
In light of the International Labour Organization (ILO) and UNESCO delegations visiting the country, the Windhoek Observer’s Eric Nyasha Mhunduru (ENM) recently had a one on one interview with Jean Pierre Ilboudo (JPI), who is the Head of Office and Representative of UNESCO to Namibia, to touch base on the mission’s findings.

Ilboudo said the final report by UNESCO was expected to be presented to the Minister of Higher Education, Training and Innovation by the end of July 2016. Based on the outcomes of the report, the Ministry would consider options recommended.

He said this was expected to assist the Ministry in implementing reforms (if any) required to improve the impact of the education system in Namibia on her people.

ENM: What was the main purpose of the ILO and UNESCO delegations visit to Namibia? Give us the background, as well as the strategic intent.

JPI: The general aim of the mission was to assist the newly established ministry in defining policies and programmes related to the three pillars of its mandate, by (i) assessing the current status of Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET), higher education and innovation in Namibia, (ii) identifying strategic priorities, and (iii) proposing alternative interventions responding to those priorities. The mission also considered the contribution of TVET, higher education and innovation to overall development goals such as poverty reduction.

Particular attention was paid to the country context, including human development, economic activities and labour market functioning, and key policy documents such as Vision 2030 and the fourth National Development Plan (NDP4).

- Regarding TVET, the mission was expected to produce a diagnosis of the system in terms of policies, programmes, infrastructure and human resources, identifying current weaknesses and barriers to the expansion and transformation of the system.

- Broad areas that were considered included enrolment in TVET, the use of information and communication technologies and innovative approaches in service delivery, relations between TVET and firms (such as apprenticeships and instructor training), policy development and review, monitoring and evaluation, financing (especially training levies and funds), and promotion of TVET.

- Specific advice was also requested on: (i) the creation of a Centre of Excellence on TVET (with the aim of obtaining UNESCO recognition as a Category Two Centre); (ii) the establishment of a network of regional Vocational Training Colleges designed to respond to the local demand
Regarding Higher Education, the mission was expected to identify the key strengths and weaknesses of the higher education system in Namibia, including academic performance as well as economic and societal benefits. In particular, the mission examined the management of higher education and: (i) assisted in the design and implementation of a capacity building programme on higher education management, including a higher education management information system (HEMIS); (ii) suggested ways to handle the issue of unqualified and underqualified teachers and faculty development; (iii) provide advice on the use of information and communication technologies in service delivery.

Regarding Innovation, the mission was expected to identify the extent, strengths and weaknesses of Namibia’s national innovation system (research, science and technology) and make propositions on promoting a culture of technological, process-related and organizational innovation or innovativeness; the aim was to delineate the contours of a national innovation policy. Specific advice was also requested on: (i) the ongoing review of the 2004 Research, Science and Technology Act; (ii) patent filing and licensing; (iii) the articulation between research and development and industry, including technology transfer centres, start-up incubators, and sector-specific industrial clusters.

ENM: When did the assessment start and when did it end? Can you highlight some of the key parts of the assessment and what it entailed?

JPI: Once the terms of reference of the scoping mission and parameters were set, much research was done via desk study. The actual mission took place from 18-28 April 2016 in Namibia.

During the mission the delegation held several key stakeholder meetings and visited some regions. These included meetings and or workshops with the Minister of Higher Education, Training and Innovation, Ministry of Basic Education, Arts & Culture (including NIED), Namibia University of Science and Technology (NUST) and University of Namibia (UNAM) 3 campuses.

The delegation also met the National Planning Commission together with the Namibian Statistics Agency, National Qualifications Authority, National Council for Higher Education, and National Commission on Research, Science and Technology, Namibia Training Authority and NTF (Training Levy), National Student Financial Assistant Fund, Windhoek Vocational Training Centre, Eenhana VTC, NIMT campuses, relevant ministries and related agencies as well as private training providers.

ENM: Can you tell us what UNESCO’s view is with regard to Namibia’s skills gap and ongoing battle to produce staff aligned to what the country needs to drive its development agenda? What international best practice strategies can be applied in this regard and what can be done to augment the existing efforts to overcome these challenges?

JPI: Namibia’s education system does not provide a strong enough foundation for vocational education and training, higher education and innovation. Since independence, the constitutional commitment to education has been backed by high levels of public expenditure. This allowed an increase in enrolment, particularly at secondary and tertiary level, but the task of building an inclusive and equitable education system is unfinished.
Primary education is not universal yet, and a large proportion of pupils leave school without completing secondary education. Learning outcomes are low in international comparison and their distribution within the country reflects patterns of inequality in Namibian society.

These shortcomings of the education system imply that low and unequally distributed levels of education among the youth and adults who make up the labour force will persist into the future. The economy has to function with a scarcity of highly qualified persons, while youth illiteracy still is significant. Education and training beyond secondary level will therefore need to include a second-chance component, besides offering adequate opportunities to those who could complete senior secondary education.

Namibia’s vocational education and training (VET) system is fragmented between different types of providers and does not constitute a comprehensive and consistent network. The system has poor linkages with basic education, with higher education and between its own components. Key issues arise regarding quantity, quality and relevance, which explain why the VET system produces very small numbers of adequately skilled workers, reinforcing the dual nature of Namibia’s labour market.

Existing governance and financing arrangements, involving the MHETI, NTA, NQA, NTF and NSFAF are complex, with five key features: non-separation of key functions, duplication and overlaps of mandates, difference between an institution’s legal mandate and actual responsibilities, lack of capacities and actions regarding the evaluation of impact of VET, and lack of autonomy of VET institutions.

Meanwhile the involvement of the private sector in the VET system appears insufficient, whether in terms of governance, contribution to curriculum development or contribution to delivery.

**ENM: What were some of the key outcomes of this assessment exercise?**

JPI: Key findings: Economy and labour market show that Namibia appeared to be a stable, competitive, growing, upper middle income economy; remained dependent on primary production; the labour market was dual, with high levels of inactivity, unemployment and informality; had active labour market policies and a prospective analysis of the demand for skills.

Key findings on the Namibian education system also revealed that the constitutional commitment to education had been backed by public expenditure while the task of building an inclusive and equitable education system remained unfinished and the low and unequal levels of qualifications in the labour force would persist into the future.

Key findings on the vocational education and training showed that the current provision of centre-based VET was insufficient to meet social demand; poor quality of training and high dropout rate reduced the provision of skilled workers while the weak links with the economy limited the relevance of VET to the labour market and Namibia’s governance and financing of VET could be revised to enhance efficiency.

The current provision of centre-based VET is insufficient to meet social demand and Namibia’s VET system is fragmented between different types of providers and does not constitute a comprehensive and consistent network.
The capacity of the system is not in line with the demography of the country while VET largely excludes young people who have not completed basic education and it has poor linkages with basic education; higher education and also between its own components.

Ongoing or envisaged reforms and plans share the same understanding of the situation but proposed solutions that are incompatible with each other results in poor quality of training and high dropout rate reduce the provision of skilled workers.

Many trainees lack foundation skills and face precarious living conditions, which hampers their ability to learn while initial qualifications and training of trainers appear inadequate and the equipment in training centres is sometimes deficient and outdated.

There are weak links with the economy limiting the relevance of VET to the labour market which forces trainees to face challenges in finding job placements; and VET does not guarantee a smooth transition to employment or to entrepreneurship while it does not respond to the demand for skills expressed by formal firms and a few Lifelong learning opportunities.

ENM: Judging from the assessment, which VET areas are more crucial for a country like Namibia to direct more resources towards and why?

JPI: The current provision of centre-based VET is insufficient to meet social demand:

Industry partnership and engagement to receive more priority and inclusion in meeting social demand,

The capacity of the system is not in line with the demography of the country,

The VET system has poor linkages with basic education, with higher education and between its own components that need to be addressed to become sufficient and efficient.

Poor quality of training and high dropout rate reduces the provision of skilled workers:

Many trainees lack foundation skills and face precarious living conditions, which hampers their ability to learn – their basic needs must be met in order to succeed;

Initial qualifications and training of trainers appear inadequate – trainers need continuous professional development;

The equipment in training centres must be kept updated;

The transition towards a competency-based education and training model needs to be revised.

Weak links with the economy limit the relevance of VET to the labour market:

Trainees face challenges finding job placements – needs to be mandatory or better facilitated with industry;
VET does not guarantee a smooth transition to employment or to entrepreneurship – more incubators are needed but should be of good quality; and

VET does not respond to the demand for skills expressed by formal firms – industry engagement needs to improve.

ENM: It was recently revealed that the North will be one of the main areas to be boosted, with regards to vocational education and training. When can we see such exercises being undertaken in other regions of Namibia?

JPI: The anticipated boost to the northern region is related to the creation of a Training Hub encompassing three vocational training centres, a project sponsored through the EU. The project itself ought to commence in the next 1-2 years.

The plans for the southern region are envisaged in the VET expansion plan of the Namibia Training Authority. Given the importance given to VET expansion under the Harambee Prosperity Plan, projects should be developed in the next 5 years.