

## **Appraisal and Endorsement of the Liberian Primary Education Recovery Program Prepared for Fast Track Initiative**

### **1. Overall Comments and Endorsement:**

There is a very clear recognition by the Government, civil society, NGOs and DPs of the vital importance that education plays in the social and economic recovery of the country. Many branches of Government have consistently referred to the recovery of the education sector as a major national priority. Education is described as a priority in the Interim Poverty Reduction Strategy and was a priority in the recent Liberia Partner's Forum. In parallel, there is huge public demand for better access to education at all levels and for improved quality throughout the system. The Government and the Ministry of Education (MOE) are open and frank about the capacity and system weaknesses in the sector and within the MOE and show willingness to address these weaknesses. All these form a strong basis upon which to collectively develop a comprehensive sector policy and implementation plan that addresses the real issues and to develop a system that can assure incoming support will be used transparently and effectively for the purpose identified in the Liberian Primary Education Sector Recovery Program (LPERP).

The LPERP does symbolize a move away from the short-term emergency-related program interventions to a medium to long-term programmatic approach. The MOE has already begun to address some of the systemic constraints for such a programmatic approach. For example, the efforts to replace school levies charged by individual schools with the payment of school grants and the steps taken to address the issue of "ghost teachers". These initiatives demonstrate the MOE's willingness to address complex and difficult anomalies in the system.

To seize the current positive attitude to change within the sector and to address the real needs as soon as possible the LPERP was developed within a very short period of four weeks. The development of the LPERP did engage all senior level officers in the sector included consultations with the highest levels of government and brought development partners into the technical debates on sector policy. The latter was the first of its kind in very many years. However, the very short timeframe did not make it possible to have consultants and technical reviews at all levels of the education sector and with a broad range of stakeholders.

While it is undoubtedly true that the Government is fully committed to the LPERP currently only 8% of the budget (up from 3% in the previous financial year) is allocated to the education sector and without a medium term budget projection it is not possible to give firm predictions of the future public financing of education. However, the Ministers of Finance and of Planning and Economic Affairs have both stated that there will be an increase in the proportional government allocation to education in the new financial year. Nonetheless, the Ministry of Finance is expecting an annual national budget of about only \$150m. Thus even a high allocation would mean that the MOE will still have considerable difficulties to finance all the recurrent costs let alone development requirements. As part of the *Next Steps* the MOE will need to develop a matrix of trade offs based on financing scenarios.

The DPs recognize the significant financial gaps and remain committed to providing financial support to the sector and within the new coordination system, to direct that support to be more on-budget than it has been in the past.

The LPERP defines a wide range of strategic objectives and actions. The DPs recognize that they are all vital to address the current priorities and constraints so as to enable the sector to recover. It is an ambitious plan that will have formidable challenges to overcome.

Given that the data is of inconsistent quality and limited in scope the targets can only be indicative at this stage. Similarly, the budget in year two and three can be considered indicative. Both targets and budgets will be more accurately defined as more information, beginning with the next round of the school census in May this year followed in early 2008 by the national census. Additionally, until the results of the HIV zero-prevalence survey are released (expected mid 2007) a detailed analysis of the impact of HIV/AIDS and the MOE's response cannot be developed.

The Government, stakeholders and DPs recognize the capacity constraints to implement all the program actions and achieve all the planned results. Many of the program initiatives, especially in the first year will be designed to address the fundamental capacity and systems gaps. The costs of these capacity initiatives will be supported by the DPs and the FTI grant. The plan and budget does outline a number of areas that will require carefully targeted technical assistance.

Regular monitoring will be extremely important. As set out in the recommended *Next Steps* the MOE will establish measurable deliverables for six-month periods. The MOE and DPs will meet monthly to review progress on the *Next Steps*, LPERP implementation, constraints, and coordinate funding inflows.

On the basis of the appraisal of the LPERP the in-country Development Partners (DPs) unanimously endorse the LPERP and recommend that it is submitted to the Education for All Fast Track Initiative (EFA-FTI) for consideration to receive support from the EFA Catalytic Fund.

## **2 Appraisal Process**

The appraisal process began on the first of March 2007. The Development Partners (DP) consist of ten leading organizations in the education sector in Liberia (USAID, UNESCO, EC, SC-UK, IRC, LET, NRC, JRS, Oxfam and UNICEF) with UNICEF Liberia as lead agency..

There were 3 meetings with MOE senior staff in which the DPs were included. The policy issues discussed were

- over-age students, vocational and technical education and infrastructure.
- instructional materials/curriculum, teacher development (recruitment, training, compensation, deployment, certification)
- human resource management, decentralization and MOE management, education sector management and coordination

Three formal review meetings were held by the DPs.

1. to review the budget and make an overview of the coherence and relevance of policies and plans
2. to discuss with the Minister of Education the policy priorities and trade offs
3. to review the full submission document and the process of its development

The DPs had open access to the MOE throughout the process and the MOE were very welcoming of participation and inputs by the DPs. The appraisal was able to draw on the technical

observations by the Open Society Institute and the UNDP MDG Support Team, Bureau of Development Policy.

### **3. Strengths**

#### ***Coherence***

The DPs recognized the LPERP's external and internal coherence. Accordingly, the education sector analysis is based on a realistic analysis of the economic, social environment and the clearly defined strategic directions are well embedded on what is known at present about the overall context. The document gives a very honest assessment of the current situation, including the limitations of the current planning environment. A key factor is the lack of data and the accuracy of the available data. Additionally, there is a clear relationship between the long-term strategy and the short-term action LPERP. The action LPERP provides a strong basis for the costing. Furthermore there is an internal coherence. There is a direct relationship between the LPERP service delivery (components 1-4) and the management capacity development (components 5-7) together with the discreet plan for technical assistance.

#### ***Holistic approach***

The LPERP considers the whole education system and makes linkages between each area of intervention, the needs and the constraints. The LPERP represents a balance between access, quality and management considering the program implementation environment and the comprehensive nature of the needs. The LPERP includes comprehensive strategies to move towards equity in educational outcomes including measures to encourage gender equity. However, the LPERP has no reference to children with special needs, and the reduction of social and geographic disparity regarding access and learning. Nonetheless the overall holistic approach lends credence to the program's ambitious strategic and policy agenda.

#### ***Focused action plan***

Whereas the actions are wide ranging, they clearly focus on the most critical issues. Prioritization is very difficult given the scale of the needs and practical challenges but the proposed action plan does focus the financing and the political attention to the key areas. Nonetheless it will be important for the MOE to do more analysis on trade off scenarios based a financial and capacity projections. It will be challenging for the MOE to maintain its focus as competing issues. In this regard the regular review meetings with the DPs will be useful.

#### ***Commitment***

The LPERP represents the starting point for the creation of a full policy and sector plan. This means that achieving the EFA related goals are the core of the MOE's plans and future activities, reflecting full commitment to achieving universal primary education (UPE) and other related goals. The MOE is clearly aware of the fact that achieving the EFA goals will require trade offs at other levels. The MOE recognizes and welcomes technical assistance that, with carefully crafted terms of reference can build capacity in critical areas. However, the plan was not able to capture in detail the current and planned external support to the sector. This information is vital and will be collected in the proposed monthly review meeting to be held by the MOE and DP.

### ***Ownership.***

Starting with the President, the entire Government, including the Ministers of Education, Finance, Planning and Economic Affairs as well as the heads of the Budget Bureau and Civil Service Agency stand behind the LPERP. The process that developed this plan included all relevant senior government officials, relevant line ministries and senior officers of the MOE. However, the process was too short for a very thorough analysis of options and trade offs. Equally it did not give time for participation of all the stakeholders in education. These issues will need to be addressed in the development of the comprehensive sector policy and plan.

### ***Frankness***

The LPERP is clear about not just what it intends to achieve but also about all the constraints. The plan includes action that will directly address constraints – both system and human capacity. The MOE is open to technical assistance and willing to deal with complex issues such as payroll and school fees. The MOE is fully committed to collecting missing data and establishing a fully functional EMIS system. The MOE will have to address with some more urgency the strengthening of the mid level management (County and District Education Officers).

### ***Accountability procedures***

The LPERP has clear targets to establish accountability procedures. The DPS are equally clear that such procedures are vital. The first procedure will be the monthly MOE-DP meetings which will review the establishment of the other procedures and to check that these procedures are working and effective. The MOE and DP agree that such procedures are vital for effectiveness and credibility with the donors and public. The targets will need to be revised as more accurate data is available

## **4. Challenges**

### ***Knowledge Base***

Currently, very little is known about the student population, the available supply, the quality and reliability of services and the resources used. Data is needed in all areas of the sector and a major part of the capacity building in the first year will have to be directed at setting up solid data collection and EMIS system. The MOE is committed to filling the data gaps and the DPs will support this process.

### ***Budgeting system***

The budgeting system is weak, lacks transparency and accountability. There is an agreement to establish a more strategically focused budgeting structure for the sector and use it to simulate strategic and policy options for sector development. The Budget should be very clear and transparent about how much is spent on each levels, each budget categories, each administrative level and on discreet externally funded interventions. It should reflect the unit costs both for recurrent and investment related expenditures. The Budget execution should be of a manner that it can be easily monitored.

### ***Absorption and Implementation Capacity***

Understandably, there are serious capacity problems in all areas of the sector. Even the low budget of the past year was not fully executed. For now, a large number of donor-financed projects are planned, managed and implemented externally and the major actions planned in the LPERP need to be implemented in incremental stages until adequate capacities are built. The MOE fully recognizes this challenge and is ready to coordinate donor activities targeting capacity development as set out in the LPERP.

### ***Better understanding policy trade-offs***

This policy area is yet to be fully developed. In a country where need is widespread for support and resources, it is very difficult to define trade-offs. Moreover, it is difficult to set a limit to quality standards to assure that most of the population and especially the at-risk population benefits from capital investments, school supplies, textbooks and teacher training. Yet there is an understandable aim by the policy makers to pursue ideal standards. Making the right policy choices and understanding the implications and trade-offs will have to emerge during the upcoming months of intensive policy dialogues and capacity development

### ***Resource mobilization***

For the next three to five years the projected recurrent costs and investment needs are about twice as large as the projected internal and external resources. Given the amount of resources available and the finance needs, there is a need for additional funding preferably from external resources. A second option is to further refine the LPERP activities. However the latter option will put the achievement of the MDG at high risk.

Preparation of the groundwork for longer term system reform: Introduction of school grants  
In respect to school grants and the role they may play in the future of service standards and school management, it will be important for the MOE to establish standards and benchmarks around eligibility use, fund flow mechanism, and safeguards.

## **5. Next Steps**

The Appraisal Team recommends to the MOE the following *Next Steps*

- The MOE and the DPs to set up a detailed implementation plan for the next six months with measurable “deliverables”, costs and deadlines.
- A system of monthly meetings to set up by the MOE for the MOE and DPs to review progress on the *Next Steps*, review LPERP implementation and overview external financial inflows
- An annual review be instigated that evaluates program implementation, progress towards targets and assessment of trade offs
- The MOE sets up some interim capacity to integrate and coordinate externally funded activities to align them with the LPERP
- The MOE together with the Ministry of Finance and the Budget Bureau establish an appropriate budgeting system (if necessary, parallel to the present) that enable a clearer analysis of financial allocations to the sub-sectors of the education sector
- The MOE establishes a simplified, accountable and transparent version of the sector plan
- The MOE carries out the next round of the School Census with a revised and extended questionnaire and data inputted into a functional EMIS system
- Together with the Civil Service Reform Agency, the MOE regularizes the payroll, establish a human resource database and establish a salary scale based on qualifications, experience and responsibilities
- An independent verification of the teacher payroll be included in the regularization of the payroll
- The MOE develops a matrix of trade offs based on a number of financing scenarios
- The MOE undertakes research on demand-side interventions and disparity reduction
- The MOE will develop criteria to identify the location of new schools, school extensions and school rehabilitation with an emphasis on disparity reduction
- The MOE will begin the development (that includes field research to fill knowledge gaps) of a comprehensive education policy and plan that includes a process of wide consultation. The document should take particular note of special needs education, public and private service provision, HIV/AIDS, and over-age pupils. The policy and plan should be complete by end of the year.
- The MOE and DPs to engage with the Ministry of Finance on possible financial management and disbursement mechanisms

## **6. Conclusion**

It is very clear that now is the time to initiate such as LPERP as the LPERP. The government is fully committed, the MOE is united in its commitment to the LPERP's goals and targets and the public is clamoring for the changes in access and quality that this LPERP can create. The MOE has established a good partnership with the Development Partners and the latter have understood the complexities of the sector recovery process, the need to sustain support and the opportunities that the LPERP provides for better coordination and on-budget planning. Thus the Development Partners unanimously endorse the LPERP program.