I. COUNTRY CONTEXT

Papua New Guinea (PNG) is one of the most ethnically diverse countries in the world. About eight million people live in the country with a land area of approximately 450,000 km², spreading from the highlands to about 600 other islands. There are more than 800 languages spoken with the three most common languages being Melanesian Pidgin, Motu, and English.

Made up of four regions, 22 provinces, the Autonomous Region of Bougainville, and the National Capital District, PNG is mostly rural, with rainforest covering about 75 per cent of the land and about 15 per cent is spread across 600 islands. More than 85 per cent of the population live in rural areas, many of which are separated from each other by thick rainforests, seas, and weak infrastructures, providing challenges in the delivery of basic services. Access to scattered rural communities is often difficult. Most travel between provinces is by air, but air travel is expensive. About 3 per cent of the roads are paved and many villages can only be reached on foot. The capital, Port Moresby, is not connected by road to the rest of the country.

According to the recent official GDP released by the National Statistics Office (2020), the mining and quarrying industry and agriculture, forestry, and fisheries are the main contributing industries to the PNG’s GDP in the period between 2017 and 2018, as a percentage of total GDP. These industries also provide limited employment opportunities for the growing population of the country.

It is estimated that 75 per cent of households depend on subsistence agriculture, with 40 per cent of the population living on less than $1 a day. Before the COVID-19 pandemic hit, the World Bank, (2020) forecasted real GDP growth in PNG was projected to remain around 3 per cent on average in 2020 to 2022. The country’s revenues continue to face challenges arising from lower global commodity prices.

II. SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOAL 4 (QUALITY EDUCATION) AND LINKAGES TO OTHER SDGS

Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) on quality education is deeply interlinked with the other Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Understanding the integrated nature of the SDGs is important in the creation of policies and programmes that will make well-defined, effective, and positive impacts that contribute to the development of PNG (UN, 2020). The most interconnected goals are those between education (SDG 4) and poverty (SDG 1), gender (SDG 5) and economic growth (SDG 8).
Poverty

The Government of PNG (GoPNG) has put access to basic education as a priority. It plays its shared responsibility by providing 100 per cent tuition fees in basic education as the platform for all other development objectives. In 2012, the government made a choice to provide 100 per cent tuition fees to cover secondary education, vocational education, and Flexible Open Distance Education (FODE). As a result, there is a steady expansion and improvement in the provisions of education. Enrolment increased from 2.1 million in 2015 to 2.4 million in 2018 (Department of Education, 2018).

The government wants to apply the increasing Tuition Fee Free (TFF) that are provided in the education budget to get more children into school, including those with disabilities who normally have severely limited educational opportunities, and to give children opportunities to learn how to read and write and apply basic arithmetic skills to help lift them out of poverty (UNESCO, 2017).

Gender equality

The GoPNG has identified improving gender equity as a priority area in its National Education Plan. It has implemented policies and guidance. It also receives support from development partners and UNICEF. The government has used the TFF transfers as a tool to improve gender equity. Evidence reported in Education at a Glance (2018) shows that the transition rate is improving for basic education (56%) and secondary education (52%).

The TFF Policy was especially intended to increase access for girls. The focus on girls’ education has led to some improvements in girls’ enrolments. Growth was faster for girls, with an increase from 56 in 2015 to 40 per cent reported in 2018 (Education Statistics, 2018).

Both SDG 4 on quality education and SDG 5 on gender equality call upon the PNG Government’s commitment to invest in boys and girls and equip them with the necessary skills and competencies to participate equally in the economy, in their families, and in their communities (Global Partnership for Education, 2017). Examples of proven measures that can overcome barriers to gender equality in education in PNG include promoting gender-sensitive toilets and washing facilities in some provinces to address the low attendance and high drop-out rates of girls who need to manage their menstrual hygiene (UNICEF, 2017).

Economic Growth

Many reports mentioned the importance of education for employment and growth. PNG has promoted sustained, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth as well as full and productive employment and decent work for all with the discovery of liquefied natural gas that boosted PNG’s economic growth. Other sectors that create more job opportunities include construction, mining, manufacturing, and wholesale. Unfortunately, Papua New Guineans have not fully reaped the benefits from these resources boom and private sector growth due to the lack of skills and experience in the workforce. The low number of tertiary and technical and vocational graduates have resulted in a low number of skilled workforce (Barker & Pryke, 2017).

The GoPNG, private sector and development partners have started initiatives to respond to this skills shortage by providing a number of in-house and formal training and skills development in technical colleges. A study conducted on financing technical and vocational education and training (TVET) in the Pacific (Horne et al., 2014) shows that about 1,895 apprentice students have graduated from TVET colleges in 2012 and a total of 622 students graduated from Trade and Technology and Hospitality and Community Services from 2012 to 2015 in Queensland, Australia. More than 400 students enrolled under the Australia-Pacific Technical Scholarship and graduated in technical trades. It was noted, however, that these TVET Skills Scholarship Programmes accepted more boys than girls.

The PNG LNG Leadership played a key role in including more women in its various graduate development and vocational and technical training programmes. For the production operations and maintenance programme, out of 137 Papua New Guinean technician trainees, 38 were women. Meanwhile, some 526 of the 1,796 graduates from the construction training centres have been women. Although these statistics appear to be low compared to OECD standards, they are encouraging in the context of PNG’s significant level of gender inequality (Nelson & Valikai, 2014).

Within the overall framework of the Decent Work Country Programme (DWCP), the International Labour Organization (ILO) is providing support to PNG in amending its labour laws, building up the capacity of the social partners, supporting skills development, and promoting decent work. The framework supports social justice, protection, and gender equality in the labour force. At present, it is difficult to access data from the Decent Work Country Programme.

BARRIERS TO EDUCATION

Many barriers to education access and educational outcomes persist and challenges in monitoring progress remain. Three key barriers that are identified in PNG include:

Educational opportunities are both non-inclusive and non-equitable

SDG 4 advances the need for educational opportunities to be inclusive, equitable, and of high quality. Yet, in PNG, many of the most marginalised and vulnerable students are continued to be placed at a disadvantage. According to the Education Statistics Bulletin (2018) and the PNG National Research Institute’s National Population Census Projection (2017), about 690,000 of the school-age children (i.e. 6 – 18 years old) are out of school in PNG. This represents 48 per cent of boys and 52 per cent of girls out of school.

Some of these children do not go to school because their parents thought they are too young to be enrolled in school, while others are not in school because of the lack of schools within the vicinity of the community; security issues, especially with girls walking long distances to school; the lack of equal opportunities, particularly of children with disabilities, to learning; and early child marriages. There is also limited capacity or space in secondary schools to absorb a large number of children completing primary education. Inclusive Education Resource Centres for disabilities are under-funded, which runs against the aim towards equity and inclusivity called for by SDG 4.

COVID-19 pandemic

The current COVID-19 pandemic has affected about 2.4 million students throughout the country. The vulnerable children, including girls, children with disabilities, poor and other marginalised groups, those living in remote and hard-to-reach areas, are the most affected by the impacts of the crisis. In PNG, schools were temporarily closed as part of the COVID-19 response and the State of Emergency. Children are most likely to miss out on school because attendance is not compulsory after students were asked to return to school.

The Government Tuition Fee Subsidy was released in 2020, but many schools do not have the necessary resources to implement the direction from both the government and the Department of
Education to prevent and control the pandemic. The Department of Education continues to provide remote learning support through lessons broadcast on the local EMTV television, NBC radio, and online throughout the year.

Many schools have reported that parents and students are still uncertain about returning to school due to lack of accurate information available on COVID-19 from the Department of Health. Based on this experience as well as the non-compulsory attendance, many students may remain out of school even once schools reopen. The Department of Education helps guide schools in their preparation for the students’ return with strategic plans for student remedial learning programmes. This provides an opportunity for safe and healthy learning environments for many schools.

**Lack of funding**

Along with the absence of a national plan or strategy for implementing the SDGs, no funding has been made available specifically for taking steps to achieve SDG 4. The targets within SDG 4 are ambitious and will not be achieved without specific and major funding commitments.

For SDG 4 to receive more funding from the GoPNG, the Department of Education may incorporate the SDG 4 into its new National Education Plan and utilise the available education funding from the Government. The GoPNG allocated K1.2 billion (US$342,269) to the education sector to ensure that every child gets a decent education. Of this amount, the Department of Higher Education Research Science and Technology receives K238 million (US$67,883,454). K69 million (US$19,680,497) is allocated to the Tertiary Education Students Assistant Scholarship to support about 14,000 students and K45 million (US$12,835,107) to support universities and college infrastructures, rehabilitation, and development.

In late March 2020, the UNICEF office in Papua New Guinea received a GPE grant of US$70,000 to support the Department of Education in planning its response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The fund was used in providing distance learning and booster classes, distributing learning material, training teachers, initiating back-to-school campaigns, and providing hand washing sanitiser.

### III. STRATEGIES TO ACHIEVE EQUITY AND INCLUSION IN EDUCATION

The government’s bold Vision Statements, “Take Back PNG” and “Leaving No Child Behind,” place human development at the core of its Vision. The Development Agenda for PNG focuses on developing the full potential of every Papua New Guinean regardless of their circumstances.

The GoPNG will continue to develop and support inclusive education systems, girls’ participation, and equal education opportunities for rural and remote communities in the country. Strategies to improve access, especially girls’ access, include changes in the regulations that prevent the enrolment of some groups and the establishment of child-friendly schools. It is also important to build more schools closer to where girls live, ensure on-time enrolment, train more qualified teachers, and take steps to change the perceptions of parents and communities and encourage them to see the importance of girls’ education. These gaps in access to education need to be addressed. Failing to do so would lead to the persistence and exacerbation of barriers to quality education.

Other strategies to improve gender equity in education include an approach to policy-making that takes into account both girls’ and boys’ interests and concerns through the curriculum, teacher training materials, and capacity development activities such as workshops. Further strategies to improve educational management include capacity strengthening and the development of strong partnerships, effective leadership, and efficient school management with the involvement of community members (NEP 2020 – 2029).

### IV. KEY EXAMPLES OF INTERSECTORAL LINKAGES AND INSTITUTIONAL PARTNERSHIPS

**Addressing low student learning outcomes in math and science through BEST PNG**

The intersectoral linkages of the GoPNG with development partners, such as Save the Children, UNICEF, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) Australia, the European Union, and the World Bank, in the education sector have resulted in the establishment of Boosting Education Standards Together in PNG (BEST PNG). BEST PNG addresses the country’s low student learning outcomes, especially in math and science, in the low performing provinces.

The programme has proposed that in the next three years, it will reach 7,000 teachers for pre-service training and 2,000 teachers for in-service training. It will also reach 106,000 primary students in 965 schools and benefit 870,000 students across the country through the provision of new math and science textbooks that were developed with technical support from Japan.

BEST PNG also benefits from resources and expertise provided by partners like Save the Children, UNICEF, DFAT, the European Union, the World Bank, and other civil society organisations that are members of the LEG.
**Improving reading skills with Global Partnership for Education**

The GoPNG, together with development partners, have identified projects on improving reading skills. It is one of the key areas that needs to be addressed in the previous plan covering the years 2010–2019. The plan identifies the lack of reading materials and trained teachers among the challenges that decrease the quality of education in the country.

To address this challenge, the GoPNG and the Global Partnership for Education (GPE) played a key role in bringing education partners together to improve sector planning, identify key challenges, analyse the situation based on data, and ensure that the external education funding for PNG focuses on the priorities outlined in the country’s education plan. By funding the plan’s strategic elements, GPE helped ensure that investments in PNG’s education sector delivered results.

The GPE and the World Bank worked with the government to launch READ PNG in 2011. READ PNG promotes better teaching and learning of reading skills in elementary and primary education. Through the programme, children have more opportunities to practise reading, while teachers acquire the tools and knowledge to support them and regularly test children’s performance. The programme is being established in more than 21,700 classroom libraries in elementary and primary schools in all 22 provinces in PNG.

**V. RECOMMENDATIONS**

The government’s key action plans and targeted investments and the CSO’s concerted efforts are urgently needed to address the gaps in equity and inclusion in as well as the quality of education. The report recommends the following:

**On Intersectoral Linkages and Institutional Partnerships**

- Localise, align and link SDG 4 articulated under the PNG Medium Term Development Plan III to the new National Department of Education Corporate Plan (2020 – 2029), and to the Provincial Education Plans and down to District Education Plans.

**On COVID-19**

- As schools reopen and students return to school, the Department of Education, through the Secretary’s Instruction Circular, should lay out safety protocols to avoid the spread of COVID-19, such as staying at home if one feels sick, washing hands regularly after contact, covering one’s mouth with elbow when coughing and sneezing, avoid touching one’s face, eyes, and mouth with unwashed hands, avoid large social gatherings, as well as unnecessary and unprotected contact with animals.

**On Civil Society Involvement**

- The government should institutionalise the participation and engagement of organisations such as CSOs in the conduct of independent monitoring and evaluation at the school level to ensure that no child is left behind. Steps should be taken to maximise and mainstream these M&E reporting through existing channels of SDG review as a way to reflect their contributions to the fulfilment of SDG 4.

**On Inclusion**

- Review and implement the strategy for the inclusion of children, including those from the most vulnerable groups, such as girls, older children, and children living with disabilities, in Early childhood care and education (ECCE).
- Provide alternative pathways and complementary opportunities pathways to allow learners to continue their education at higher levels, instead of the system pushing them out at the end of Grades 8, 10, and 12.
- Develop and implement pro-poor policies by observing the SDG target of providing free basic education, reaching out to the most marginalised and vulnerable learners, and covering scholarships and additional expenses related to schooling.

**Early Childhood Care Development**

- Institutionalise Early Childhood Care Development (ECCD) and incorporate this within the national education systems so it will be a key priority sector for advancement in the next National Education Plan (2020-2029) to ensure equity and prevent the commercialisation of ECCD by the private sector.

**On Gender**

- Integrate and align the Gender Strategic Plan into the future National Education, Provincial and District Education Plans to utilise the latest research findings and interventions on building proper girls’ toilets, improve water and sanitation at the school level, strengthen security, create awareness on the importance of girls’ education, and prevent early child marriage.

**On Financing**

- Mobilise the community and civil society to enable CSOs to monitor government funding through the Tuition Fee Free Education, province and district funds through members of Parliament, and to strengthen and raise awareness in communities with the aim of ensuring the active participation and learning continuity of girls and women, poor and marginalised children, children with disabilities, and children in remote areas.