In July 2019, Kolisen Blong Leftemap Edukesen (KOBLE) published its first CSO Spotlight Report on SDG 4 implementation in Vanuatu. This 2020 report provides an update on SDG 4 implementation, highlighting progress made since 2019 and the remaining important gaps in the government’s work.

The high-level priorities established by the Government for 2020 in education and training included: increased student net enrolment ratio for years 7 to 13; improved support for Early childhood care and education (ECCE); improved teaching materials, improved training of teachers and learning facilities; maintained student-teacher ratio; improved support for National Tertiary Education; and improved support for training programmes through technical and vocational skills development.

From 2019 to 2020, there have been positive results, one of which is the mobilisation of donor resourcing for inclusive education support, developed some guidance within the Post-Secondary Education and Training (PSET) sector with the advent of a National Human Resource Development Plan (NHRD), and improved support for ECCE. Despite this, there remain critical gaps regarding the inclusion of children and youth who are not engaged in formal education and training due to their disability, marginalisation, or disadvantage.

ANALYSIS OF THE PROGRESS ON SDG TARGETS

Target 4.1 The government committed to extending the free tuition fee policy (via school grants) to cover all levels of formal schooling from ECCE to Year 13. This was reflected in an increase in grants for secondary schools, up 75 per cent at US$7.5m, but not an increase in participation for secondary school, with a net enrolment ratio (NER) for students Year 7+ which remains very low at 45 per cent. However, NER at primary is now approaching 100 per cent, possibly an intended effect of increased support of ECCE. The student-teacher ratio worsened slightly.

In 2019, students in Years 4, 6, and 8 sat the Vanuatu Standardised Test of Achievement (VANSTA). Overall for both literacy and numeracy, there has been

References:
little improvement since the 2017 VANSTA. Almost half of all students in Year 4 do not meet minimum literacy standards and almost a third in Year 6 do not meet the minimum literacy standards. This is particularly concerning when so many of these students leave at the end of Year 6.

With the global pandemic in 2020, the MoET closed schools and instructed schools to develop and implement a Home Schooling Package (HSP). Results from a KOBLE survey on the HSP revealed that the most effective form of HSP is a hard copy format that should be standardised for use by schools. Overall the report states that an effective HSP programme will require clear instructions and facilitation of the homeschooling package to students; support, monitoring and feedback provided by teachers, and, support from parents and families to provide a conducive home learning environment. The MOET is currently developing a continuing education policy to strengthen the HSP programme should there be future lockdowns and school closures in Vanuatu.

Financial access to education. The school grants scheme, which is in effect the Government’s attempt at providing “free education,” only covers tuition fees and does not take into consideration the ability to pay of parents experiencing poverty, disadvantage, or the increased challenges of supporting children with disabilities to access education. Parents are still required to pay contribution fees to schools, and many are not able to meet this cost. It is likely that the economic downturn due to COVID-19 resulted in the declining ability of parents to pay the fees.

Target 4.2. ECCE continues to be afforded strong prioritisation in the education sector. ECCE centres around Vanuatu have benefited from government grants, proper registration, and increased number of teachers appointed to centres and receiving salaries. Additionally, teacher training and education continues to support professionalisation of the sub-sector – in 2020 there were 478 ECCE teachers enrolled in the University of the South Pacific (USP) and undertaking training in cohorts.

Target 4.3. The 2019 Education Statistics Report published by the MoET shows a downward trend overall in enrolment in Post-school studies. Programmes that saw a significant increase in enrolments were foundation studies, certificate courses, bachelor degrees, and master programmes. The TVET in schools programme is positive, seeing the introduction of technical studies from Years 8 and 9, enabling students to complete a Certificate I in Year 10.

A worrying trend has been the introduction of a scholarships loan scheme called the VNPF Members Education Support Scheme (MESS). This scheme uses the retirement savings of a family member to guarantee the repayment of a scholarship loan. There has been a lot of criticism in the local media and the scheme is opposed by KOBLE as it marginalises those without access, which is the majority in Vanuatu, whilst impoverishing those in later years who do qualify. It is apparent that few will be able to pay back loans and guarantees will be demanded. It is a large privatisation wedge into scholarships, formerly provided free by government and donors.

Target 4.4. The status of literacy and numeracy outside of primary education remains unknown, and there are few attempts to cater for youth dropouts and provide educational pathways for all. Even for students who participate in formal education or for graduates, there are barriers to accessing adequate life skills and vocational training to prepare them for work. The emphasis remains on formal views of skills. For example, the National Human Resources Development plan has determined the need for more ni-Vanuatu with skills and qualifications related to managers, professionals, and technician/associate professionals.

In 2020, with the global pandemic generating a major economic downturn in Vanuatu, national human resource priorities need to shift or adapt to the current context. As opportunities for income generation dwindle locally in several sectors, ni-Vanuatu look to programmes overseas, such as the Pacific Labour Scheme and...
Seasonal Worker Programme (formerly, Recognised Seasonal Employer, RSE). Livelihood skills, very important for three quarters of the population that live in rural areas and dependent on their own resources, remain barely addressed in the education system.

The delivery of non-formal education programmes is somewhat haphazard given the limited financing of the youth and adult education and training sector. Non-accreditation status of numerous providers and lack of coordination means that data on programme capacity and results is not captured for national reporting. It also demonstrates that the tertiary and TVET sector is not capitalising on opportunities to partner to provide services to a greater number of people, thus increasing the number of jobs available and fostering entrepreneurial economic development.

**Target 4.5:** A positive move has been the securing of funds from the Global Partnership for Education (GPE) for inclusive education initiatives led by the MoET and in partnership with Save the Children and the Australian Government. The four-year development involves the establishment of an inclusive education resource centre within the Vanuatu Institute of Technology (VIT). Further, VIT will commence delivery of an inclusive education training course for teachers.

The MoET via its Inclusive Education desk has made progress to better link with disability service providers and stakeholders since 2018. In 2020, the MoET coordinated the placement of Early Intervention students with disabilities into mainstream schools, an activity that has largely occurred independently in previous years between non-government service providers and private institutions.

The Vanuatu Skills Partnership signed a tripartite agreement with the Vanuatu Society for People with Disabilities and the Vanuatu Disability Promotion and Advocacy Association, strengthening disability inclusion amongst key actors in the sector, as enshrined in the Disability Inclusion Policy for the TVET Sector.

**Target 4.6:** There has been acknowledgement that there may be critical issues of literacy in the population, but the Literacy, Language and Numeracy unit, although afforded a small budget, has yet to have a coordinator.

**Target 4.7:** There have been no changes to the curriculum in related to target 4.7. There has also been little support of those looking to promote a more appropriate curriculum including sustainable livelihoods. Rural Training Centres, regarded by many as a way of addressing livelihood skills and community education programmes, remain largely unsupported.

**CIVIL SOCIETY ENGAGEMENT ON SDG 4 AND INTERSECTORAL LINKAGES**

**Local Education Group (LEG)**

The LEG in Vanuatu has the potential as a critical influencing body to input into national education policy and advise on key issues. However, it meets very infrequently. There needs to be a more effective mechanism for civil society participation and representation.

In the past year, there has been little improvement in intersectoral linkages coordinated by ministries. One of the issues highlighted is disability inclusion: non-government partners provide limited Early Intervention services, however the link between these services, and those of the Health, Justice and Community Services and Education sectors is inadequate to effectively support transitions for children with disabilities from ECCE to formal education. Linkages between the ministries of education, youth, and trade are also critical to strengthen pathways and enable opportunities for learning and career development beyond formal education.

**SYNTHESIS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

**Critical issue 1: Quality of education and student push-out**

Despite an increased number of children attending ECCE and primary school and increased fee subsidies provided to schools, there remains a high push-out in the transition to secondary level and a large number of students in Years 4, 6, and 8 are still not meeting minimum literacy standards.
Any approach to future pandemics and natural disasters must focus on minimising the gap between urban and rural education – an online or digital remote learning platform will be out of reach for the majority based in rural areas, which comprise more than three quarters of the student population.

**Recommendations:**
- Review the secondary curriculum to make it more appropriate for rural livelihoods
- Standardise homeschooling and learning continuity packages and opportunities
- Construct more secondary schools

**Critical issue 2: Financial barriers to education**

The Ministry of Education and Training’s school grants system provides basic resources to schools, but the actual cost of education has not been analysed. Many schools report financial difficulties and parents struggle to pay the additional fees by schools. Vanuatu’s economy has been shattered by the COVID-19 pandemic, leaving many parents unable to pay fees.

**Recommendations:**
- Remove financial barriers to access to education by abolishing mandatory parents’ contribution fees
- Investigate the actual cost of education across all schools in Vanuatu

**Critical issue 3: Commitment to lifelong learning and inclusion**

Data collection to better understand the status of inclusive education has had slow progress. Without clarity around the number of children who are out of school due to disability and the specific learning needs of children with disabilities, little progress has been made to mainstream inclusive education in schools, teacher training and strategies, and learning materials. The extent of literacy in the wider community is unknown, but suspected to be very high, and there is no government support for community programmes. Likewise, the skills needed to navigate sustainable living on community owner resources or to work overseas in migrant labour schemes remain unsupported.

**Recommendations:**
- Gather data on children with disabilities in schools and in the communities and invest in inclusive education initiatives that can be scaled up throughout the country
- Properly support a review of the curriculum to ensure education reflects the differing cultures of Vanuatu and the real needs of the majority of population living in rural areas
- Properly investigate the extent of illiteracy in the country and provide support to rural training centres and community programmes that address it

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The Kolisen Blong Leftemap Edukesen (KOBLE) is a national coalition of civil society organisations with the aim of engaging the Government of Vanuatu and other stakeholders on national education policy to help ensure that all ni-Vanuatu have access to good quality and inclusive publicly provided education. KOBLE is a member organisation of ASPBAE.

**Asia South Pacific Association for Basic and Adult Education (ASPBAE)** is a regional association of more than 200 organisations and individuals working towards promoting quality education for all and transformative and liberating, lifelong adult education and learning.

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