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## Foreign aid and inclusive education in the Pacific island nation of Kiribati: a question of ownership

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### ABSTRACT

This study examines the influence of foreign aid and local ownership in the introduction of inclusive education in Kiribati. The data reported in this paper were collected through interviews with key local stakeholders and these data are part of a larger study. Data were analysed under the major theme of ownership, and were grouped into the four sub-themes of: local responses to inclusive education initiatives; support for inclusive education principles; local attitudes regarding the contribution of Australian Aid; and, sustainability with or without aid support. The results indicate that a positive commitment towards inclusive education is emerging and that Australian Aid provided essential advocacy for children with disabilities in Kiribati through direct management of initiatives by the expatriate administered Kiribati Education Facility. Inclusive education initiatives remain dependent on Australian Aid for direction and sustainability. Sustainability of inclusive education initiatives in Kiribati will depend on continued development of local ownership including community support and commitment by the Government of Kiribati, particularly budgetary support.

### KEYWORDS

Inclusive education; foreign aid; ownership; Australian aid; Kiribati; Pacific Island nations

## Introduction

Foreign aid, by which developed countries provide assistance to poorer developing countries, is political. Donor governments set the agenda and oversee the use of the aid in developing nations (Riddell 2014). Inclusive education, by which all children have the right to access education generally at their local neighbourhood school (United Nations 2016), is socio-political in nature, emerging from the human rights and social justice movements in developed countries (Terzi 2014) rather than from educational practice. That foreign aid is political and inclusive education is socio-political are the two primary assumptions underlying this research. As both foreign aid and inclusive education are political, power relationships and local ownership of inclusive education initiatives (or lack thereof) play an important role in determining outcomes.

The introduction of inclusive education initiatives in Kiribati has been largely through Australian Aid funded and directed programmes. This raises questions of local ownership and commitment to an externally imposed agenda. There is a potential conflict between external professional management and implementation by donors (James 2016) versus genuine local ownership of programmes (Rahnema 2010). This paper considers the

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influence of Australian foreign aid in progressing inclusive education initiatives in the Republic of Kiribati, a small island nation in the Pacific. In particular, the focus is to explore the degree of local ownership versus donor control and direction in the introduction of inclusive education in Kiribati. We were interested to explore how key local stakeholders perceived the aid support within the context of their local and cultural needs and how this influenced control and ownership of inclusive education initiatives.

The concept of development aid has been criticised as it ‘undermines confidence in oneself and one’s own culture, clamours for management from the top-down [and] converts participation into a manipulative trick to involve people in struggles for getting what the powerful want to impose on them’ (Esteva 2010, 3). This can mean that control and ownership of programmes remains with the aid provider, creating an unequal power relationship between the aid provider and the recipients. This is a subtle process by which the recipients may think that ownership resides with them, whilst acknowledging that foreign aid support is necessary because of limited funds and expertise in inclusive education: ‘The participants do not feel that they are being forced into something, but are actually led to take actions which are inspired by centres outside their control’ (Rahnema 2010, 127). We suggest that there is also a risk that the aid recipients develop a mind-set whereby they think that without the support and direction of the donor they will not be able to deliver or maintain the programme.

The role of development aid in imposing programmes on developing countries is extenuated when dealing with sensitive reforms like inclusive education that have implications for local cultural and educational practices. Foreign aid direction and control raises the prospect that projects may neglect local culture factors (Nguyen et al. 2009) such as attitudes towards disability. Projects funded by foreign aid may be based on the donors’ cultural values which may have little relevance to the local culture. As noted by Sharma, Loreman, and Macanawai (2016, 397), ‘Local culture and context must be accounted for, if inclusive education is to be successfully implemented in the [Pacific] region’.

In the Pacific region, the inclusion of children with disabilities has been the major focus of inclusive education initiatives (Puamau and Pene 2009). Australian Aid, through the Development for All Strategy (DFAT 2009, 2015), has made a significant contribution to supporting the development of inclusive education into Pacific island nations. The ‘Development for All 2015–2020 Strategy’ (DFAT 2015) gives priority to support disability-inclusive education. This priority is based on an international human rights agenda through which Australia fulfils its humanitarian obligations of ‘being a good international citizen; and acting as a regional partner’ (Corbett 2017, 144). Australian Aid initiatives, in promoting disability-inclusion as a priority, are leading the advocacy for people (children) with disabilities in recipient countries: ‘AusAid<sup>1</sup> therefore is in a position of needing to lead many of the stakeholders at country programme level to enable them to understand the rationale and benefits of disability-inclusive development’ (Kelly and Wapling 2012, 27).

## **Inclusive education in Kiribati**

The Republic of Kiribati is a small island nation centrally located in the Pacific Ocean with 32 atolls straddling the equator across a distance of 3,900 kilometres east to west. Kiribati is classified as a least developed country (World Bank 2018): ‘Kiribati has few natural resources and is one of the least developed Pacific Island countries. Kiribati is dependent

on foreign aid, which was estimated to have contributed over 43% to the government's finances in 2013' (World Fact Book 2015). This is further evidenced in the 2017 budget, where foreign aid was projected to contribute 48% (\$A153M) to the government's budget (Government of Kiribati 2016).

In Kiribati, inclusive education is a very new concept. Historically, the following factors have contributed towards a lack of interest or awareness in addressing inclusive education as an area of educational need:

- Government reluctance to become involved in issues which are seen as primarily family concerns, such as whether a child attends school;
- Lack of government finances to provide anything beyond basic classroom provisions such as teaching materials and teacher salaries;
- Negative community attitudes, particularly towards the education of children with disabilities; and
- Lack of strong advocacy for excluded groups.

The extent to which children have been excluded from schools either formally or by social factors such as families not sending the child to school is not known. The 2015 national census reports that while there were primary school enrolments of 15,117 students (Kiribati National Statistics Office 2015), neither attendance figures (including children of school age not attending school) nor overall incidence figures for children with disabilities were reported.

Children with disabilities in Kiribati, particularly in the outer islands, have generally been excluded from accessing school programmes. In the report *Operational Research on Disability and Inclusive Education in Kiribati*, Jolly and Rokete (2012, 13) comment: 'Anecdotally, very few of the mainstream schools visited were able to identify any children with disabilities in their school system, and if so they were very often mild impairments'. They identified attitudes towards children with disabilities as a significant factor in school exclusion:

There was a strong finding that attitudes were the most disabling barrier for children with disabilities being able to attend school. This included the attitudes of the community, parents, teachers, principals, the Ministry of Education, students and children with disabilities themselves. Many people believe children with disabilities cannot learn. (Jolly and Rokete 2012, 17)

In Kiribati, Australian Aid provided the funding of inclusive education initiatives and direction of programmes through the externally managed Kiribati Education Facility (KEF), which is a part of Coffey International, a for-profit provider of aid projects for the Australian Government. In Kiribati, inclusive education initiatives, managed through KEF, seem to be very donor driven projects. This raises questions over the introduction of inclusive education policy and programmes when it is the donor country initiating and directing this agenda. Furthermore, one must question the sustainability of such initiatives following the withdrawal of aid if local ownership is not apparent.

The following sections outline the procedures and findings used to explore the degree of local ownership of inclusive education initiatives in Kiribati. Firstly, the method is presented using individual interviews with key stakeholders to ascertain their attitudes towards inclusive education. Ownership of inclusive education will only be achieved if the key stakeholders value the initiatives as important and relevant to the needs of Kiribati

and have positive attitudes towards inclusive education. Values and attitudes are central to the philosophy behind inclusion, as noted by Booth (2005, 1) 'the importance of understanding inclusion [is] as the putting into action of particular values'. These values and attitudes are explored in the findings through the sub-themes of: local responses to inclusive education initiatives; support for inclusive education principles; local attitudes regarding the contribution of Australian Aid; and, sustainability with or without aid support. Finally, the challenge of ownership, the role of foreign aid in providing advocacy and generating local ownership and commitment, and the developing commitment by the Government of Kiribati are discussed.

## Method

For this study, engaging the participants through individual interviews in dialogue around themes related to local ownership of inclusive education initiatives provides the vehicle to express local voice concerning these topics. Local ownership of programmes will not develop unless seen as relevant to local needs and values by the local stakeholders.

## Participants

Ten key local stakeholders were interviewed. They were Ministry of Education representatives (M1, M2, M3), a Teachers College representative (TC), school executives (SE1, SE2), a Disabled Persons' Organisation representative (DPO), and three locally employed donor representatives from KEF and the Australian Consulate (D).<sup>2</sup>

## Data collection and data analysis

Engaging the participants in dialogue around themes related to local ownership of inclusive education initiatives provided the vehicle to express local voice concerning these topics. Semi-structured individual interviews were conducted to generate discussion regarding responses to the implementation of inclusion. Through this discussion, the level of commitment by the participants (local stakeholders) to inclusive education initiatives and participants' attitudes toward Australian Aid support/direction for these initiatives were examined. All interviewees were asked the same set of questions to provide consistency and comparability in analysis of the responses. The questions were designed to elicit a broad understanding of the participants' views regarding inclusive education in Kiribati and, therefore, the extent of their ownership and commitment. English was used for the individual interviews as the targeted interviewees held senior positions in the Government or their respective organisations and had a good level of competency in English language. Interview questions included:

What is your understanding of inclusive education?

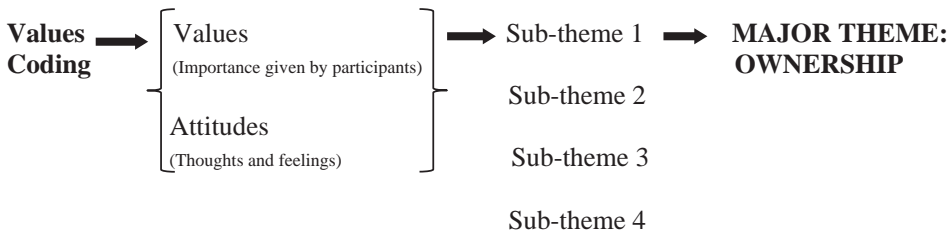
How does this apply to education in Kiribati?

How realistic are inclusive education initiatives for your schools?

How was a focus on inclusive education initiated?

What is the government's commitment to inclusive education?

What would happen if there was reduced or no foreign aid support?



**Figure 1.** Coding process for values.

The responses from the interviewees were transcribed verbatim and analysed using values coding (Miles, Huberman, and Saldana 2014). Coding was employed to systematically organise the data from the individual interviews and to aid in the identification of thematic patterns (Saldana 2013). Values coding was chosen as it relates particularly to the theme of ownership as inclusive education initiatives ultimately rely on an acceptance and commitment to these values. Values coding provided the generation of sub-themes related to ownership (outlined below).

To identify values and attitudes of the participants, the following definitions were utilised: ‘Values are the importance we attribute to oneself, another person, thing or idea; Attitudes are the way we think and feel about ourselves, another person [or people], thing or idea’ (Miles, Huberman, and Saldana 2014, 245). Specifically, the word ‘important’ was word searched in the transcribed texts of the interviews to identify participants’ values. Then, to identify the associated attitudes, the words ‘think’ and ‘feel’ were word searched in the transcripts. A list of phrases and sentences linked to the words ‘important’, ‘think’, and ‘feel’ was generated from these searches. From these groupings sub-themes were identified. Further examples of the sub-themes identified through the coding were then sourced directly from the transcripts as containing the essence of the sub-theme. The sub-themes were:

- (1) Local responses to inclusive education initiatives
- (2) Support for inclusive education principles
- (3) Local attitudes regarding the contribution of Australian Aid
- (4) Sustainability with or without aid support.

The sub-themes were analysed in terms of their relationship to the major theme ‘Ownership’. Figure 1 illustrates this process.

## Findings

### *Local responses to inclusive education initiatives*

Local engagement with inclusive education demonstrated ownership and commitment at the practical level. Although participants acknowledged there was a positive commitment to inclusive education, they also identified limited commitment by the Ministry of Education in the initial stages of incorporating inclusive education. In the early stages of implementation, the KEF project managed the direction for inclusive education initiatives, while Australian Aid provided the financial support. Nominal ownership by the Ministry of Education was provided through the donors: ‘I always make sure that the person from

the Ministry is the chair and started the meeting [Inclusive Education Working Group]. They have ownership and leadership' (D). However, responsibility for *implementing* the initiatives fell almost entirely on the donors: 'What I have really found, I did most of the work because they are very busy with their own load. I'm just the person behind but I'm doing it all' (D). While the donors directed the implementation of inclusive education through the education aid project, ownership by the Ministry of Education was a matter of nominal support for the concept without a practical commitment.

Teacher knowledge, skills, and capacity were seen as major challenges to implementing inclusive education: 'At the moment our teachers only have the capacity to teach normal children' (M1); 'Teachers I would say need more training in how to cater for children with disabilities' (M2); 'Teachers say we don't know how to look after these children' (D). Donors were optimistic that inclusive education initiatives could develop teacher capacity: 'I think that in the roll-out of inclusive education we are going to help teachers apply what really is inclusive education' (D).

Resourcing was also seen as a major barrier to inclusion: 'We need classrooms that have access, disability accessible and we haven't got that in most of our classrooms' (M1): 'It is also related to the resources of the country because we could not afford wheelchairs and what else was needed' (SE2). Without adequate resources schools may be resistant to enrol students that they see as requiring additional support. Schools are dependent on Australian Aid provisions for additional resources as the government is only able to provide basics such as exercise books.

Although there is a degree of acceptance of inclusive education principles, there are challenges such as teacher knowledge, skills, and capabilities as well as resourcing issues that each provide barriers in being able to support diverse learning needs. Each of the challenges identified require funding support with the Government of Kiribati being able to fund only basic services for education. For example, teachers' salaries are the major expenditure in the education budget (\$18.5M out of a recurrent budget of \$22M) (Government of Kiribati 2016, 57). As the funding to introduce inclusive education initiatives has been sourced from Australian Aid, Kiribati's dependency on Australian Aid for financial support will need to continue to enable its continued implementation.

### **Support for inclusive education principles**

Participants' responses indicated strong support for inclusive education ideals and practices.<sup>3</sup> A participant commented that 'the project now is very important for Kiribati' (DPO). The change in the level of support appears to have come from dialogue, particularly by the local professional educators. This dialogue was generated through inclusive education initiatives such as the development of the Kiribati Inclusive Education Policy (Government of Kiribati 2015). The dialogue, however, was generated through the Australian Aid programme, suggesting, perhaps, compliance to external direction rather than a locally generated consideration of the issues. This aid driven expectation of the development of the Kiribati Inclusive Education Policy illustrates how aid controls the development of the initiative rather than supporting local ownership and commitment. This type of approach perpetuates dependency on aid rather than a focus on sustaining inclusive education initiatives in Kiribati supported by local ownership including community support and commitment by the Government of Kiribati. A more sustained approach is



necessary because in the past ‘The adoption of international approaches such as inclusive education and its subsequent policy development in the Pacific disregarded cultural and local issues, thus making implementation ineffective’ (Duke et al. 2016, 910).

A representative of the Ministry of Education summed up this strong support: ‘We believe that inclusive education is a very important initiative’ (M2). Senior administrators interviewed from the Ministry of Education were very supportive of the concept of inclusive education: ‘I would like to do as much as I can while I’m in the Ministry to ensure its smooth implementation’ (M1). At the school level, support for the concept of inclusive education was evident. School administrators expressed support for the concept: ‘[It’s] very important to be inclusive’ (SE2).

However, there was minimal reference made by the participants regarding why inclusive education initiatives are important. Whether these statements of support are rhetoric, reflecting adherence to the Australian (international) imposed position, is difficult to assess. Genuine valuing of inclusive education principles, as distinctively applicable to Kiribati, will be seen in developing local interpretations and implementation of inclusive education.

Generally, there was a broad understanding of the (international) concept of inclusive education: ‘With inclusive education we are trying to include every student to attend school. All students should be catered for in the school system’ (M1); ‘Everyone on board, every child no matter what’ (DPO); ‘Education for all, inclusive, regardless of gender, ability and any other differences’ (M3). Again, this raises the question of adherence to an imposed concept. Achieving education for all children, whilst a laudable aim, is far from a reality, both internationally and in Kiribati.

Participants supported the achievability of inclusive education in Kiribati with some reservations: ‘Yes! Positively yes! [It] can be achieved if inclusive education is always rolled out, not only once but always, maybe once a month’ (SE1); ‘I know that they are very realistic but there are quite significant challenges but [we] still have to find ways to overcome these. I think we’ll be OK’ (M1); ‘It can be achieved but through funding, if we have the right schools and appropriate resources to make it worthwhile. If it’s all there everything will be realistic. If not, then nothing will happen’ (M3). There was an implied expectation that inclusive education would be achieved only by continued funding support from Australian Aid. The priority given to inclusive education by the Ministry of Education must be questioned if there is little direct government funding to support the initiatives. Long-term institutionalisation of inclusive education within the Kiribati education system will only come from commitment by the Government of Kiribati (including a budget commitment) to ongoing support for inclusive education.

Inclusive education was seen as relevant to Kiribati in catering for a wider range of students: ‘Teachers in the classroom deal mostly with the good ones. Inclusive education is really important for teachers to realise that they should also consider other children who are being overlooked because of their ability’ (D). Catering for a wide range of learning needs is a challenge for teachers who often are struggling to teach the basic skills in under-resourced schools.

### *Local attitudes regarding the contribution of Australian aid*

The consensus of the recipients interviewed was that Australian Aid has contributed significantly to the introduction of inclusive education and in providing ongoing support: ‘I



can say [Australian Aid] has contributed to a large extent. The Ministry of Education itself lacks the expertise in this area given that it's a very new thing' (M2); 'Without foreign aid I don't think much would be achieved. Foreign aid is bringing things together and initiated all of these and keep them mobilised. The Ministry would not be able to do all this' (DPO); 'It's contributed a lot. Without Australian Aid where can we be?' (M1). An appreciation of Australian Aid's contribution was expressed in the comment, 'We must thank Australia because it's the only country which has a programme that is dealing with this kind of issue in Kiribati' (SE2). A local donor employee added:

I would like to compliment the foreign aid's support of my country. I know when I first started with this project we have achieved quite a lot. I've seen changes of attitudes by the people in this area. Buildings are now being built more accessible. To say thank you and wish that foreign aid continues to support Kiribati. I can see changes because of our policy promotion. It's getting there. (D)

The expertise and direction provided through Australian Aid was acknowledged, as seen in the comment, 'AusAid advisor knows the important matters' (DPO). The donors provided a proactive role in the introduction of inclusive education initiatives: 'We can advocate for the schools or the government to do it themselves' (D). The donors' aim was to 'expose the Ministry to this inclusive thinking' (D).

### *Sustainability with or without aid support*

Commitment can only be maintained if the stakeholders are confident that they, themselves, can support the concepts into the future. Genuine ownership will only occur if the stakeholders 'do it themselves'.

Stakeholders interviewed were concerned that inclusive education initiatives would be significantly affected if Australian Aid was reduced. Inclusive education initiatives could collapse without foreign aid support: 'Looking at this point in time it will all be collapsing. Perhaps it will be like 5 to 10 years before we can stand on our own two feet' (M1). Financial commitment by the Government of Kiribati was seen as the long-term solution to sustainability: 'So it has to be put in the government budget' (DPO); 'It's up to the government but I trust that the government has sustainability plans to go ahead with inclusive but it will be very sad [if not continued]' (TC).

The dependency on Australian Aid was also reflected by the recipient responses to the question 'What would happen if there was reduced or no foreign aid support?': 'It would be a very big burden for the Ministry in terms of sustaining those supported with inclusive education' (TC). Recipients interviewed saw that inclusive education initiatives would collapse without foreign aid support: 'I think everything will stop, that we are very limited. We have just started' (M3); 'It might stop as our government is not very big. More funding, more years to go when they can deal with that' (SE1). The Ministry of Education representatives identified priorities for utilising Australian Aid: 'While we have the donors [we] will work on facilities and teacher training' (M3). This focus was seen as providing sustainability for the future because education may then have the facilities and trained teachers to maintain these initiatives.

From the local donor employees' point of view, there was also concern that the inclusive education initiatives would not progress without Australian Aid: 'I think inclusive education will freeze. Not really going backwards but not progressing. Currently people at the Ministry

cannot do much to really support inclusive education [given competing priorities and a lack of resources], that will be a big problem if they stop so very little activity will happen' (D). The donor representatives expressed a hope that the Kiribati Government would be able to support inclusive education in the future: 'They've got their own policies so they don't have to depend on foreign aid all the time as people should participate in their own development' (D). There was cautious optimism that a solution could be found if Australian Aid was curtailed: 'I think we will be able to find a way to support it. We can advocate [for] the government to do it themselves but that's like the best model' (D).

There was some guarded optimism that inclusive education initiatives could be sustained without the support of Australian Aid: 'I've been thinking that perhaps while we have the donors, let's try to work on the facilities and training of teachers for inclusive education so when the donor departs we'll still have the facilities and trained teachers already' (M2); 'I hope the Ministry will have to come up with fund raising. I think the government can do that because they have a lot of income from the fishing industry' (SE2); 'I can see changes because of our policy promotion. It's getting there' (D). Without aid support a different local model may develop to support inclusive education based on a traditional approach but with some new insights.

## Discussion

### *The challenge of ownership*

The challenge for sustainable implementation of the inclusive education policy is in the genuine local ownership of inclusive education rather than relying on Australian Aid programmes. Participants raised the following concerns: 'Everyone should be accessing quality education regardless of their location, background, gender. Everyone must be receiving equal and quality education. How are we going to achieve that?' (M1); 'We've been talking about that. That's sustainability. It's a bit difficult. How long have we been working on this disability issue, especially inclusive education. It has to be continuing. But how to continue it?' (DPO). The capacity for local ownership was questioned: 'It's ownership issues because the thing is we don't have the capacity' (SE2). The answer to these issues can only be found through local solutions and not from imposed programmes from external sources.

Despite the challenges there is a positive view towards implementing inclusive education initiatives: 'I know they are very realistic but I didn't want to stop there even though there are still challenges that are quite significant but still [we] have to find a way to address to overcome these. I think we'll be OK' (M1). This positive attitude demonstrates a commitment towards implementing inclusive education practices, but implementation may still require significant Australian Aid support and direction.

### *The role of foreign aid*

Australian Aid has provided the impetus for the introduction of inclusive education in Kiribati and thereby has provided advocacy for disadvantaged children, particularly children with disabilities who have been historically excluded from school. As noted in the interviews, 'Because it's [inclusive education] new to Kiribati I think that in

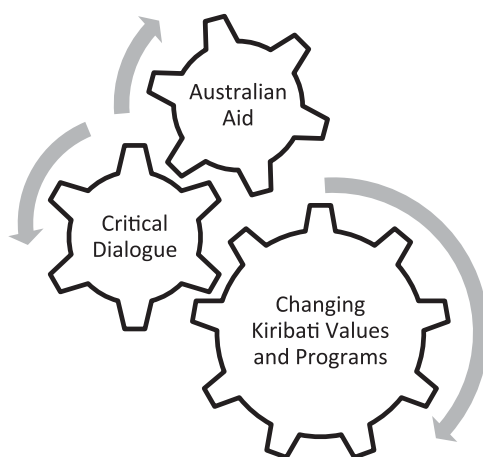
the past the government did not see the importance of those people [children with disabilities] because they [the government] have less knowledge and understanding of human rights' (SE2). In analysing participant responses, it appears unlikely that the Government of Kiribati would have independently supported inclusive education because of factors such as attitudes towards disability, concerns about costs, and not seeing inclusive education as a priority. This would also be similar in other island nations in the Pacific. There has been acknowledgement that the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat (PIFS) in 2005 in partnership with UNESCO and Australian Aid played a leading role in the introduction of inclusive education in the Pacific (Pillay et al. 2015).

The role of Australian Aid in initiating the process of advocacy for inclusive education contributes to cultivating greater local ownership as illustrated in Figure 2. The cog of Australian Aid values and programmes (promulgated through expatriate advisers and the locally employed KEF coordinator) starts the process through generating the turning of the dialogue cog which (slowly) is turning the cog of changing values and programmes in Kiribati. Personnel engaged in dialogue regarding inclusive education include Ministry of Education administrators and, to some extent, teachers and the wider community. At this stage, the Australian Aid 'cog' needs to keep turning in order to maintain the process and support future ownership of progressing inclusive education in Kiribati.

The larger cog for changing Kiribati values and programmes implies that Australian Aid can only do so much and that the impetus for changing local values towards people with disabilities should ultimately be generated from the turning of the local community cog (supported by the turning of the Australian Aid cog).

### Government commitment

The development of the Kiribati Inclusive Education Policy (Government of Kiribati 2015) has provided the platform for inclusive education in Kiribati. The policy is seen by the stakeholders interviewed as central to implementing inclusive education<sup>4</sup> – 'The government has approved and endorsed the policy so we are now obliged to make sure it is fully



**Figure 2.** Process of changing local values and programmes.

adopted and enforced' (M1). The implementation of the policy may be a key opportunity for embedding more authentic ownership and commitment to inclusive education in Kiribati and therefore supporting the development of inclusive practices that are relevant to local needs and culture.

Despite varied perceptions of Government ownership and commitment to inclusive education by different stakeholders at the time of the study, there is now evidence of a growing local ownership and commitment towards the sustainability of inclusive education initiatives, particularly at the Ministry of Education level. The Kiribati Education Sector–Strategic Plan (ESSP) 2016–2019 (Kiribati Ministry of Education 2016, 10) included a major goal, 'Effective implementation of the [Kiribati] Inclusive Education Policy', as one of its nine main goals whereby 'This policy will see improved access to and participation in education for many children and young people who cannot access or participate yet in mainstream schools'. However, there may be an expectation that solutions to challenges faced in implementation can only be found through Australian Aid funding: 'One effect of DFAT/KEF moving forward a policy [of Inclusive Education] such as this, is that it has raised an expectation that KEF will finance the activities it is proposing' (Emmott 2014, 29). The effects of this are yet to be seen but are representative of a broader issue relating to the financial complexities associated with aid for supporting inclusive education in developing countries.

Le Fanu (2013) cites a capacity critique in the implementation of inclusive education in developing countries which makes implementation logistically difficult due to cost and other factors. He argues that 'National governments need to resist the transfer of international policy and practice, a task that requires them to generate their own situationally appropriate solutions to problems besetting their education system' (Le Fanu 2013, 50). Concerns regarding funding, resourcing, teacher training, etc., mean that solutions to problems raised are currently based on receiving Australian Aid support rather than finding local solutions.

## Conclusion

This paper demonstrates that the catalyst for inclusive education initiatives has come from outside of Kiribati through foreign aid programmes. This has provided advocacy for the inclusion of all students, particularly children with disabilities, which had not been given much attention in the past. As a result, there is a growing commitment to inclusive education particularly at the Ministry of Education level, but there is a risk of continued dependency on Australian Aid to continue this important work. How inclusive education is supported and assimilated into Kiribati school communities is the key to sustainability. The long-term sustainability of inclusive education initiatives in Kiribati will depend on continued development of local ownership and commitment to inclusive education, including community support and commitment by the Government of Kiribati, particularly direct budgetary support. This needs to be seen in the context of Kiribati's economic position as a least developed country with few resources. Foreign aid support for the Kiribati economy and for programmes such as inclusive education will be necessary well into the future.

It is, however, encouraging that inclusive education is being increasingly supported particularly by administrators in the Ministry of Education and has been included as a

priority in the Education Sector Strategic Plan (ESSP) 2016–2019 (Kiribati Ministry of Education 2016). It should be noted that: ‘Inclusive agenda are incomplete unless understood and acted upon by [local] educational professionals [who] should be empowered to gain ownership and become actively engaged in the process of transformational change’ (Liasidou 2015, 56).

## Notes

1. Now titled Australian Aid.
2. The locally employed donor staff (D) were not coded individually in order to comply with the DFAT condition for the research that ‘the comments made [by the staff interviewed] are not for attribution to DFAT or the individuals’. (DFAT Research Approval Email 24 March 2016).
3. From the researcher’s observations, the participants’ responses in 2016 represented a significant shift from 2013 when inclusive education was a very new and little understood concept.
4. However, it can be argued that the policy reflects international rhetoric of inclusive education rather than a local Kiribati cultural viewpoint (Yates 2018).

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

## Notes on contributors

*Rodney Yates*’ interest in inclusive education came from a long career in regular and special education as a teacher of students with learning and intellectual disabilities, as a school psychologist, and as a school principal. He has played an active role in inclusive education since 1983, establishing programmes of inclusion and administrating a state-wide programme at the very beginnings of the ‘seeds’ of inclusive education (then called integration) in Australia. Through these experiences he has developed a strong commitment to social justice and inclusive practices. This culminated in volunteer placements in Kiribati as Inclusive Education Teacher Trainer at Kiribati Teachers College in 2013 and as Inclusive Education Advisor at the Maldives Ministry of Education in 2015, both positions funded through the Australian Volunteers for International Development (AVID) programme. In 2016 he returned to Kiribati for two months, planning staff development at the Kiribati School for Children with Special Needs. The interviews for this study were conducted during this time. His PhD doctorate examined the role of Australian Aid in the introduction and sustainability of inclusive education initiatives in the Republic of Kiribati.

*Suzanne Carrington* is a Professor and Assistant Dean (Research) in the Faculty of Education, Queensland University of Technology (QUT), Australia. Suzanne’s areas of expertise are in inclusive education, disability, and teacher preparation for inclusive schools. She has engaged in research to inform policy and practice in Australian and international education contexts, more recently extending this research to the South Pacific and Asia. She has broad knowledge of education research, and her publication list provides evidence of extensive collaboration with education, health, and medical research.

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