

# Nepal Education Sector: Planning for Results in an Unstable Setting

## Authors:

Ram Balak Singh, Deputy Director, Department of Education

Karsten Jensen, Chief Technical Adviser, DANIDA/ESAT

## Executive Summary

Since the mid 1990s, Nepal has been suffering from an insurgency on the one hand and political instability resulting in frequent changes of governments on the other. The education sector has suffered deeply, but schools are still functioning. Amid the continuous turmoil, the nation has maintained its commitment to improving access and quality of education through decentralization of the heavily centralized school system. An Annual Strategic Implementation Plan (known as the ASIP) was the starting point for this transformation. Building upon a broad participatory process, the plan has defined and guided educational planning in light of the armed conflict and political instability. It organizes strategies and specific measures proposed for district-level activities, and it shapes budgetary allocations in a systematic comprehensive manner. The ASIP is supported by an up-to-date Education Management Information System (EMIS), which provides meaningful feedback from the central administration to the district levels. As the EMIS has become larger and more reliable, information-based decision making is taking hold in the education sector. Regional and international partners have assisted in this process. The experience from Nepal shows that planning and budgeting of education can be shifted from an entirely state-run central planning mode to more of an inclusive, data-driven mode, even under highly adverse conditions.

## Background: The Need and Challenges in Educational Reform

With per capita GNP income of US\$ 300 per year, Nepal is among the poorest countries in the world. At 61 years, life expectancy at birth is still far below neighboring countries, and the maternal mortality rate is high and is estimated at 415 per 100,000 live births. Gender disparities also are reflected in education: only 34 percent of Nepali women are literate, compared with two-thirds of men.

Nepal's transition from an absolute monarchy to a multiparty democracy took place quite recently, in the spring of 1990. Since then, unfortunately, Nepali society has been severely tested by social and political turmoil. A Maoist insurgency has dominated the national agenda since 1996, claiming more than 12,000 lives, causing severe loss to national and individual properties, and inflicting pain and suffering on countless children, women and men. Not surprisingly, many schools and a broader range of social services are irregular or have been forced to close under the continuous onslaught.

Violence and political instability notwithstanding, Nepal has remained steadfastly committed to improving school access and educational quality. The Education for All program and the Millennium Development Goals are strongly endorsed and the international community has lent steady support. In light of the

difficulties in providing traditional public sector services in the midst of a conflict, the government strategy has been to devolve responsibility for implementation to community groups while providing the financial and technical support.

To carry out this agenda, four pressing challenges need to be addressed:

**Meaningful participation beyond the capital to plan, budget for, and manage educational activities.** Before 1972 in Nepal, community-managed schools were common, and many flourished. By the end of the 1990s, however, virtually all planning, budgeting, decision making, and management had been centralized. The involvement of local stakeholders was largely symbolic. Nominal participants described their contribution as “writing on water” – yes, they wrote, but with little lasting impression.

**Accurate data for planning.** Until recently, if educational data could be located at all, it was likely to be incomplete and inaccurate, if not flatly misleading. Categories could not be disaggregated and easily recast to determine, for example, attendance by gender, indigenous group, or children with disabilities. Statistically, policy makers could not “see” broad swathes of the population.

**An information system for monitoring and management.** Despite the unstable, rapidly changing political scene, many donors were cautiously willing to invest



in education, especially in programs for children in conflict zones, temporary classrooms for internally displaced children, scholarships for girls and underserved minorities, and help for children with disabilities – assuming, that is, that such projects could be reasonably monitored and effectively managed. To do so, a properly organized Education Management Information System (EMIS) was essential.

***An EMIS in place, and sufficient human capacity to collect, process, and analyze data from more than 27,000 schools.*** Prior to the implementation of reforms, local schools universally viewed data collection as just one more onerous bureaucratic requirement imposed by national managers. Participatory methods for compilation and sharing were unknown. No one seriously expected analyzed data to be returned to its local source, much less used locally for planning. Even at the central level, issue-oriented meta-analysis rarely took place.

### **Returning School Management to the Communities**

Prior to 1972, the country relied on about 4,000 community schools as its cornerstone for formal education. These schools were set up through community initiatives and financed through tuition fees and government block grants. The schools were nationalized in 1972 to improve inclusion, ensure more even funding, and provide technical support. Yet much was lost. In 2001, an effort was made to restore the positive elements of community management. The new Department of Education that began operations in 1999 created a policy framework for devolution of primary schools through amendments to the Education Act. In addition, the PRSP of Nepal adopted decentralization of school management, including transfer of management to communities, as one of the major strategies in education development. As such, the management of more than 2000 schools has already been transferred to communities. Preliminary assessments of these schools show that overall performance of these schools is encouraging.

Further, the goal has been to build systemic, institutional, and individual capacity for educational management and administration – first, by enabling national management within the sector, and then by extending capacity to district and local authorities. They needed real statistics, credible information systems, and serious modalities for participatory input.

This shift evolved from three points of reference.

- An Annual Strategic Implementation Plan (known as the ASIP) was to systematically embrace a broad range of stakeholders. Financed jointly by the government and donor agencies, the ASIP

emerged as the annual template for national and district level activities. The ASIP was first used to generate input for the annual appropriation bill, but it evolved into the actual draft bill that was submitted to the Ministry of Education and Sports and then to the Parliament.

- Participatory principles were to guide the strategic implementation plan. Starting with local school improvement planning, each educational district synthesized its annual improvement plan into a five-year plan. District plans were then submitted for synthesis into the national ASIP.
- Monitoring and management were to be supported by an up-to-date Education Management Information System (EMIS). Combined, the ASIP and EMIS were key tools that stakeholders at all levels could use for planning, monitoring, and management.

### **Designing and Implementing the New Mode**

The capacity building process designed to implement that new mode was kept deliberately simple, formative, and open-ended. It rested upon two principles.

#### **1. Not for us without us!**

Taking up the rallying cry from the disability sector – “Not for us without us!” – national officials and educational planners first met with administrators from Nepal’s 75 school districts. Together, they discussed issues and educational indicators at the national level. The national planners and officers then helped to convene five regional workshops, representing approximately 20 districts, the regional educational directorate, and several national agencies. After three to four days of lively debate at each, planners returned to their home districts and used what they had learned to initiate similar planning processes locally.

These meetings produced district-level strategic plans reflecting diverse local needs. With drafts in hand, the district planners then returned for another round of regional workshops. They and their colleagues from regional and national agencies thrashed out individual regional plans, setting the stage for the regional representatives to meet once again. Finally, the national agencies consolidated this output into the overall Annual Strategic Implementation Plan.

It should be noted that discussion of the draft amendment to the Education Act in 2001 – with the Minister of Education and Sports in attendance – was the first time in Nepal’s history in which school planners and administrators were consulted on a change to the legal framework of the educational sector before the change was presented to Parliament.



## 2. Educational management capacity building for high-quality data for decision making

In order to bring the ASIP to life, the largely dysfunctional data collection system had to be totally redesigned. Previously, questionnaires were sent annually to local schools, which were to answer and return them to the district offices that would total the compiled data and forward it to the national office. More often than not, it took two to three years to complete the “annual” cycle. The districts – much less the local schools – did not expect to receive feedback that would be used locally.

How was this cumbersome, unwelcome chore to be transformed so that real data could be fed into a modern electronic information system? First, data-gathering formats were totally redesigned, with data collectors receiving training at the regional strategic planning workshops. A qualified data entry company was contracted to process the resulting four gigabytes of data. A team of external data analysts and monitoring specialists was contracted to oversee quality assurance. More important, however, a program was launched to build internal capacity to promote the practical application of data for decision making, especially at the district level.

### Institutional Linkages with External Partners

Active institutional collaboration between Nepal’s Department of Education and India’s National Institute of Education Planning and Administration (NIEPA) was implemented to improve decentralized planning capacity. The more experienced external partner helped with the hands-on training of staff, development of manuals, and elaboration of district plans. It was agreed that trainees generally learn when they can apply knowledge and new skills in the context of real-life situations. So a proposal was developed to allow trainees to help develop actual district education plans.

Much was accomplished through the institutional partnership that linked Indian and Nepalese professional counterparts:

- Guidelines were elaborated for the preparation of district education plans. These guidelines spanned all levels and a broad range of activities.
- A manual was produced for district plan appraisal, standardizing the approach and monitoring strategies in five pilot districts.
- A set of training modules was produced, including practical exercises using real data from pilot districts and documenting good practices.

- A strategy was articulated for scaling up experiences from the five pilot districts to the remaining districts.

Moreover, Nepal’s technical institutions were planned to be strengthened – in particular, the National Centre for Educational Development (NCED) – so that national institutions could take full ownership of the technical role upon NIEPA’s exit. As such, an exit strategy for the partner was built in from the beginning of the institutional linkage.

Simultaneously, an institutional linkage was established between Nepal’s Department of Education and the International Institute of Educational Planning (IIEP), which is part of UNESCO in Paris. IIEP training programs focused on the education management information system and on school mapping. New technologies, such as geographical information systems (GIS), were piloted.

Through the partnership with UNESCO, enhanced technological capacity strengthened Nepal’s capacity for local planning in several important ways. School mapping (based on GIS) supported micro-planning that took into account the vast topographic complexity of Nepal. First, guidelines and training materials were piloted. The school mapping and microplanning was then implemented in selected districts. An EMIS was developed for the districts that would pilot decentralization. Finally, emphasis was placed on an exit strategy for IIEP that would leave Nepal with a skilled, experienced national team in place.

### Problems Encountered

In general, capacity building and the policy environment are mutually dependent. Policies are always imperfect because choices in the actual environment require tradeoffs and mask conflict that may not be immediately apparent. Hence, an institutional development strategy must ask not only how capacity building will affect the policy environment but, moreover, how policy changes will play out in the institutional structure. How will new legislation and regulations fare in light of longstanding administrative traditions and entrenched procedures? The question is not whether new technology will work, but whether it will work for particular people.

It is one thing to decide that decision making and educational management should be based on good data and participatory methodologies, but in an environment as complex and unstable as Nepal, getting there has been no easy matter:

- Local communities are not adequately involved in data collection, compilation, and dissemination. The Ministry of Education and Sports could more



or less compel schools to fill out annual questionnaires. Yet the preferred alternative – collecting reliable data from the community – is also difficult, costly, and time consuming; and it may not turn out to be cost effective.

- Many doubts persist on the quality and coverage of the basic data that has been processed. Actually, the bulk of it was collected by people who were not interested in their task. Data collectors saw no point in completing forms accurately, and despite training to the contrary, they consistently overstated or understated what they recorded.
- Indicators derivable from these data often do not speak to the key question of results – the impact of educational systems on the population, or the operational problems of the systems.
- Even with satisfactory data and relevant indicators in general, systematic analyses of gender, indigenous minorities, and biases against the poor are still difficult to undertake in depth.
- Frequently, data and indicators are not being used to inform policy making at the national and sub-national levels. Access is still limited; but even more significantly, lack of familiarity with the new modality causes old habits to die hard.
- Two-way data flow is still not the norm, and mechanisms for data dissemination are lacking. Schools still do not routinely receive feedback; forms are simply filled out. One recent study showed that the instructions in the data collection form did not adequately explain what needed doing. Data about student dropouts and grade repetition were particularly weak.
- Institutional linkages and capacity-building measures could not be financed to benefit all parts of the system at a national scale. Rather, they were pilots – development activities that would have to be scaled up through the regular government provisions. This puts considerable pressure on the system to manage and broaden the change. It means that key lessons must not only be learned, they must be utilized.

Strategies for capacity building require enabling institutions to learn by doing; yet if they do not connect with their clientele and provide real benefits during the learning process, they will remain isolated. While building necessary capacity, learners must also deliver solid results in complex spheres such as planning, budgeting, and monitoring.

### Adaptations during Implementation

At the outset, decision-making mechanisms were to be developed for planning and management, and capacity was to be built for educational management and administration. The systems, methods, and practices were expected to continuously change and evolve, taking into account lessons learned from the past year, financial resources, and staff. But management, planning, and administration are not constant; they need to adjust to an ever-changing context.

For 2000 and 2001 data, this meant that the Department of Education initially collected and computerized all school forms, rather than processing data at the district level, in order to reduce error. However, with regional training and capacity building, central data processing was discontinued by 2002.

For the ASIP process, the initial focus on subsectors generally deemphasized the macro-perspective. More recently, the education sector is being addressed as a whole, including references and conceptual links to the national Poverty Reduction Strategy and the Medium-Term Expenditure Framework.

Turning the education system into a learning organization is a complex work in progress, with the final form still to be identified and built.

### Factors for Success

Four factors for success stand out:

- ***The need for quick, effective capacity building.*** The capacity to undertake technically sound planning and substantive monitoring at the central, regional, and district levels needed to be developed quickly – and it was. Technically sound planning implies a participatory process with operational management decisions made on an informed basis. Today, plans are sounder, and mostly they are developed in a participatory modality. A few committed officers, working in close collaboration with experts from the linkage institutions, have contributed greatly to this achievement.
- ***Timing and coordination.*** Sound project plans make sense only if they are presented for appraisal and carried out at just the right time. Nepal's natural topographic diversity makes this hard enough under the best of circumstances; but when the complications of armed conflict, political instability, and natural calamities are added, the challenge becomes truly daunting.



For any project to work, proponents must successfully coordinate the development planning, budget approval, release of funds, and execution of multiple activities. Good efforts and timely coordination among more than 400 district-level officers have made this formidable challenge feasible.

- **Institutional learning.** The capacity to learn from one year to the next – to build lessons upon lessons – is critical for success. This capacity is still at a beginning stage. Yet as an example of evolving institutional learning, it should be noted that the Ministry of Education and Sports drafted its 2004–2009 Education for All plan without the use of external consultants and, for the most part, with recent data from its own EMIS. Donors contributed by holding back, providing the government with sufficient latitude to develop its own plan.
- **Strong, consistent external partners.** The Danish development agency, DANIDA, has been a consistent partner of the Department of Education, helping to cover financial liabilities of the ministry and facilitating capacity building through institutional linkages. It has helped to bridge gaps in capacity. A third party of this sort – with intimate knowledge of both worlds – has been crucial to the success of linkage activities.

## Results Achieved

**Entrenchment of ASIP as a modality.** At the most basic level, virtually all stakeholders have come to accept the modality of the strategic implementation plan. Among donors, the ASIP idea is entrenched as the primary planning and monitoring instrument for education. For example, the Secondary Education Support Project (SESP), jointly financed by AsDB and DANIDA, has adopted ASIP as the planning tool and the basis for annual budget planning. ASIP has also been taken as a decision-making tool and the basis for annual budget planning by donors.

In Nepal, moreover, this idea now incorporates and resonates with key elements in other critical areas, such as the Poverty Reduction Strategy paper, the Medium-Term Expenditure Framework, the Millennium Development Goals, school management transfer to communities, the Business Plan for Education, and the School Sectorwide Approach.

**A positive transformative element in a conflict-ridden environment.** The starting point for the ASIP was to define the scope of educational activities for a country in the midst of intensifying armed conflict and political instability. What is feasible and what isn't? The ASIP exemplifies what working on conflict and political instability really means. Every strategy, policy, or measure that is proposed must be assessed in

light of its contribution toward escalating or de-escalating conflict's impact on the education sector. From 2006 onward, the ASIP will explicitly document the role that it plays in conflict transformation.

**A step in defense of rights to education and equity.** In coming years, the ASIP will place even greater thematic emphasis on protection of the basic human right to education. Budgetary resources to address this issue are now allocated at virtually all levels and among all agencies. The structure of activities and financing linked to the ASIP are to be balanced with respect to the principles and practice of democracy, human rights, and equity insofar as they are related to schools and communities. In line with UN guiding principles, the impact of conflict will be addressed by allocations for internally displaced persons and children living in camps, and by addressing school overcrowding.

**Meaningful feedback from the central administration provided to the district levels.** The national ASIP documents all strategies and measures that are proposed for district-level activities; and it makes corresponding budgetary allocations in an organized, planned, and comprehensive manner. The districts' ASIPs are appraised using a manual developed during the 2004 institutional linkage with NIEPA. Starting in 2006, written responses will be provided to every district's proposed plan. These responses will be summarized in the national ASIP. How are decisions and tradeoffs justified? The allocations to each district are juxtaposed with key performance and financial indicators, as well as relevant figures from the Human Development Index.

**Participatory local planning as an accepted norm.** At the district level, participatory planning has become widely accepted. In an increasingly decentralized system, microplanning gradually is being viewed as the norm. School Improvement Planning now encompasses more than 27,000 schools and 5 million schoolchildren. Each year, thousands of citizens meet to participate in school planning and educational administration; and school management committees are now entrusted with real authority. Microplanning has become the point of departure for a grant allocation system in which funds for school management are released directly to local stakeholders.

**Data-based decision making is taking hold.** As it has become larger and more reliable, the EMIS has become progressively more useful. Although the scope for improvement and growth is vast, the information produced by the EMIS is being used more often and more consistently in both education management and decision-making processes. This shift works hand in hand with the ASIP modality. Previously, the ASIP focused on how the national budget would be devel-



oped. Today, budgeting starts with EMIS-produced data, and it generates an actual appropriations bill. The fiscal process has shifted toward a sectoral approach, with thematic budget categories replacing the simpler, politically-negotiated categories of primary versus secondary education.

***Institutional and professional linkages through external networks are extending national capacity.*** Nepal's national institutions have a far-from-sufficient technical and professional base for supporting comprehensive educational reforms. To extend professional exchanges and opportunities for institutional learning, Nepal's capacity-building process must effectively use institutional links through regional and international networks. The Department of Education is involved in such networks and is increasingly recognized for forging associations with other institutions of excellence.

### **Lessons Learned**

***Lessons on participatory planning and budgeting.*** At the systemic level, the organization for ASIP planning is now set up, and EMIS monitoring is functioning according to basic principles. Nevertheless, in coming years, the procedural quality needs to be improved in every area. In particular, more institutional capacity is needed to withstand staff transfers and political instability. Policies, strategies, and plans need to be sensitized so that they work in a particularly difficult educational environment that includes, among other things, ongoing armed conflict and all too frequent natural calamities. Overall, systems need to be developed that are uniform and harmonized so that individual agencies do not work in inconsistent modalities.

***Lessons on data quality and the link between data and planning.*** The quality of planning indicators can be no better than the institutions that collect and analyze data. Typically, collected data are associated with a vast range of approaches and objectives. Unfortunately, most information does not yet directly link to EMIS or produce robust educational indicators. Data collection and processing is carried out by an institutional system with limited capacity for such complexity. Indicators have been dealt with organizationally through a standard development project/program approach. Yet the educational and financial information management systems are still unlinked. The critical link to actual financing of schools is not sufficiently established.

Monitoring information is greatly underutilized for planning and decision making by the Ministry of Education and Sports and other key government offices.

Even though they are the ultimate beneficiaries, grass-roots stakeholders are not yet involved in the monitoring process. Without participatory input, monitoring reports are typically bound nicely and shelved, rather than being made available through a fully transparent information system geared toward public feedback

***Lessons on capacity building through institutional linkages.*** Linkages through networks can greatly facilitate access to new knowledge and the latest sector-specific thinking. For these to work, institutions and professionals must be bound through genuine partnerships and collegiality. Relationships must offer practical opportunities for mutual learning. On-the-job learning and collective knowledge sharing is enhanced by shared mutual experiences, technology, and exchange of best practices. Linkage arrangements can provide relatively easy access to a partner institution's entire resource base. This is a cost-effective and sustainable method of capacity development, but the logistical difficulties in undertaking such linkages should not be underestimated.

Both NIEPA and IIEP have developed training modules on decentralized planning and monitoring. These materials and the respective experiences of using them could be shared in far greater depth. Despite the challenge of translation, training modules in the Nepali language are needed. As more experienced partners, NIEPA and IIEP could assist in developing a framework for preparation, translation, and adaptation of these modules for local need, especially for use outside the capital. On the other hand, an exit strategy is just as important. Institutional circumstances greatly limited NCED's capacity to benefit from NIEPA and IIEP programs.

### **Applicability to Other Programs**

Can Nepal's experience in capacity building be applied to other programs and countries?

Capacity building always takes place in a particular context; and in Nepal, conditions have been exceptionally harsh and difficult. Potential pitfalls and stumbling blocks have been formidable – armed conflict, chronic political instability, the dissolving of Parliament, restrictions on movement, and the absence of elected local bodies. Yet Nepal's experience also shows that decentralized educational planning and budgeting can develop even under such highly restrictive conditions. At the end of the day, capacity building makes the difference. But that takes time, patience, and flexibility, and steadfast collaboration among dedicated institutions, educational professionals, and communities.



## How Educational Programming in Nepal Embodies the MFDR Principles

1. *At all phases – from strategic planning through implementation to completion and beyond – focus the dialogue on results for partner countries, development agencies, and other stakeholders.*

- The School Improvement Plan, the District Education Plan, and the Annual Strategic Implementation Plan both at district and central levels are the instruments of planning, budgeting and monitoring.
- The school and district level planning is shared with stakeholders at the local level.
- There are two annual review missions in which both government and development partners participate actively – they engage in constructive dialogue in assessing the previous year’s progress and pitfalls before the next year’s ASIP, and review the annual work plan and budget (AWPB) with a view to endorsing improved results.
- Recent initiatives include the preparation of the school sectorwide approach (SWAp) policy framework, the education sector business plan, school management transfer to communities, education sector financing, etc.

2. *Align actual programming, monitoring, and evaluation activities with the agreed expected results.*

- Flash report I and II are monitoring instruments at school level to document and report progress.
- At district and national levels, planning is linked to targets and achieving results.
- Aide Memoires of EFA and SESP evaluate program implementation and provide suggestions for improvement. Recent recommendations are to slowly move in the direction of a ‘school sector approach’ for intensifying educational achievements.

3. *Keep the results reporting system as simple, cost-effective, and user-friendly as possible.*

- Every year the Department of Education prepares a Status Report and shares it with development partners and key stakeholders. This is an instrument of transparency and a self-evaluation report prepared from the perspectives of accountability and continuous improvement. The emphasis is to support and capacitate the schools to prepare annual progress reports that outline their expenditures and learning achievement for all students.

- The formats used for reporting progress and results are simple and user-friendly to the extent possible. These are prepared in consultation with head teachers and school supervisors who are their users at the sites.

4. *Manage for, not by, results, by arranging resources to achieve outcomes.*

- Resources are allocated for achieving desired results. For example, this year ASIP aims to increase net enrolment of children (differentiated by girls) by 4 percentage points over the last year, and to increase learning achievement in primary and secondary education.

5. *Use results information for management learning and decision making, as well as for reporting and accountability.*

- Recent statistical information is used to make decisions on resource allocations for block grants, scholarships, earmark grants for teacher support to schools with high PTR, grants for construction of classrooms, and so on.
- However, using results information for management learning needs high capacity and development of culture of work.

## References

Annual Strategic Implementation Plan (April 2005)  
District Basic Education Plan. Manual for Appraisal  
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## For more information

### Contact:

Ram Balak Singh, Deputy Director, Department of Education; DANIDA/ESAT

Karsten Jensen, Chief Technical Adviser,  
DANIDA/ESAT **E-mail:** [kjensen@esat.org.np](mailto:kjensen@esat.org.np)



