

Brian K Robertson

To
Independent Review of Aid Effectiveness Secretariat
GPO Box 887
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From
Brian Robertson

January 1, 2011

Dear Madam and Sirs

In common with many Australians I have a great interest in how Australian aid to the developing world is used and I applaud this Government's decision to increase it. I do realize that your terms of reference for this review are about the effectiveness and efficiency of the Australian aid program as a whole. My experience and interest in the aid program is about educational improvement in the South Pacific and these days with particular reference to school textbooks. I therefore thank you in advance for your patience and attention to this relatively narrow example of aid assistance. I make five comments below and then make some more general suggestions based on what my comments exemplify.

Why a submission to the Panel Members?

First let me state my own personal and pecuniary interests. I am the author or co-author of about 20 books designed specifically for PNG and other South Pacific Schools. I also have a website set up to inform teachers and parents about books designed for South Pacific schools at <http://pngschoolbooks.com/>. The site also offers the books for sale although to date I have sold none! Please have a look at the site. At present I am running the stories from 15 PNG scientists who are all contributing to this site (at the *What's New* page) and to a new Grade 9 Science Text Book that I have co-authored and is currently undergoing publication at Pearson Education Australia.

I am retired and along with writing books managing this website is my hobby. I previously taught in PNG, worked as Senior Curriculum Officer for Agriculture in PNG for 8 years and was the Australian Team Leader of the Solomon Islands Science and Agriculture Project from 1993 to 1998. I have also consulted in Southern African countries. I know quite a bit about education and development aid particularly for the South Pacific and I keep up to date with what is happening to education in the area.

Some comments and observations

1. Never enough books

It is a truism that schools never have enough books even although it can be argued that if a child can read then the easiest way to educate that child is to provide books—and many of them! One reason for the lack of books in schools is because book supply is often at the tail end of education aid projects. This has been true of many

educational aid projects that I have had knowledge of. This tends to lead to each school getting a sample of books that are supplied according to the money available rather than a planned selection according to school needs.

2. Who orders the books?

The people who decide on what school books are required for schools are generally the National Subject Syllabus Committees consisting in the main of practicing teachers lead by the National Senior Curriculum Officer for the particular school subject area. This is organised at a National Government level and while it is a reasonable and fair system it can take a very long time. An order supplied under EU aid funding early this year was about 4 or 5 years in the making! On the other hand one of the major aims of two very important AusAID projects—the *PNG Basic Education Development Project* and the *Education Capacity Building Project* both of which ran from 2004 to 2010 costing \$124 million was to develop the capacity of and thus empower school management structures at the grass roots level such as School Boards of Management. If these projects have been successful you might want to enquire why books orders are not being developed at this level or at the Provincial Government level. Perhaps they are, of course, and I have not heard of it yet!

3. How do books survive?

In the Solomon Islands Science and Education Project, my SI counterpart and I lobbied AusAID and the SI Government hard but unsuccessfully for a slight change to the project implementation plan that would have allowed a commercial company to tender for the publication of the science books that we were writing. However development of the SI Education Print Shop was a part of the project, although it was never going to have the capacity of a commercial publication company. This resulted in the books being produced but the Malaitan/Guadalcanal troubles erupted soon after the completion of the project and I doubt that the book masters survived. As a consequence it required a project funded by the EU and implemented by a French company LINPICO in 2008/9 to develop sets of subject textbooks in association with Pearson Education Australia as the publishers. I was involved briefly with this for the next round of Agriculture textbook production.

4. Who writes the books?

About half the books that I have been involved in writing have been co-authored with a National form PNG or SI but we need more direct and proactive action in this area if countries of the South Pacific are to eventually write their own text books. See the *Ples Bilong Yumi* series at http://pngschoolbooks.com/index.php?option=com_chronoconnectivity&connectionn_ame=Books&Select=LowerPrimaryLanguage&Itemid=34: and *Organising School Agriculture* and *Vanilla Farming* at http://pngschoolbooks.com/index.php?option=com_chronoconnectivity&connectionn_ame=Books&Select=SecondaryAgriculture&Itemid=21. It is not easy to organise a South Pacific writing partner. I have started quite a few books with author partners from PNG who have dropped out for one reason or another. One other slight problem in writing books, for PNG schools in particular, is that the *Curriculum Reform*

Implementation Project 1999 to 2006 (\$44 million) did not complete its task. The website at <http://www.pngcurriculumreform.ac.pg/index.htm> is dead but all the secondary syllabuses are still in draft form and have been so for about the last 3 years. It appears that some have not even been proof read. The contact given on the site mcoleman@crip.sagric.com is also dead. This is not a good look for AusAID. And finally most school textbooks written for Australian school students are written and presented in what a present co-author of mine recently called—*magazine style*. Each page is full of pictorial representation and asides to the extent that someone reading to follow a well-presented and reasoned narrative is distracted. Such presentation might be required to hold the interest of the average Australian student. However books I have written for PNG and other South Pacific students are in a style that puts the story explaining the concept front and centre with more limited space allowed for occasional interesting asides. This is very necessary if the student is required to learn from the book with limited or no help.

5. How many South Pacific schools have one or more computers?

I have not been to PNG schools for five years and I don't know what percentage of primary or secondary schools have access to even one computer connected to the Internet. I suspect very few and I suspect that the main reason is the cost of maintaining an Internet connection. I am not talking about computer access for students because first the teachers need computer access. It needs no comment about how useful this would be for teacher education. And yes, of course it would let them have access to my website!

Possible Suggestions for the future:

- supply sufficient school textbooks as a primary method of enabling improvement in student learning (See comment 1 above.)
- supply computers and training, one or two, with internet access to all schools, primarily as a means of teacher education (See comment 2 above.)
- investigate the level of success of the *PNG Basic Education Development Project* and the *Education Capacity Building Project* with particular reference to the ability of School Boards of Management to organise their own budget—for example in the buying of required school textbooks (see comments 2 and 5 above)
- create a mechanism for tidying up all the loose ends and keeping any necessary and associated services alive after projects are complete (See comment 4 above.)
- give more time and effort to the setting up phase of all projects particularly where the expertise of the consultants is limited in one or more proposed aspects of the project—which is often the case (See comment 3 above.)
- create a project to train a cadre of writers of school textbooks using consultants who have written/published school textbooks—not as an attachment to a curriculum development project. (See comments 3 and 4 above.)

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I hope that the above is of some help to you in your task and I am happy to be contacted at my address or by email or telephone on any points.

Warm Regards

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'BKR', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Brian K Robertson