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TFF BUDGET CUT HAS THE POTENTIAL TO IMPACT ACCESS AND RETENTION IN BASIC EDUCATION

Jeremy Goro
Hafford Norea

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Key Points

- Tuition Fee Free (TFF) Policy increases enrolment, retention and girls' participation in basic education.
- TFF has the potential to increase production, improve living standards and enhance economic growth of Papua New Guinea .
- TFF budget cut will have adverse impacts on enrolment, retention and girls' participation in education.
- TFF Policy could be managed properly by reviewing the policy without cutting the budget.
- There are issues about management of TFF which can be resolved by creating an effective monitoring and evaluation mechanism.
- Quality issues of education can be managed by more investments in infrastructures and recruiting more teachers.

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TFF BUDGET CUT HAS THE POTENTIAL TO IMPACT ACCESS AND RETENTION IN BASIC EDUCATION

By **Jeremy Goro and Hafford Norea**

Increase in enrolment and retention at basic education is fundamental to achieve sustainable and equitable growth. This can contribute toward achieving Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) number 4 and its six education targets. The National Education Plan (NEP) 2015 – 2019 has not embrace SDG 4 (National Department of Education, 2014). It is imperative to maintain sustainable access and retention in basic education. The recent budget cut on education will have impacts on enrolment. The Government of Papua New Guinea's (GoPNG) decision to cut the TFF budget will also affect girls' participation in education. The government's new allocation for Government Tuition Fee Support (GTFS) revealed that only K486,351,400 was allocated to fee support for 2020 compared to K616,187,000 for 2019 under TFF. This represents a reduction of 21 percent. The budget cut means that parents would pay portion of their children's school fees commencing on 2020 school year. By cutting 21 percent of the budget, under the new GTFS arrangement, parents will have to pay 36.6 percent while the government pays 63.4 percent. This will certainly have adverse impacts on access to basic education in the country.

The Tuition Fee Free education

Education increases workers' productivity and thus increases their income and standard of living which, in turn, improves the gross domestic product of a country. In addition, there are many non-monetary benefits of education such as improved health status and reduced crime. These benefits has the potential to improve the 'ease of doing business' in a country and thus, attract more foreign direct investments. In most developing countries including Papua New Guinea (PNG), governments often highlight the value of improving human capital as an important pathway towards poverty reduction. This often provides the governments with the motivation to invest in skills and human capital of their

populations through expanding and improving the quality of their formal education systems. Compulsory free education has the potential to improve quality of life of people and promote economic growth of a country.

The notion of Tuition Fee Free (TFF) education was debated around the world as old as the notion for human rights. According to United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization's (UNESCO) Right To Education project (UNESCO, 2019), education is not a privilege. It is a human right. Free education is enshrined into the human rights to education as one of the key attributes among many other characteristics. It is a right, it is universal, it is a priority, it is non-discriminatory and equality, it is free and compulsory universal primary education, it is available and accessible free education at secondary and vocational, it is quality education, it is non-violent and safe learning environment for all and, academic freedom at all levels (UNESCO, 2019, p.29). There is compelling moral, political, economic, social and pragmatic reasons for the state to legally protect the right to education for everyone in the national law and make it compulsory or mandatory.

The benefits of free compulsory education are necessary for the country's prosperity. Education increases workers' productivity and thus increases their incomes and standard of living, which in turn, improves the gross domestic product of a country. Compulsory free education has the potential to improve quality of life of people and promote economic growth of a country.

The TFF policy was introduced in 2012 to improve access and retention of students especially in basic education from elementary to secondary school. The policy made it compulsory and free for all basic education from elementary to secondary school by abolishing any fees including project fees except for specific projects that are approved by provincial and national education boards. This has seen dramatic increase in basic education access and retention according to Medium-Term Development Plan III (Department of National Planning and Monitoring, 2018). There were more children accessing basic education and there was significant improvement in retention and participation of girls in education which improves gender parity index. However,

quality of education remains a challenge as government rolls out TFF in schools (Walton et al, 2017).

The current government's assistance to education is called Government's Tuition Fees Support or Subsidy. This is a new arrangement where government and parents share the cost of education. The arrangement allows parents to pay 37 percent and government to pay 63 percent.

Achievements of the Tuition Fee Free Education Policy

The TFF policy has some notable achievements despite some challenges associated with its implementation. Some of these achievements are:

- **High enrolment rates in school.** The implementation of TFF contributed to an increase in enrolment rates of school-aged children in basic education. As more children enrolled in schools, literacy rates in PNG will be increased. Currently, literacy rate in PNG is the lowest in the Pacific.
- **Higher retention rate.** The TFF Policy contributed in reducing the number of children dropping out of basic education. More students are retained in school to complete the basic education cycle (prep to grade 12). The improvements in retention is due to the fact that parents' financial burdens were removed. With government's paying fees, more children are retained in school to complete grade 12.
- **Improved Gender Parity.** One of the significant achievements of TFF is the increase in the number of girls enrolled and completed basic education. In PNG, most parents prefer to allow boys to continue in education but with the intervention, number of girls' participation in education has increased dramatically.
- **Improve Gross National Product (GNP).** The increase in students' enrolment and retention rates as a result of TFF Policy has the potential to increase PNG's literacy rate which contributes to human development. The increase in literacy and human development also result in increase of the Gross National Product of our country and improve standard of living for our citizens.
- **Increase competition.** The increase in access and retention also increases competition among students which has the potential to improve the quality of education.

Potential impacts of TFF budget cut on basic education

The potential impacts of TFF budget cut are:

- **A reduction in school enrolment rate.** Some parents may not be able to pay school fee for all of their school-aged children. Thus, they might consider enrolling some children in school whereas others might be asked to engage in activities such as agriculture, household chores or even looking after their siblings. Children from rural villages whose parents have no steady income and have more than one child in school are most likely to be hit harder.
- **A decrease in school retention rate.** Some parents who have several children in school might find it difficult to pay school fee for all their children and might consider withdrawing some of them from school. This will lead to deprivation of school-aged children's rights to education.
- **A reduction in school enrolment and retention rates for girls.** Most parents in PNG, especially in rural areas, prefer to enrol boys than girls in school. Thus, budget cut for TFF might affect girls more.
- **Potential decrease in human capital development.** A reduction in school enrolment and retention rates have the potential to reduce the number of students that make it to colleges and universities. This can have adverse impacts on manpower development in the country.
- **Reduction in literacy rate.** PNG has one of the lowest literacy rates (about 65 percent) in the Pacific. The reduction in the TFF budget might result in a reduction in the country's literacy rate and lower Gross National Product as the country needs more literate people to increase production both in formal and informal economic activities.
- **Access to basic education may become a luxury good.** Paying fees will be burdensome for children whose parents are unemployed and those living in the rural village where there are little or no economic activities to generate income. This might create a pyramid where education will be for only the privilege rich households.

How TFF budget cut can be managed

If the intention of GoPNG is to improve accessibility to basic education, improve literacy rate and improve human development in the country, it should consider the following:

- **Review the current TFF arrangement and budget**

cut. The current 37 percent to be paid by parents may be burdensome to some parents, especially those who have no stable income and have more than one child in school. Thus, the TFF budget cut should be suspended.

- **Gradual implementation for TFF cut.** If there is a need for budget cut on TFF, the implementation should be gradual, which should be spread over three years. For the first year, parent should pay 10 percent of the school fee. They pay additional 12 percent in the second year and 15 percent in the third year.
- **Establish effective monitoring and evaluation mechanism.** GoPNG should establish effective and efficient mechanism for monitoring and evaluation of the implementation of TFF fund. The GoPNG, through the Department of Education and Department of Provincial and Local Level Government, should establish a TFF management team to monitor and evaluate the disbursement and implementation of funds through effective systems of reporting acquittals to ensure that funds are properly used and acquitted.

Conclusion

TFF has contributed towards increasing school enrolment and retention rates as well as participation of girls in education. Increase in enrolment creates competition among students which can improve quality of education. However, the implementation of TFF requires more classrooms and good teacher-to-students ratio to work well. Given this situation, it is notable that more classrooms should be built and number of teachers should also increase. The TFF budget cut will have adverse impacts on enrolment, retention and girls' participation in education.

This paper suggests that GoPNG should establish a effective monitoring and evaluation mechanism so that funds meant for TFF is utilised properly. All necessary facilities and teachers should be provided to improve quality of education under the TFF Policy.

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About the Authors

Jeremy Goro is a Research Fellow in the Education Research Program at the PNG National Research Institute. He has a Master of Education specialising in research and pedagogy from the University of Newcastle, Australia. His research interest areas include education and curriculum reforms, understanding issues in higher education, economics of education, governance of education and cross-cutting issues in education. He also has research interest in governance and service deliveries in PNG.

Hafford Norea is a for Research Cadet with the Education Research Program at the time this paper was written. He graduated with a Bachelor's Degree in Political Science from the University of Papua New Guinea. He is also a graduate of Diploma in Economic Policy Analysis from the PNG National Research Institute.