

**United Nations Transforming Education Summit (TES)
National Consultation Report
St. Vincent and the Grenadines**

1. TES NATIONAL CONSULTATION PROCESS

Convenor's Name: Dr. Godwin E. James

Number of consultations: Four (4)

Date(s): June 15, 2022
June 17, 2022
June 23 June, 2022 and
21 July, 2022

Number of participants for each consultation:
43, 60, 9, 58, respectively

Language used: English

Age range of participants:

- 18-29: 20
- 30-59: 150
- 60+: 0

Participants by gender:

- Male: 55
- Female: 115

Number of Participants from each sector

- Education: 143
- Child Protection: 1
- Health: 3
- Labour: 1
- Finance: 3
- Information Technology: 2
- Youth and students (including children and adolescents): 19

2. PRINCIPLES OF ENGAGEMENT

St. Vincent and the Grenadines (SVG) held four (4) consultations in preparation for the September United Nations (UN) Transforming Education Summit (TES). There were two (2) consultations with principals, one (1) with a small group of males and a national consultation that brought together a broad representation of stakeholders.

To deal with the issue of educators often being spoken for by others, regarding educational changes, principals of primary and secondary schools discussed five (5) areas of the Summit's remit through an online Zoom meeting on 15 and 17 June, 2022 respectively. They were placed in breakout groups to discuss the topics below. A Ministry of Education staff member facilitated each group discussion using questions drawn from the UN documents. The groups elected a principal to report on the discussions, and a rapporteur took notes of each report. The topics covered were:

1. Ensuring full recovery from COVID-19 educational disruptions;
2. Inclusive, equitable, safe and healthy schools;
3. Learning and skills for life, work and sustainable development;
4. Teachers, teaching and the teaching profession and
5. Digital learning and transformation.

The national consultation took place on 21st July, 2022. There were seven (7) groups with representatives from the Ministry of Health Wellness and the Environment; the Ministry of National Mobilisation, Social Development, Family, Gender Affairs Etc.; the Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning, a financial institution, special education, early childhood education, education officers, Division of Nursing Education, teachers and senior Ministry of Education officials.

The only area not covered on that day, was "ensuring full recovery from COVID-19 educational disruptions", because the topic and related issues were exhausted during the principals' discussions, held previously. In addition, SVG has robustly responded to COVID-19 educational disruptions and continues to implement programmes to mitigate its challenges. Each of the seven groups comprised six to eight (6-8) participants, a facilitator, a rapporteur and a note taker.

The groups discussed:

1. Inclusive, equitable, safe and healthy schools;
2. Learning and skills for life, work and sustainable development;
3. Teachers, teaching and the teaching profession;
4. Digital learning and transformation;
5. Financing education;
6. Ensuring strengthened and more sustainable financing of education and
7. Raising the ambition of national education targets and benchmarks.

The critical discussion points form the basis of this report, representing, as authentically as possible, the participants' voices.

3. CONSULTATION FOCUS AND OUTCOMES

Ensuring full recovery from COVID-19 disruptions

The discussions revealed that COVID-19 has had, and continues to have profound adverse effects on education in St. Vincent and the Grenadines (SVG), as it did in other countries. The most noticeable of these include:

1. Lack of student engagement in school;
2. Low levels of literacy and numeracy among some students;
3. Increase in learning gaps;
4. Increase in school dropout rates, particularly among middle and senior secondary school students;
5. Inadequate and inappropriate use of devices intended for online learning, as well as insufficient access to connectivity (Devices were a source of distraction to many students rather than an aid to their learning);
6. Increase in behavioural problems among students when face-to-face classes resumed;
7. Instances of sexual abuse of girls and a few cases of teenage pregnancy;
8. Teachers being overworked, with some suffering from burnout and a lack of attention to their psychological needs;
9. Increase in delinquency and absenteeism among teachers and
10. Decrease in structured physical activity among students.

The country instituted several measures to minimise learning loss related to the COVID19 pandemic, including:

1. Implementing multipronged approaches to remediation in literacy and numeracy which continue into 2022/2023;
2. Restructuring of schools' timetables to focus on the core subjects in the primary grades;
3. Providing psychosocial help for students;
4. Increasing physical activity for students;
5. Sharing of resources and collaboration among principals as communities of learners;
6. Providing students with electronic devices (tablets) to ensure continuity in learning and
7. Tutoring for students (one-on-one assistance).

The measures outlined above reveal that the government of SVG, through the Ministry of Education, made a valiant effort to deal with the adverse effects of COVID-19 on education. However, other measures must be implemented to ensure a complete recovery from the deleterious impact of COVID-19 on education, such as:

1. Providing continuous professional development for teachers in the use of online learning platforms;

2. Providing intense, targeted and structured identification and support for the most vulnerable segment of the student population, particularly in literacy and numeracy;
3. Improving the collection and the use of data to inform instructional and other decisions in schools;
4. Increasing the support staff in schools to handle teaching, extracurricular and physical activity;
5. Redesigning schools' learning spaces to promote critical thinking;
6. Evaluating the present curriculum of primary schools to determine whether it is too heavy;
7. Increasing the appreciation for skills training in education;
8. Reintegrating students who have abandoned school and ensuring that they attend school regularly and
9. Providing support for students' nutrition and health.

Inclusive, equitable, safe and healthy schools

Educational provisions in any country must ensure an inclusive, equitable, safe and healthy environment for all. However, this is not always the case in many countries. The consensus from the discussions was that SVG was generally off-track regarding SDG 4 goals, for several reasons:

1. There are only a few schools in the country for children with special needs, and none of them is in the Southern Grenadines;
2. There are many teachers who do not possess the requisite skills for teaching students with learning disabilities;
3. There are still too many primary schools that do not have access to readily available counsellors;
4. There are too many hurdles or challenges in diagnosing students with learning disabilities, which currently is a slow and painstaking process;
5. There are several schools that are not safe nor emotionally conducive for learning, as there is an increase in crimes being committed by students and some teachers;
6. There are some students who are left out of mainstream schools because of a lack of training for teachers in inclusive education;
7. There are inadequate technological resources to cater to inclusivity;
8. There are many school buildings that are not designed to cater to individuals with physical disabilities;
9. There are still some challenges with streaming of students and ranking them, including the inadvertent lowering their self-esteem and
10. There is still no proper system of tracking students throughout their educational journey.

Suggestions for dealing with these challenges include:

1. Providing essential professional development for teachers in sign language and literacy;
2. Utilizing existing and other assessment tools to diagnose learning difficulties to be able to correct the challenges;
3. Ensuring that the entire chain of Grenadine islands is included in the process of inclusive education;
4. Improving school buildings so that they could accommodate the differently abled;
5. Using Youth Empowerment Workers (YES) to perform the role of safety monitors in schools;
6. Revising the truancy policy with a view to achieving effective enforcement;
7. Implementing a proper information management system that will assist with data regarding students and teachers;
8. Reviewing the curriculum to cater to students with disabilities and exceptionalism;
9. Partnering with law enforcement agencies to deal with offenders within schools who run afoul of the law and
10. Reviewing the deployment of teachers so that outstanding teachers are not assigned to the academic highfliers, but that they are assigned to lower-performing students.

Learning skills for life, work and sustainable development

While strides have been made toward ensuring that technical vocational education and training and skills are normalized in the education system, long-held narrow perspectives and misconceptions still dominate educational thinking among some sections of society.

The concerns relating to this action track are:

1. Lack of training opportunities locally beyond the associate degree;
2. Inadequate investment, training, retraining and upskilling of workers to meet labour market demands;
3. Inability of or the limited capacity of the technical institutes to provide adequate training and
4. Unequal distribution of human and physical resources.

These challenges may be dealt with in the following ways:

1. Design new programmes and expand current ones to address the emerging skill needs; This should be done in tandem with employers;
2. Create flexible and modular part-time programmes that extend beyond regular school hours;
3. Develop modular training in micro credentialing for TVET and lifelong learning;

4. Develop and introduce rapid modular training in partnership with employers, to cater for the skill development of unemployed youths;
5. Create hybrid programmes through the use of a remote learning infrastructure that will blend online and practical training;
6. Create a talent management system and succession planning system to retain and track the talent and skill needs in the country;
7. Create a rapid response for the assessment of emerging skill needs and
8. Enact and finalise the TVET policy that has been languishing since 2011.

Teachers, teaching and the teaching profession

This action track focused on the bedrock of education: teachers, the act of teaching and the teaching profession. The view is that SVG was off-track regarding some aspects of the SDGs relating to this theme; however, it was on track in some areas.

The discussants identified the following areas of concern:

1. The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in the loss of quality teachers to meet the needs of students, particularly the vulnerable students, as some teachers who did not take the vaccine, as mandated by law, were replaced with unqualified ones;
2. The shift to using online technology to deliver instruction during COVID-19, caught many teachers unprepared, not being sufficiently competent in the use of educational technologies;
3. The female to male ratio among teachers still presents a challenge;
4. The obvious inequities in rural-urban schools;
5. The absence of regulations to govern the Early childhood education sector;
6. The difficulty with attracting persons into the teaching profession because arguably the incentives are not attractive;
7. The absence of systematic appraisal and accountability of teachers;
8. The teacher education programme is inadequate to prepare teachers for the 21st century classroom
9. The disparities in the appointment of teachers following the acquisition of additional higher qualifications and
10. The unsafe working conditions in some instances.

The suggestions below may mitigate the challenges relating to teachers, teaching and the teaching profession:

1. Evaluate the current teacher education programme. Student teachers should increase contact time with students in the classroom.

2. Create teaching standards, which should include, increasing the minimum qualifications for being a teacher;
3. Consider the licensing of teachers. Teachers should be licensed to practice for a stipulated number of years, with an appraisal done before being allowed to continue to practice;
4. Review the terms and conditions relating to retirement, pension and gratuity, so that teachers can exit the profession after 20 or 30 years of service, without losing their entire benefits;
5. Increase support services, rather than having teachers perform multiple tasks in addition to teaching;
6. Increase the allocation of physical and human resources to educational institutions;
7. Introduce school boards to assist with the decentralisation of educational provisions;
8. Revise, possibly extend the school year and
9. Incentivize competent teachers, by increasing their remuneration, thereby, encouraging them to remain in the classroom rather than move out into management or other areas.

Digital learning and transformation

COVID-19 brought into sharp focus the need for digital learning and transformation to be accorded high priority in education systems worldwide. In relation to SVG, the following concerns were proffered in the discussions on digital learning and transformation:

1. The primary school curriculum does not include the use of technology;
2. The unavailability of Wi-Fi services for vulnerable students;
3. The misuse and lack of care of devices provided for online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic;
4. The inadequate use of digital tools and devices for teaching and learning
5. The absence of policies to inform / govern the use of technology in schools
6. The e-illiteracy or dearth of knowledge of teachers in the use of digital devices and platforms for online learning and
7. The techno-phobia or lack of digital skills of parents to engage with the learning technologies and use of devices. They also do not have adequate monitoring strategies for their children/wards.

The suggestions put forward to deal with the shortcomings of digital learning and transformation include:

1. Restructure the curriculum of primary schools to include technology education;
2. Hold parents responsible for the maintenance of devices, or a team of individuals should be stationed/ deployed in zones to deal with malfunctioning devices;

3. Prepare and disseminate tutorial videos to provide parents with monitoring skills and techniques to assist their children;
4. Create policies for parental control and use of government-issued devices for students;
5. Enhance the link between the virtual and face-to-face learning environments;
6. Produce local resources (including self-paced courses) for teachers and students to facilitate supplementary learning;
7. Create/host school websites where stakeholders can access learning resources and
8. Procure an EMIS system to collect and manage data on every aspect of school life.

Financing Education

Financing education in St. Vincent and the Grenadines consumes 15-17 percent of the national budget, and 4-6 percent of the country's GDP is spent on education. Over the years, there has been significant infrastructural work done to educational facilities. There has been the implementation of universal secondary education and the country is almost at the point of providing universal pre-primary education.

However, there are still issues regarding, or stemming from the inadequate financing of education:

1. Inadequate provision of computers to all students (at once), versus a phased approach;
2. Non- access, impeded or inadequate access to educational facilities by persons with disabilities;
3. Lack of accountability, inefficient use or wastage of resources;
4. Centralization of educational management is sometimes a challenge to financing education and
5. Poor reliability of internet connectivity.

To deal with the challenges that are facing the financing of education in SVG, the group articulated these suggestions:

1. The construction of new school buildings or educational facilities must provide unimpeded access to those with disabilities;
2. The construction or retrofitting of more virtual classrooms;
3. The provision of more devices for online learning and the employment of additional school support staff;
4. The installation of electricity to vulnerable households so that children can have access to online learning;
5. The introduction of various incentives (such as tax rebates) to businesses that contribute to (sponsorship, scholarships etc) education;
6. The improvement of reporting, accountability and continuous auditing of schools;

7. The introduction or (re) – establishment of school gardens to reduce the bill for the school feeding programmes and as a means of income generation and
8. The sharing of resources across different units within the Ministry of Education to reduce costs.

Apart from the five action tracks, the National Consultation also addressed the following two areas suggested in the UN document *Guidelines for National Consultations*:

1. Ensuring strengthened and more sustainable financing of education and
2. Raising the ambition of national education targets and benchmarks

Ensuring strengthened and more sustainable financing of education

The government of SVG allocates a substantial amount of its budget to education, as members of action track 4 who discussed *financing education* noted. However, there is a need to consider ways to strengthen and create more sustainable forms of financing education in St. Vincent and the Grenadines.

Sustainable financing of education will assist in mitigating some of the immediate and recurring challenges with financing education. Some of the issues identified were:

1. The educational offering in SVG is still too heavily theoretical with not enough practical or in the field experience (immersive learning opportunities), this notwithstanding SVG has achieved universal access to education;
2. The teaching profession in SVG appears to attract those who do not possess the most outstanding academic acumen;
3. The greater portion of the 16 % of the national budget allocated to education goes to wages;
4. The government spends a substantial amount on providing books for secondary school students through the book loan scheme;
5. The allocation to education also covers public and government-assisted schools and the SVG Community College;
6. The SVG Community Colleges does not charge tuition fees to students;
7. The notion of "free" education poses a challenge to the sustainable financing of education, specifically regarding the student loan system and
8. The private financial institutions face a challenge when they provide student loans as there are no repercussions when borrowers default on their payments.

The group put forward these suggestions to strengthen and improve the sustainability of financing education in St. Vincent and the Grenadines:

1. Shift the mind-set of the populace from the consumers' perspective of educational services to the notion that education is not a free undertaking;
2. Educate the public on the fact that education is an expensive undertaking;
3. Explore ways to reduce school expenses, especially the food bill; as such, schools should produce some of the food they consume;
4. Encourage, incentivize private partners and willing NGOs to assist the government in funding education;
5. Teach and encourage parents to plan financially for their children's education;
6. Manage, scrutinize and monitor the use of books and the introduction of new editions that do not contain any major changes before passing on this new cost to the Government or parents; Books on the book loan scheme should have a stated shelf, thus saving on expenditure in purchasing books to keep up with publishers' frequent updates;
7. Source e-books as a viable alternative to printed texts;
8. Review the financial implications of the Government funded \$500.00 bursary. While a source of contention among group members, some saw the \$ 500.00 award for performance in external examinations as a strain on the government's budget and suggested students should be encouraged to be intrinsically motivated to do well in these examinations and
9. Weigh and review the notion that education be seen as a business, and as such, to avoid bankruptcy, it should operate as businesses do.

Raising the ambition of national education targets and benchmarks

Finally, the National Consultation deliberated on *raising the ambition of national education targets and benchmarks* as one of the components suggested by the UN for consideration. According to the *Guidelines for National Consultation* document, the UNESCO 2020 Global Education Meeting committed to providing national benchmark values for 2025 and 2030 concerning the seven indicators for realizing SDG 4.

It is important to restate what are the SDG 4 benchmark indicators:

1. **Exclusion:** out-of-school rate (primary education, lower secondary education, upper secondary education)
2. **Participation in early learning:** participation rate in organised learning (one year before the official primary entry age) by sex
3. **Completion:** completion rates (primary education, lower secondary education, upper secondary education)
4. **Teacher Qualification:** proportion of teachers with the minimum required qualification, by education level
5. **Learning outcomes:** proportion of children and young people (a) in grades 2/3, (b) at the end of primary, and (c) at the end of lower secondary, achieving at least minimum a proficiency level in (i) reading and (ii) mathematics by sex

6. **Financing:** education expenditure as a share of GDP/ total public expenditure
7. **Gender equality:** Gender gap in upper secondary completion rates

One of the areas the group pondered on was whether the government had set current SDG 4 benchmarks indicators, including that for gender equity. The group concluded the following:

1. There had been discussions at various levels on the benchmarks, but the group was not aware if this was done at the level of the Cabinet;
2. The formal position of the government on gender equity is not known;
3. There is a significant gap between the achievement of males and females in the education system and
4. The group was unaware of any existing benchmark values to accelerate progress toward SDG 4 commitment targets.

The following suggestions were put forward concerning the SDG 4 benchmark indicators:

1. Rethink the methodology used to teach boys and girls to be equitable to both genders;
2. Consult with all stakeholders to set clear benchmarks to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education to promote lifelong learning opportunities for all;
3. Aim for learners to attain different competencies as they progress along their educational journey;
4. Introduce vocational skills to students earlier than currently takes place;
5. Provide more Government resources to achieve SDG 4 benchmarks, even if it is done on a phased basis;
6. Improve monitoring and evaluation mechanisms in schools;
7. Establish professional learning communities among teachers and
8. Collaborate with other government Ministries to utilise the expertise that exists within those Ministries.

Using the suggestions from the UN documents, the consultations that focused on the five (5) thematic action tracks also considered the features of the education system in St. Vincent and the Grenadines that are most important to continue, as well as the current education policies and practices that need abandoning.

Features of education to continue

1. Access to skills training for unemployed youths;
2. Prioritize and expand TVET training;
3. Use online platforms for teaching and learning;
4. Provide professional development and training for teachers in ICT;
5. Provide universal access to secondary education and
6. Train and facilitate general professional development for teachers and administrators.

Policies and Practices to abandon

1. The streaming of students
2. The assessment methods used in schools
3. The ranking of students
4. The academic (content heavy) curriculum
5. The decision-making convention of little or inadequate stakeholder engagement;
6. The delay in responses to critical issues relating to technology and learning;
7. The wastage of financial resources;
8. The centralization of education management and
9. The remuneration “policy” that only benefits secondary principals and not primary principals.

The UN Transforming Education Summit consultations yielded invaluable information regarding educational provisions in St. Vincent and the Grenadines. This National Consultation Report provides the framework for preparing the National Statement of Commitment that SVG will present to the United Nations General Assembly in September, 2022.

However, beyond the preparation for the UN General Assembly, the consultations have opened a space for the conversation on education to continue among a broader cross-section of stakeholders. The Minister of Education, himself a former secondary school principal, has suggested that he would like these conversations to continue across the various geographic regions of the multi-island state of SVG.