

## Summary and recommendations

This section provides a summary of findings and recommendations emerging from this review.

### ► RECOMMENDATION 1:

Inclusive education policies and programmes, including COVID-19 recovery plans, must address the inclusion of students disadvantaged by various factors; however, increased and sustained efforts to meet the requirements of learners with disabilities must be assured.

### ► RECOMMENDATION 2:

Access to education must be promoted for all marginalized learners, in particular students with disabilities, through policies and strategies that enable this.

### ► RECOMMENDATION 3:

Inclusive education policies require costed implementation plans, and these need significantly greater resourcing, activation and monitoring.

### ► RECOMMENDATION 4:

Inclusive education implementation plan priorities and strategies should be incorporated, resourced and monitored within education sector plans.

## Access to education

Challenges in accessing quality education in the Pacific are related to factors such as gender, disability, remoteness, poverty, ethnicity, language, migration, sexual orientation and gender identity. These factors intertwine to form multi-faceted dimensions of exclusion experienced by some students.

While data was not collected on this during this mapping, emerging literature indicates that COVID-19 is likely to have exacerbated disadvantages, having caused school closures and interrupted learning for many students and had an economic impact on many families across the region.

National efforts to promote the rights of marginalized people are emerging but incomplete: of 15 responding countries, 11 reported that they had initiated processes to establish legislation relating to gender. Ten reported the same for disability and eight for ethnicity.

Marginalization experienced by learners with disabilities appears to be the most complex and compounding, with disproportionately lower numbers of students with disabilities enrolling and completing school in many countries across the Pacific region. National censuses and regional analysis indicate that individuals with disabilities are less likely to ever attend school, are more likely to be out of school and tend to have fewer years of education than people without disabilities. Additionally, people with disabilities are less likely to complete primary or secondary education and less likely to have basic literacy skills.

Given the well-established link between disability and poverty, it is vital that learners with disabilities are not further excluded from the lifelong and generational benefits that education brings.

## Inclusive education policy implementation

All countries have legislation that supports inclusive education and have or are developing policy frameworks that support disability-inclusive education. All have committed to inclusive education as it is broadly defined through international framework commitments and adoption of the SDGs.

However, realities for students with disabilities in schools, which frequently lack an inclusive culture, suggest that wide gaps exist between policy aspirations and implementation. The majority of countries (10) reported that the culture of inclusion within schools fell short or far short of expectations. Only five countries reported that the culture of inclusion equalled expectations.

Policy implementation plans can be a central enabler of inclusive education by providing a clear outline of priorities for incorporation in wider education sector plans. Out of 15 country respondents, 14 reported that operational, strategic or business plans incorporated inclusive education in some way. These, however, require resourcing and monitoring. While funding for inclusive education is made available in the education budgets of 13 countries, this is insufficient, and 12 countries rely on development partners for financial support.

**► RECOMMENDATION 5:**

Championing inclusive education and facilitating effective collaboration across the education sector should be undertaken by the highest levels of leadership within governments.

## Inclusive education leadership

Across the region, responsibility for inclusive education is often held by a single officer within the education agency (ministry or department), with limited capacity and authority to work effectively with other divisions, ministries and stakeholders. In 12 countries, a single officer within the ministry of education manages inclusive education. In at least four of these countries, that officer has multiple other responsibilities.

A whole-of-sector approach, including planning and monitoring, is essential to enable inclusive education, including through the work of divisions such as human resources, curriculum and assessment, finance, infrastructure, information management systems and student support services. Coordination is most effective when underpinned by strong leadership.

## Workforce capacity to support inclusive education

Teacher aides or assistants can provide critical support to teachers in implementing inclusive education within classrooms. However, across the region, there are limitations on both their availability and their skills to fulfil their roles.

Teacher aides are part of the education workforce in 11 countries. None of these countries reported that teacher aides had sufficient skills in all required areas. Distribution of teacher aides across urban, rural and remote areas is mixed. Availability of teacher aides varies widely within and between countries. To ensure appropriate and priority allocation of teacher aides, there is a need for effective use of student data systems, particularly in relation to disability data, and school staffing formulae.

Teacher capacity with regard to differentiating national curricula and assessments to meet the needs of diverse students varies within and between countries. Inclusive education professional development for teachers, school leaders and teacher aides represents a challenge across the region. In-service training in inclusive education is available in all Pacific countries; however, delivery is limited, and it is compulsory in only half of the countries. Coverage varies widely, with as little as 0.05% (Vanuatu) to as much as 90% (Tokelau) of the teaching workforce having ever participated in in-service training in inclusive education.

Within pre-service and in-service teacher training in universities and colleges, provision of mandatory inclusive education courses also varies. It is mandatory in 10 countries for teachers to complete a pre-service module in special or inclusive education.

Information regarding professional development related to wellbeing and psychosocial support for children was not reported. And yet this is essential to promote positive school experiences for all children, including those with disabilities. In addition, training in identifying and reporting violence, abuse and neglect of children is critical, noting the particular vulnerability of those with disabilities.

**► RECOMMENDATION 6:**

Governments must make trained teacher aides/assistants available to support teachers in classrooms where children with disabilities require them.

**► RECOMMENDATION 7:**

Pre-service and in-service training must enable teachers, teacher aides and school leaders to implement inclusive education competently and confidently, in a way that maximizes their positive wellbeing and safety from violence.

► **RECOMMENDATION 8:**

Strengthen national integrated ECD systems for children from birth to school age, which involve parents and caregivers, to maximize the health and development of all children, in particular those with disabilities, enable their access to ECE and optimize opportunities for their transition into inclusive primary schooling.

► **RECOMMENDATION 9:**

Develop, validate and implement early detection mechanisms and interventions to ensure learning and development for children with disabilities are supported from the foundation years.

► **RECOMMENDATION 10:**

Improve access to ECE for all students by establishing policies, training teachers, strengthening ECE coordination and improving classroom practices to optimize learning for all children, including those with disabilities.

► **RECOMMENDATION 11:**

Curricula must be accompanied by guidance to support teachers, teacher aides and school leaders to adapt lessons and differentiate teaching approaches so that everyone in a classroom can learn.

► **RECOMMENDATION 12:**

Policies and processes must be in place to guide adaptation of exams and assessments and provision of reasonable accommodations for students with disabilities who need them, and ministries and schools must be trained in their implementation.

► **RECOMMENDATION 13:**

The use of IEPs with students with disabilities who need them should be guided by policies and supported by training for teachers and teacher aides.

## Strengthening access, learning outcomes, retention and transition

ECD is an important enabler of the healthy development of children from birth to six years of age. Effective ECD requires the involvement of stakeholders across multiple sectors, including health, nutrition, protection and education. Parents and caregivers are important providers of support to children, particularly in the early years. ECD systems across the Pacific region are still emerging, with five countries reporting that they are in the process of establishing or developing these.

ECD incorporates early detection and intervention. Early detection mechanisms can support early identification of disability among young children, and early intervention services can support their development. ECD can help children develop the skills they need to take part in everyday activities, including ECE and school. Early intervention services are available in 10 of the respondent Pacific countries, although the often-limited services are in many cases available only in large towns, perhaps reflecting their high cost. Services are more developed in countries that have historical links to, and receive funding from, New Zealand or the USA.

ECE is a critical ECD strategy and is an important enabler of transition into primary school for all children; it is particularly important for children with disabilities. Inclusive ECE systems are still being established across the Pacific region. Of the respondent countries, 12 (80%) reported that they were developing or establishing inclusive ECE services and 11 (73%) that they supported children with disabilities to transition from ECE to primary school.

Countries that support inclusive ECE use strategies that could inform practices across the region, including establishment of an inclusive ECE policy (Kiribati), training of ECE teachers in inclusive approaches (PNG), strengthening of the ECE coordination unit (Tonga) and the use of IEPs to guide and monitor progress of ECE students with disabilities (Palau).

Inclusive delivery of curricula and assessments is essential to enable retention and learning outcomes for all children. All learners have the right to the same curriculum, and the curriculum and assessment must be responsive and accessible to a diverse range of learners.

Thirteen countries reported that they were in the process of developing and establishing inclusive curricula. Twelve reported the same for assessment processes. Several countries reported that, generally, teachers lacked the knowledge, understanding and ability to adapt lessons to suit the learning needs of children with different type of disabilities. National assessments cater for children with disabilities if exams authorities are notified but this process is not always well utilized.

IEPs record student strengths as well as their learning goals, strategies and assessment plans. In 14 countries, IEPs are used to support the learning of students with disabilities, although in some countries this practice is largely in special schools and use in mainstream schools is nascent. IEPs are critical in supporting learning outcomes for some students with disabilities.

**► RECOMMENDATION 14:**

National governments and civil society organizations, as well as regional and bilateral development partners, must increase the emphasis and resourcing to support retention, re-engage out-of-school students and build pathways between education and TVET for marginalized students.

**► RECOMMENDATION 15:**

Reasonable accommodations and assistive technologies should be mandated in policy and funding made available for their application in schools to enable equitable curriculum delivery and assessment.

**► RECOMMENDATION 16:**

Policies, programmes and budgets should prioritize learners with disabilities who are particularly marginalized, including Deaf children. In countries where an agreed sign language is not present, government should work with Deaf people and their representative groups (OPDs) to develop sign language and train teachers and teacher aides in this.

**► RECOMMENDATION 17:** Education and health authorities should establish agreements and costed plans that enable children with disabilities to access on- and off-campus specialist support services.

Children with disabilities experience a disproportionate risk of dropping out of school at the end of primary school, and are less likely than others to complete secondary school and move on to post-school education and training. Thirteen countries (87%) reported that further measures were required to improve school retention and address the problem of out-of-school children.

For disadvantaged learners, success in transitioning through education pathways and on to higher education, skills and employment varies widely within and between countries. The most common post-school training options accessible to students with disabilities across the Pacific are TVET and literacy and numeracy and/or life skills training. However, where access to these was rated positively, it was more likely to be ranked “somewhat good” rather than “extremely good,” suggesting there is still work to be done to improve access. Bridging courses are the least available post-school training options.

## Educating a diverse range of learners

In some Pacific countries, learners with certain disability types may experience greater barriers to education. Reasonable accommodations are mandated by policy to enable school participation in all countries, although their availability varies. Lower-cost accommodations, such as adaptations to classroom seating, lesson plans or activities, are more widely available than more costly assistive technologies and personal assistance.

Assistive technologies are a pre-condition for inclusive education for many children with disabilities. However, availability of these is limited, with approximately half of the countries reporting that assistive devices and adapted learning materials are not generally available in schools, and a further quarter that these are available in special schools but not in mainstream schools.

Services to support learners with diverse disability types range in their availability. For example, Deaf children are less likely to have access to school compared with others. Where an agreed sign language is not available, for example in Tonga and Vanuatu, many Deaf and hard-of-hearing children are unable to participate in or benefit from school at all.

Learning outcomes for students with diverse disabilities are maximized by availability of and access to specialists.<sup>37</sup> Many Pacific nations are small and do not have access to a range of specialists in-country. Where these are available, they are generally available through the ministries of education and health, although in some countries (e.g. Cook Islands and Niue) some highly specialized personnel are made available through visits by international specialists supported by New Zealand.

Of the 15 countries, 14 (93%) reported that the referral system was challenging. Enabling access to and participation in education for students with diverse disabilities requires ministries of education and health to work together to plan, allocate funding, build a workforce of personnel with qualifications in priority specializations and/or identify external – sometimes international – sources of specialist support.

37. Examples include sign language interpreters, Braille teachers, occupational therapy, physiotherapy, educational psychology, speech therapy, teacher aides, etc.

► **RECOMMENDATION 18:** Incorporate strategies for reaching people in rural and remote areas in education policies and plans, and resource and monitor these by disaggregating data by geographical location.

► **RECOMMENDATION 19:** Cross-sectoral inclusive education coordination mechanisms are critical for inclusive education, including ECD, and must have multi-sectoral representation and a commitment from respective jurisdictions and agencies to collaboratively develop and implement required actions.

► **RECOMMENDATION 20:** Inclusive education working groups should enable meaningful cooperation between governments, communities, parents, civil society, faith-based organizations and OPDs to raise awareness, implement activities and strengthen referral systems to support inclusive education by building coalitions that harness the strengths of all stakeholders.

In many countries, educating students in remote areas and outer islands is an enormous challenge. Resources for the effective decentralization of education and its administration are frequently scant, meaning people in rural and remote locations must relocate or miss out on school. Policies, plans, human and financial resource allocations and monitoring systems frequently miss geographically marginalized people.

While all respondent countries reported the presence of strategies to support the engagement of rural and remote learners, two (Solomon Islands and Vanuatu) highlighted the extent of this challenge. This may be because of the particularly wide spread of the populations of these two countries across large archipelagos, combined with limited access to resources to address the challenges.

## Multi-sector coordination to promote inclusive education

Governments, communities, civil society and faith-based organizations play an important role in education. Inclusive education and ECD require multi-sectoral efforts involving health, social welfare, internal affairs, transport, infrastructure, women's and children's affairs, law and education. Both inclusive education and ECD are more effective in countries where services in these sectors are resourced and have clear strategies, and where they are integrated through collaborative multi-sector networks.

Eleven countries (73%) reported that they had established cross-sectoral coordination mechanisms to support inclusive education, or were in the process of doing so. These include working groups, taskforces or steering committees that enable a system for coordination among government departments, set out clear responsibilities and, as a result, enable children to access multi-disciplinary services. In some countries, these groups exist but need reactivating. Almost all countries (93%) reported that coordination measures were in place between national and sub-national authorities.

Partnerships between education ministries and civil society organizations such as OPDs can raise community awareness of the rights of everyone to education, generate demand for inclusive education and link students to support networks and services.

## Safe and accessible inclusive education

Violence against children in school settings can include exposure to verbal, emotional, sexual and physical abuse from a teacher, school personnel or peer; corporal punishment; adult-child relationships; sexual harassment; and online or in-person bullying. Both girls and boys can be affected.

Two countries reported that they had child protection or safeguarding policies, and seven are in the process of developing these. Seven countries reported that they were in the process of developing procedures to prevent and address



**► RECOMMENDATION 21:**

Develop child protection policies and procedures to eliminate and respond to violence against children, bullying and gender-based violence, and support schools to implement these.

**► RECOMMENDATION 22:**

Develop and implement standards to ensure schools are accessible, safe and gender-sensitive, with a focus on water, sanitation and hygiene facilities.

**► RECOMMENDATION 23:**

Develop sector- and school-based inclusive disaster preparedness plans.

**► RECOMMENDATION 24:**

Governments should strengthen efforts to collect and utilize disaggregated data for inclusion more effectively within data systems to inform education sector planning, resource allocation, service delivery and monitoring.

**► RECOMMENDATION 25:**

Disaggregation variables should include factors such as disability, gender, rural/remote, ethnicity, socio-economic status, health and other variables specific to contextual factors of exclusion. This disaggregation should be utilized to monitor standard education indicators, such as enrolment, attendance and learning outcomes.

**► RECOMMENDATION 26:**

Data systems should collect information on available support in school, accessibility of the school environment and transportation, and provision of reasonable accommodations for exams and assessment.

violence against children in schools, and seven countries reported that they had moved a step beyond this, towards the establishment of child protection procedures.

Bullying is governed by national legislation, policies or handbooks in six countries, while schools in three countries are required to develop their own bullying policies. In four countries, there are no policy provisions and few school-based processes to eliminate or address bullying.

Gender-based violence was found to be moderately well covered by policies, with nine countries reporting that policies were in place to prevent gender-based violence. This study did not collect information on processes and procedures for ensuring safety and reporting gender-based violence.

Twelve countries (80%) reported that they were at the beginning stages of initiating accessible schools and developing the standards to guide these. Three have national guidelines already in place. Schools in countries across the region are somewhat likely to have accessible handwashing and sanitation facilities but less likely to have accessible menstrual hygiene management facilities. Accessible water, sanitation and hygiene facilities are a pre-condition for inclusive education, and very important in reducing the transmission of diseases such as COVID-19.

Cook Islands, Palau, RMI and Tokelau all reported that all or most of their schools were accessible and safe facilities. Interestingly, these four countries have specific funding arrangements with the governments of New Zealand and the USA, which may account for this.

Reflecting the high risk of disasters across the region, the data indicates that inclusive school disaster response plans are in place in most or all schools in eight countries. These are critical, given the highly disaster-prone nature of the region.

## Evidence-based planning and monitoring to support inclusive education

Data collection and monitoring for inclusion are critical to enable equitable resource allocation, including grant disbursement to schools for education support and adjustments. In 12 countries (80%), disability is captured in the EMIS, and many countries in the region are developing increasingly sophisticated EMIS that are capable of multi-variable analysis. However, disaggregated data is rarely connected to finance and resource allocation systems and frequently does not inform the monitoring of inclusive education policy implementation.

## Regional mechanisms to support inclusive education

This report recognizes many promising practices occurring across the region, and forums that enable countries to share and learn from each other are highly valuable. Regional mechanisms can facilitate access to useful technical information and resources. However, change happens at the national level. For example, the work of the Pacific Regional Inclusive Education Taskforce has resulted in this mapping report but support will be needed to assist countries to consider and implement recommendations at the national level.

### ► RECOMMENDATION 27:

Countries must be supported in considering and implementing recommendations arising from regional efforts, as well as sharing and learning from each others' wealth of experiences and practices.

Pacific leaders have called for the transitioning of the Pacific Regional Council on Early Childhood Care and Education (PRCECCE) to a more multi-sectoral Pacific Regional Council for ECD, with ECD focal points in each country. PIFS has been working with ECD stakeholders across the Pacific to encourage the establishment of these roles. A regional focus on ECD has promoted its importance and perhaps contributed to support for ECD in at least five countries (Cook Islands, FSM, Palau, PNG, Solomon Islands); however, generally, ECD systems across the Pacific region are still emerging.

