

Solomon Islands Primary School Infrastructure Project Review

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Report Title	Review of the Solomon Islands Primary School Storage Infrastructure Project (PSSIP)
Team	Vince Catherwood & Associates Ltd

Background

The Primary School Storage Infrastructure Project (PSSIP) was launched in 2005 with the goal of assisting in the improvement of school infrastructure in the Solomon Islands. Improvement of school infrastructure is one of several key priority areas under the Solomon Islands Government's education strategic framework. These documents form the strategic framework within which the Ministry of Education and Human Resources Development (MEHRD), with the support of communities and development partners, are working to rehabilitate and further develop the Solomon Islands education system following the ethnic tensions during 2001-2002. The overarching goal is to provide equitable access to quality basic education for all children and to manage resources in an efficient and transparent manner.

In 2004, a sector-wide programme of support, the Education Sector Investment and Reform Programme (ESIRP), was agreed between the MEHRD, New Zealand Agency for International Development (NZAID) and European Union (EU). Under the tripartite arrangement of the ESIRP, NZAID committed funds for budget support for basic education, while the EU also committed support. NZAID's budget support was targeted towards four main areas, one of which was primary school infrastructure. Two types of structure were designed and built: a storage, library and office building (Building one) and a double classroom and storage building (Building two). The next phase of ESIRP (2007-2009) has recently been agreed, and NZAID support will remain focused on the same four areas, including school infrastructure.

Purpose and Objectives

The objectives of the Review were to assess the first phase of the PSSIP, to identify lessons learned from Phase one so to inform the design of Phase two by making recommendations to the MEHRD for future infrastructure projects.

Main Findings

The review found that the project has resulted in a cost-effective solution for schools needing better storage and administration facilities and additional classrooms. The project has provided a solid, permanent building structure of good quality at many primary schools replacing buildings constructed in semi-permanent bush materials. Management of the infrastructure programme has been a valuable learning experience for the MEHRD, and the process of constructing the building has also been very useful in developing capacity in many village communities, and has strengthened school-community relationships. The PSSIP has been a qualified success in achieving its anticipated outputs:

- Nearly 70 percent of the 166 selected primary schools have either completed or made substantial progress towards the construction of the buildings.
- 112 schools received materials for Building one, 54 schools received materials for Building two.
- 46 percent of schools had completed their building and another 23 percent had almost completed the buildings (stage three).
- Helping 10 schools to complete their existing buildings was not achieved in Phase one of the PSSIP.

These results are positive given that delivery of hardware materials to most schools did not occur until early in 2006. The relative emphasis was on the library/storage/office building (67 percent) verse the double classroom building (33 percent). There is a good argument for putting more emphasis on building classrooms, and providing some limited storage/office space. In this respect Building two has advantages over Building one. The average cost per building was SBD\$144,372 (US\$20,714). This is reasonably cost effective for Solomon Islands conditions, despite some cost overruns. The total spent on the National Schools Infrastructure Project during the two years 2005 and 2006 was SBD\$23.96 million.

There were some weaknesses in the project establishment phase:

- The initial objectives were not clear, and officers coordinating the programme had to determine a direction through trial and error.
- The schools assessment process was not sufficiently thorough/comprehensive-participating schools had significant infrastructure needs.
- The project design was endorsed as fundamentally sound, although there have been minor building design flaws that needed rectifying.
- The effectiveness of school communities' awareness programmes varied. This impacted affected community reaction and project progress.

The establishment of the Primary Infrastructure Group in the MEHRD was a necessary step to strengthen the oversight and coordination of project implementation. This also addressed to some extent a lack of overall national policy and plans to deal with school infrastructure issues, and problems of co-ordination at the national level with the Ministry of Infrastructure Development and with other aid donors supporting school infrastructure development. There is still, however, a pressing need to develop national education infrastructure policy and national school infrastructure development plans, including specific priorities for schools. Improved coordination at the national level is also necessary.

Challenges during implementation were:

- Although MEHRD managed the central tender process for the two major external contracts material supply and transportation appears to have been reasonably well done, there were errors in the contract documents and in the bill of quantities that had to be rectified.
- Instructions for cutting timber gave incorrect dimensions inconsistent with the plans leading to delays, frustration and extra costs for the schools.

- Project management at the school level varied, with difficulties occurring when some School Committees made poor management decisions.
- Problems with the supply of sand, gravel and timber (and timber milling) in some regions caused cost overruns and delays. Some communities faced unanticipated logistical problems transporting timber, sand and/or gravel to the school site.

Factors influencing successful outcomes included:

- head teachers with good community relationships were able to mobilise resources and move quickly to start and complete the programme
- engagement of school communities from the outset
- works officers contracted to provincial education authorities successfully supported regular programme monitoring, while provincial government works officers proved less successful.

The Review found that relationships with provincial education authorities were variable. Communication between provincial education authorities and the MEHRD needs to be strengthened. There is a case for improved provision of training and up-skilling for participants in the programme at several levels. Learning related to unintended project outcomes included:

- the community strengthening following a school infrastructure project
- the development of vocational skills of youth assisting in the building projects
- opportunities for working with other government departments/agencies
- new or existing permanent school buildings can be used to catch rain water
- school buildings in an isolated village can act as a community centre.

Recommendations (summary):

1. Develop an MEHRD Infrastructure Policy and Strategic Framework for addressing infrastructure development at all levels of the education system, and a National School Infrastructure Development Plan.
2. Formulate guidelines for school infrastructure development, including the determination of minimum requirements for infrastructure development for schools, the establishment of benchmark standards for classrooms, a national standard for design of a Solomon Islands classroom.
3. Undertake regular/ systematic monitoring and evaluation of the programme.
4. Coordinate and integrate primary and secondary school infrastructure.
5. Invite other aid agencies operating in the Solomon Islands to discuss whether they might wish to support priorities for education infrastructure.
6. Invite NZAID to support the development of Phase two of a broader National Primary School Infrastructure Programme, with a focus on building new modified, flexible two classroom and storage units in up to 200 schools.

Key Issues and Learning for NZAID

Unintended Outcomes: an infrastructure project involving the community can have positive, unintended outcomes, such as the community strengthening that flows from working together on the construction project, vocational skills gained by local youths involved in building the schools, better water supply from rain capture on roof of the building. It would be worthwhile for similar projects to think about how to capture unintended outcomes, and to include these in analyses of cost effectiveness or value for money.

Participatory Approaches: active engagement with the community by the head teacher was a key success factor in getting the infrastructure built as planned. The head teacher helped to build the community awareness and necessary buy-in.

Follow-up

Proposed NZAID responses to the Review recommendations:

1. An infrastructure policy would allow for more informed decision-making and help address the pressure that school infrastructure will come under with the growing population. It would also allow for better coordination of donors involved. An Infrastructure Plan would help to ensure better and transparent decision-making on the distribution of the infrastructure, type of buildings, and will lay down clear guidelines for management of projects.
2. This will be a long but essential process and has already been discussed as part of a need to identify minimum standards for schools.
3. This will be essential to continue learning for new work and to ensure that the current structures are appropriate and are completed to a high standard.
4. NZAID is investigating the possibility of this with the appointment of the EU infrastructure advisor.
5. NZAID is keen to work with MERHD and other agencies to ensure a more coordinated approach to school infrastructure development. The coordination meeting that was organised for this study was well-received and further this will be discussed with the MEHRD.
6. NZAID would support the use of budget support funding for this programme provided the operational recommendations from this report are followed and work is progressed on a policy and implementation plan.