

The school

CLUSTER

system in Namibia



Framework for quality education

The school **cluster** system in Namibia

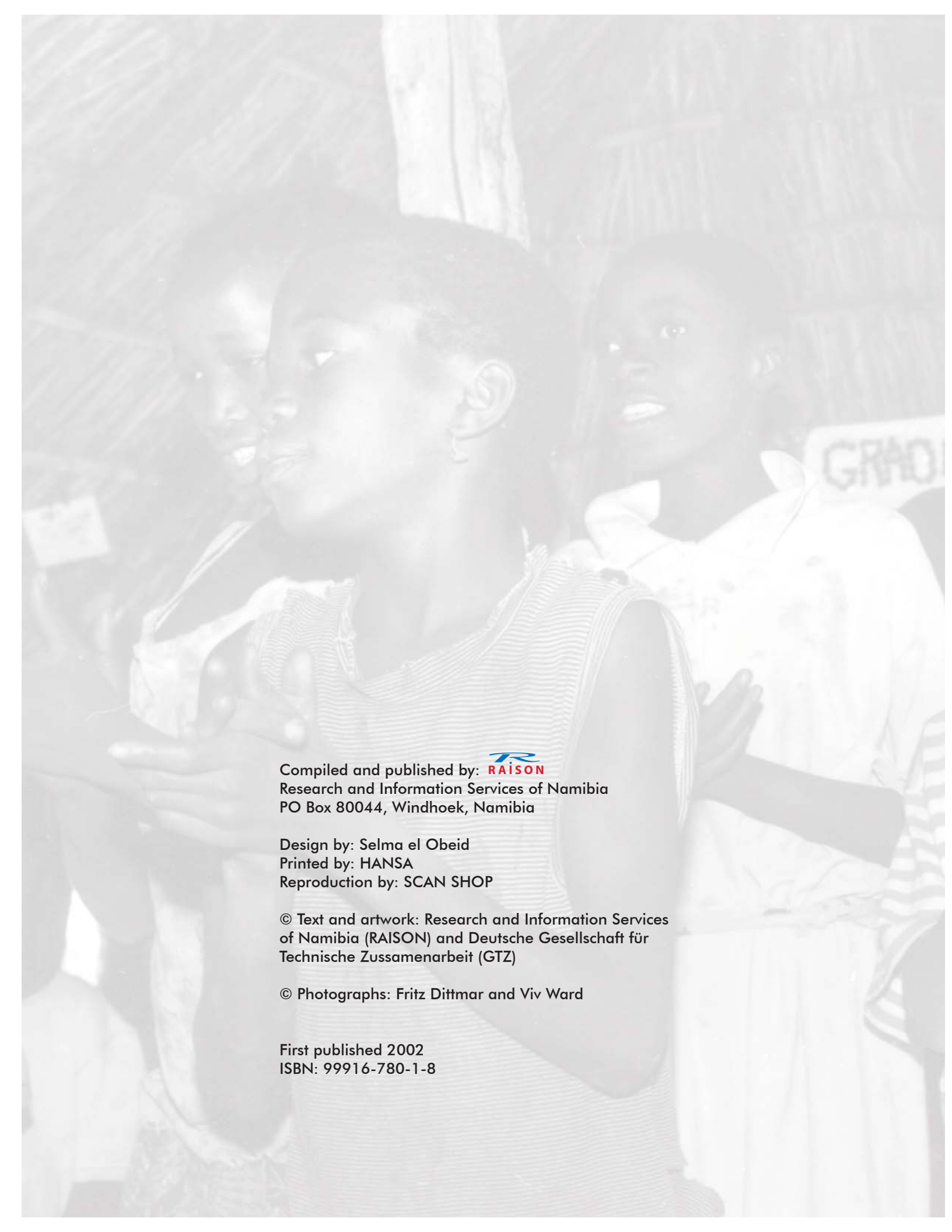
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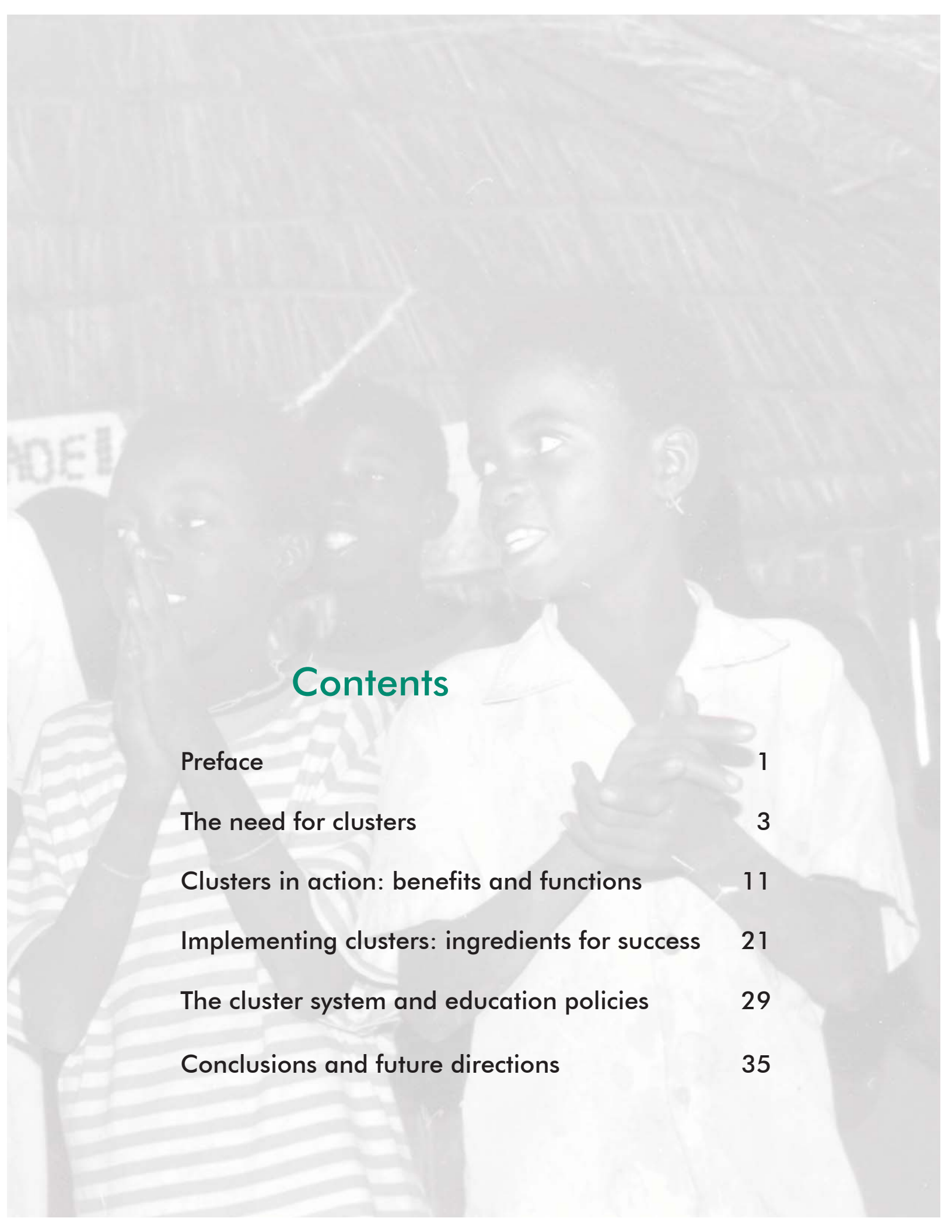
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Preface

The idea of school clusters has been around in Namibia for some years, and several kinds of clusters have been formed at various times to group together selected schools. All these groupings were made to satisfy the specific, short-term needs of particular projects, for example the clusters created to facilitate the training of lower primary teachers and those formed to upgrade the skills of Life Science teachers. However, in 1996 a new system of clusters was introduced to the Rundu Education Region. All the schools in the region were included with the aim of having a comprehensive cluster system to accommodate all the needs for grouping schools in one stable framework. Benefits which arose from the Rundu clusters led to the subsequent development of similar clusters in all other regions of the country.

It is the functioning of this cluster system - encompassing all the schools in Namibia - that forms the subject of this book. Specifically, the book aims to provide people at all levels in the education sector with information about:



- the structure and functioning of clusters
- the range of benefits that clusters can offer
- administrative and management structures which enable cluster systems to operate effectively
- the role of clusters in improving teaching and learning practices
- contributions made by clusters to major educational goals and policies
- ways in which cluster systems can develop in the future

School clusters have also come into focus in other countries in recent years. In most countries, neighbouring schools are grouped around a larger nucleus school to form each cluster. Teacher resource centres are often coupled with the nucleus school. Such clusters serve two main purposes in these countries, firstly to improve teaching by sharing resources, experience and expertise among staff, and secondly, to facilitate administration and to pool resources from several small schools (see page 36).

The book is divided into five sections. The first begins with a review of factors that create a need for clusters in Namibia. This is followed by a section describing the range of benefits that clusters can provide, while a third section outlines those ingredients that make clusters work most effectively. A review of the functioning of clusters in relation to education policies is then provided, while the last section explores several aspects of how clusters can develop in the future.

Perhaps the most important observation made in this book is that clusters can improve the quality of education in the great majority of Namibian schools. This is indeed important because there are great demands for better quality education in Namibia. The demands come from learners, their parents, the business community and society at large: everyone wants a better education.



The need for clusters

While the idea of a comprehensive system of school clusters was largely introduced by the Basic Education Project (BEP), it is important to recognise that the growth of the system has mainly been driven by needs from within schools and regional education offices. Most of these needs spring from three factors: the isolation of schools, the small size of the great majority of schools, and organisational problems.

The isolation of schools

Namibia is a large country, and is home to a relatively small population of about 1.9 million people. Most people live in dispersed communities in rural areas, and the majority of schools are quite some distance from each other. Even where schools are quite close to each other, they may experience isolation for other reasons. Neighbouring schools may have little contact because they often serve learners that come from different socio-economic backgrounds or language groups, or the schools may offer different phases, for example as primary or secondary schools. All of this isolation means that schools are seldom visited by colleagues from other schools, or by inspectors, advisory teachers and other regional managers. Moreover, road conditions are often bad, vehicles are in short supply, budgets for travel are depleted, there are too few inspectors and advisory teachers, and they are often too busy or preoccupied with other matters.

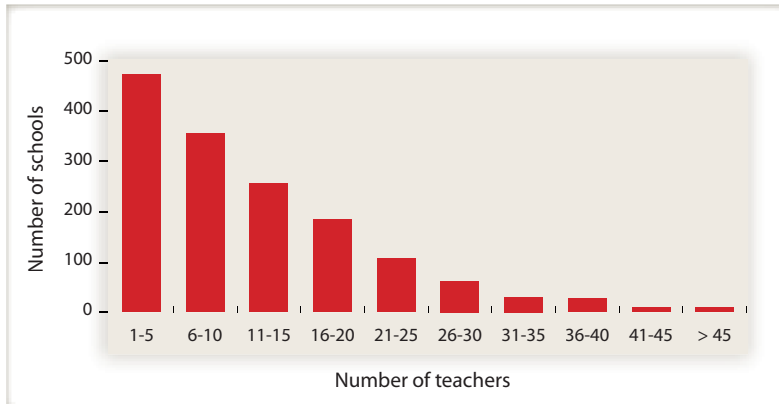
The size of schools

Most Namibian schools are very small, a point made clear by the graph on the next page. Almost one third (31%) of all schools have five or fewer teachers, and over half (54%) of all schools have ten or fewer teachers. Only 5% of all schools have 30 or more teachers. Because most schools are tiny, most teachers are professionally isolated, especially from people who teach the same subjects to the same grades, as the following figures show.

examples of professional isolation

- There is only one Grade 1 teacher in 68% (over two-thirds) of all schools that offer Grade 1.
 - There is only one Grade 10 Mathematics teacher in 75% of schools (three out of four schools) that offer Grade 10 Mathematics, and 83% of schools that offer Grade 7 Mathematics have only one Grade 7 Mathematics teacher.
 - Of all schools that offer Grade 8 Geography, 85% have only one Geography teacher for that grade. In other words, only 15% of schools have two or more teachers for Grade 8 Geography.
-

Most teachers therefore prepare and present their lessons and examinations in isolation year after year. They are unable to share ideas with other teachers who are doing the same work, or to benefit from the experience of colleagues. Each teacher will interpret the syllabus differently, preparing different schemes of work and setting different standards for examinations. It is then hardly surprising that the results of national examinations are often so poor.



Most schools in Namibia are very small. This graph shows the number of schools with different numbers of teachers

Management and organisational problems

Most organisations in the world have levels of authority and responsibility arranged in a hierarchy. In Namibia, education is managed along centralized lines. At the top of the ladder is the Ministry's head office, which oversees 7 regional education offices. Each of these regional offices has 5 to 10 circuits, and every circuit has an inspector to supervise and serve schools in each circuit.

Each level described so far deals with a manageable number of units below it. Below the circuit inspector, however, the number of units jumps to between 25 and 50 schools per circuit! How can an inspector possibly oversee so many schools? It becomes even more of a problem if inspectors have many other duties to perform, and if the roads to most schools are long and bad, for example. A survey done in 1995 found that, on average, each school was inspected about every two and a half years. Some schools had never even seen an inspector!

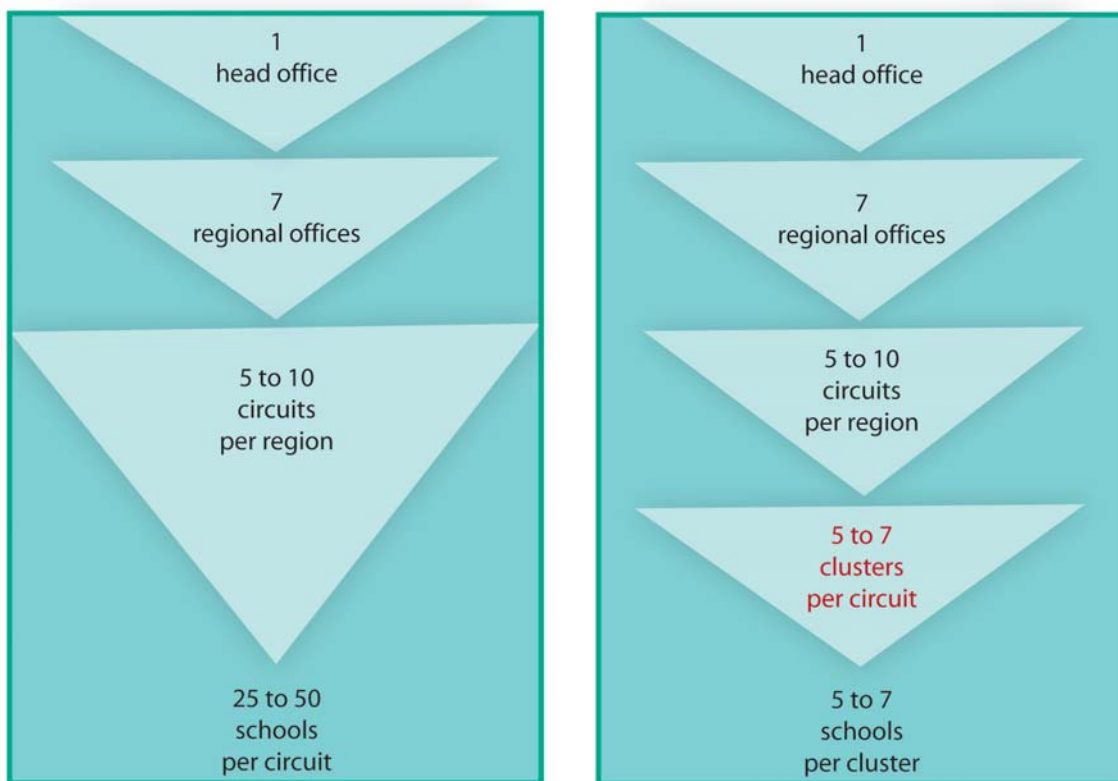
From all of this, it is clear that most principals and teachers suffer because their schools are small and isolated, and poorly supported and managed. In short, a new approach to managing education in Namibia is needed, and the cluster system holds great promise in providing such a new way forward.

What is a school cluster?

- A cluster is a group of schools that are geographically as close and accessible to each other as possible.
- Each cluster normally consists of between five and seven schools.
- One school in each group is selected to serve as the cluster centre.
- The cluster centre should be as central and accessible as possible to its satellite schools, it should have adequate facilities and ideally be situated at a development centre where other social and commercial services are available.
- A cluster centre should set good examples for management and teaching practices.
- The principal of the cluster centre should be a strong and committed manager, with a vision that can extend beyond his or her school to the needs of all schools and the community in the cluster.
- A number of management structures can or should support the cluster system.

All schools in Namibia have or are being grouped into about 260 clusters. The clusters have in turn been grouped into inspection circuits, usually with five, six or seven clusters to each circuit. This means that every school belongs first to a cluster and second to a circuit. The outer boundaries of all the clusters in a circuit form the borders of the circuit. This makes the relationship between the circuit inspector and clusters clear, and each inspector can deal with a manageable number of units. In most regions, inspectors' offices have been moved away from the regional education office to places where they are much closer to the schools and clusters they serve.

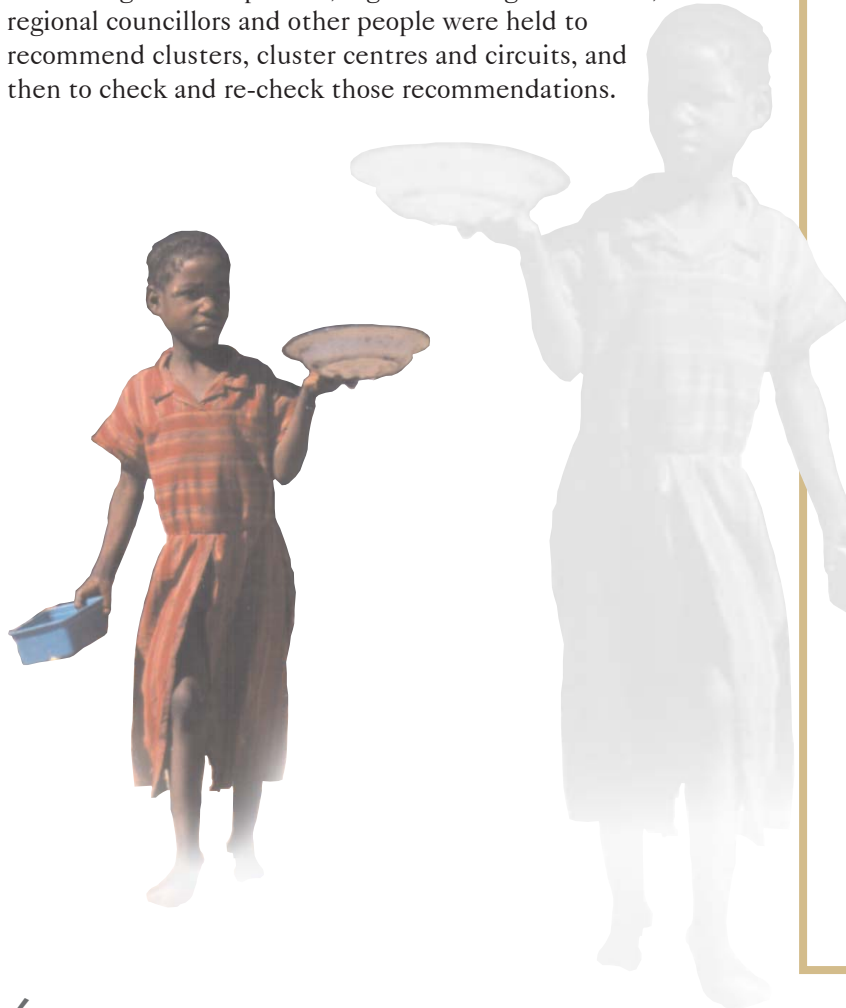
Levels of management in the Ministry of Basic Education, Sport and Culture before the introduction of the cluster system (left) and after it (right). The numbers at each level are the numbers of units managed by the level above that level. For example, the head office manages 7 regional offices, each of which has between 5 and 10 circuits.



Development of clusters

Clusters were planned during baseline studies conducted in each education region. The studies first used maps to see how schools relate to each other geographically. School statistics were then added to provide information on each school, including particulars on what grades were offered at schools, the sizes of schools, enrolment trends in recent years, and other features that would help to show how schools would relate to each other in a cluster.

Two different approaches were used during the baseline studies. In the first, each school was visited to assess its development needs, how it related to nearby schools, and its potential as a cluster centre. Draft recommendations were then discussed at consultative meetings of inspectors and senior regional management staff. Changes suggested at the meetings were incorporated into a set of final recommendations. The second approach was more consultative from the beginning. Individual schools were not visited, but several rounds of meetings with inspectors, regional management staff, regional councillors and other people were held to recommend clusters, cluster centres and circuits, and then to check and re-check those recommendations.

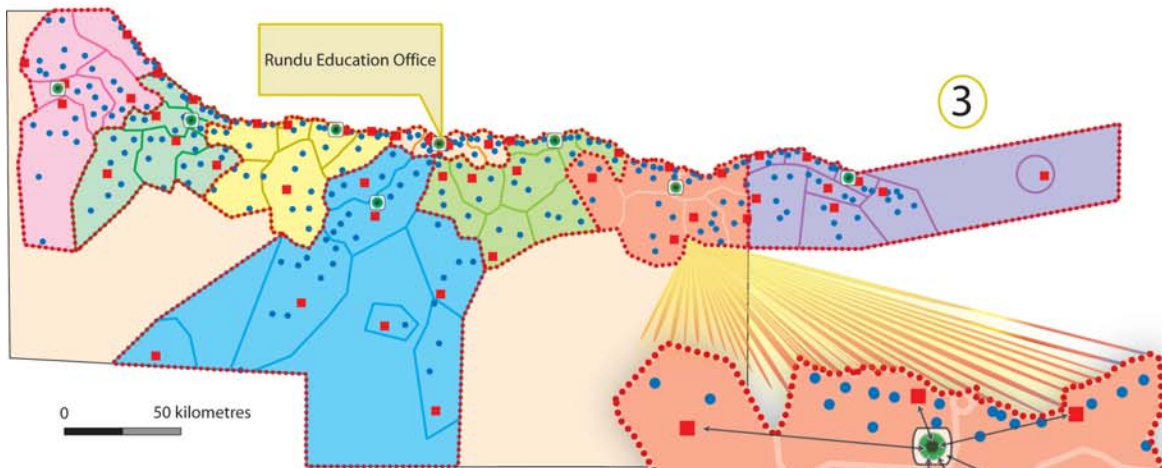
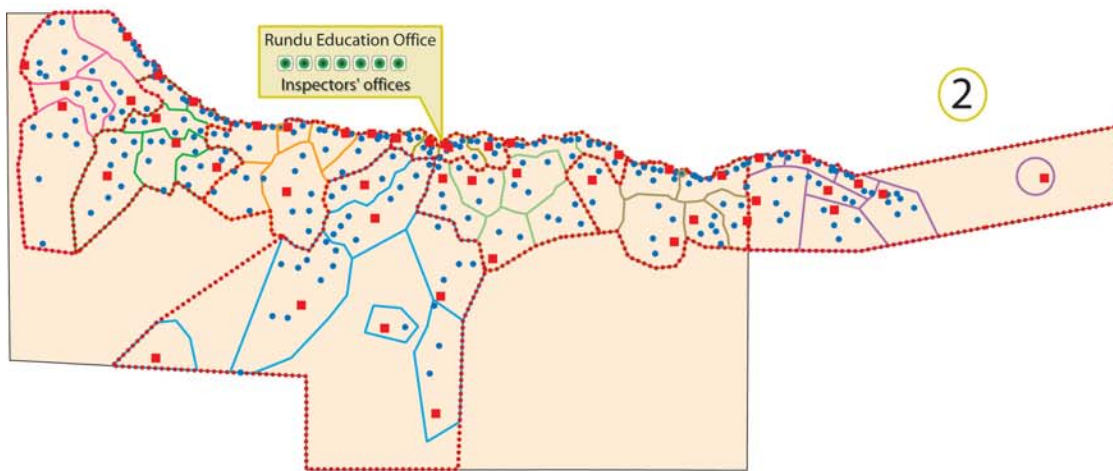
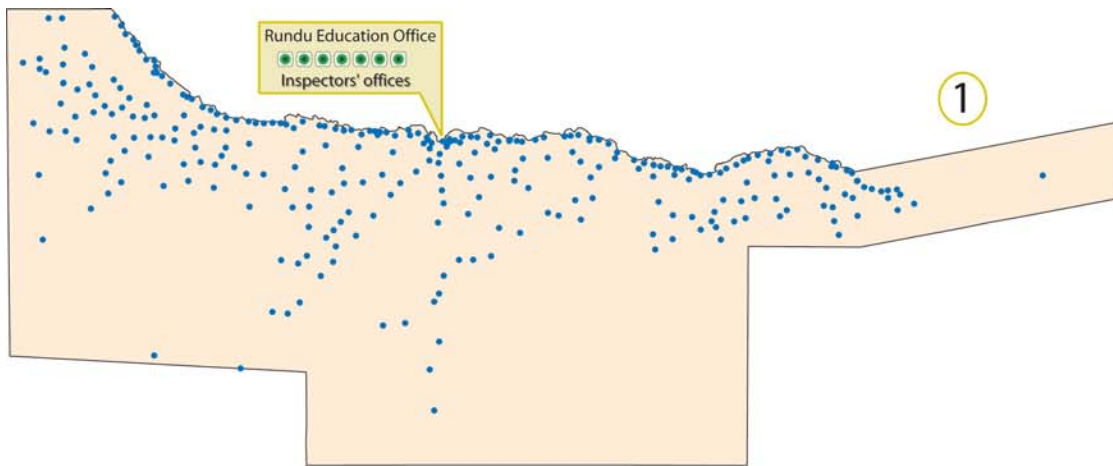


The sequence of clustering schools and decentralization of circuit offices, in the example of the Rundu Educational Region. The first stage shows how the regional education office attempts to manage a large number of schools, each of which exists in isolation from all other schools. The inspectors are based at the regional office and make infrequent and irregular visits to certain schools.

The second stage shows all the schools grouped into clusters with one cluster centre in each cluster. Schools are no longer isolated and can now co-operate and communicate through their clusters. Although the inspectors remain based at the regional office, they are better able to communicate with schools through the cluster centres, since all clusters fit into defined inspection circuits.

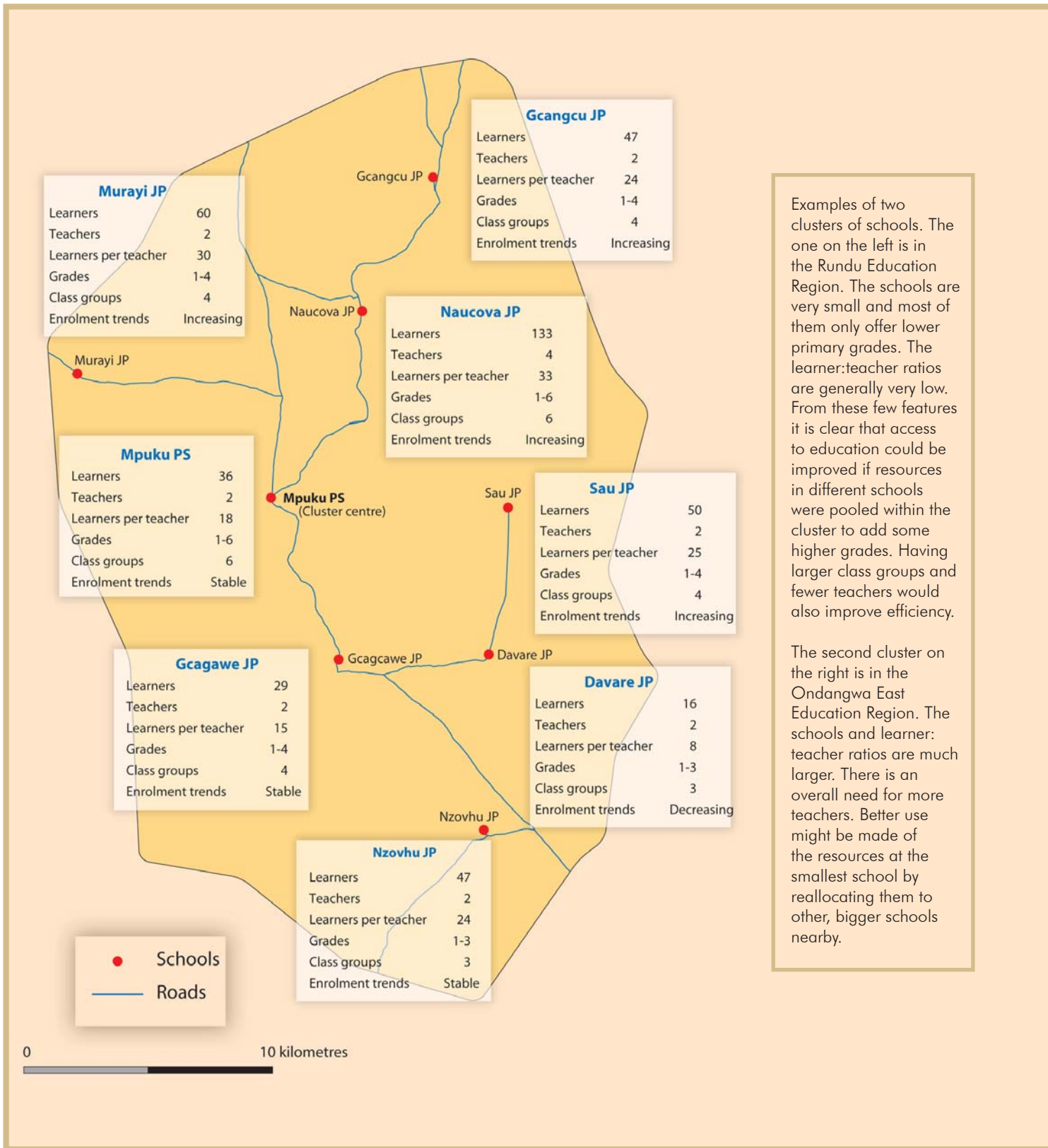
The third stage now has the inspectors based away from the regional education offices at places where they are much closer to the clusters and schools. There are now clear and close linkages between schools in a cluster, between cluster centres and the circuit office, and from there on to the regional education office.

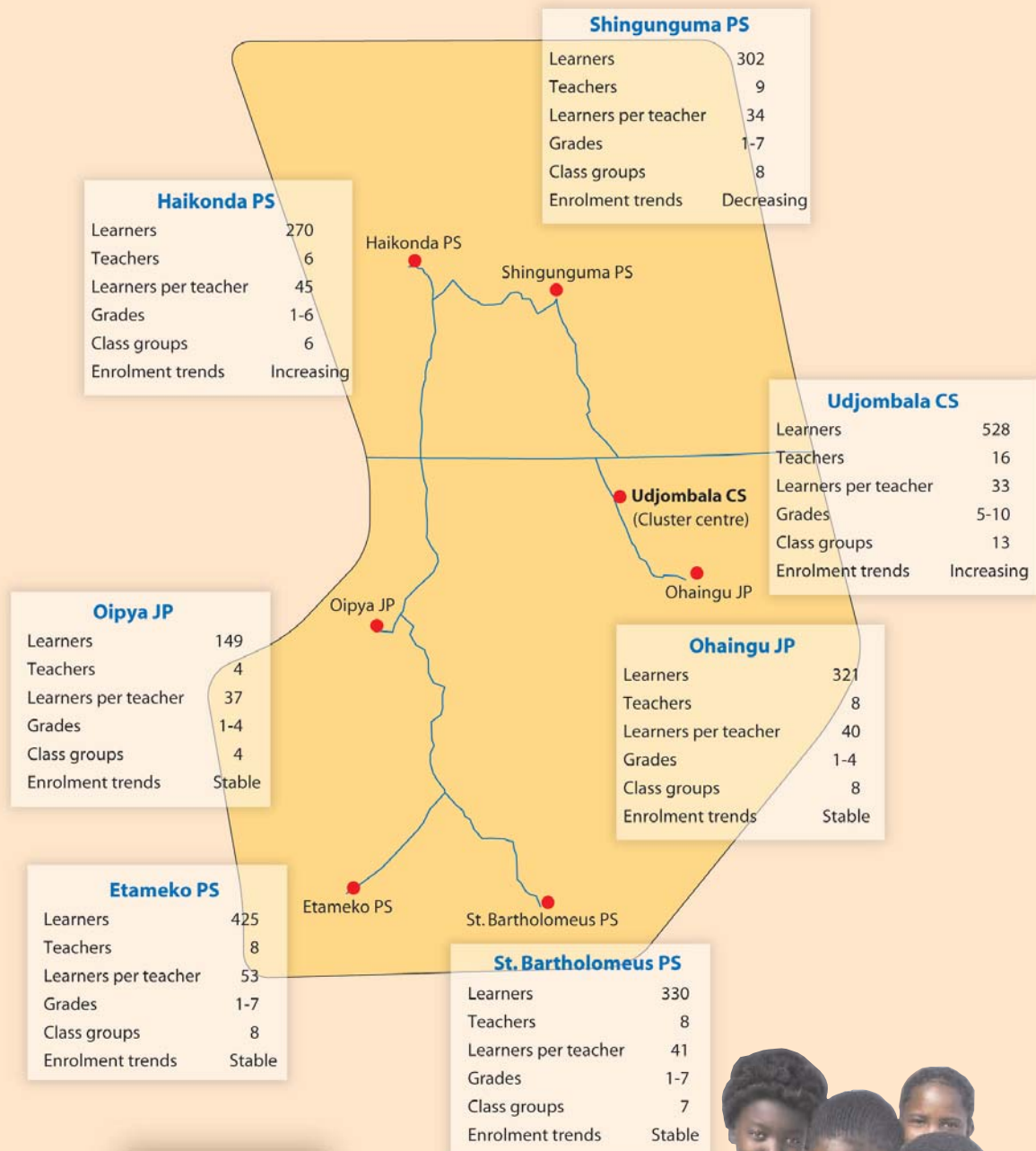
At the bottom, one circuit is enlarged to show the links between the circuit office and cluster centres.



0 50 kilometres

- Schools
- Cluster centres
- Inspectors' offices
- Cluster borders
- ⋯ Circuit borders







Clusters in action:

Benefits and Functions

Clusters have been used for a surprising variety of applications and functions. The variety is all the more remarkable because clusters have only been in place for a few years and have only functioned in certain parts of Namibia. Some applications have been emphasized or applied more actively in certain clusters and regions than in others. What follows below is a description of the various functions of clusters in the hope that they will be of benefit to as many teachers, principals and other education managers as possible.

Improving the quality of teaching and learning

The previous chapter described how so many teachers are isolated, working for years on their own with little professional contact with other people teaching the same grades and subjects. There is also little opportunity for follow-up for those teachers that attend in-service training workshops. Much of this isolation is broken by the formation of cluster-based subject groups, and it is interesting that teachers created most of these groups themselves once the clusters were in place. The groups thus grew out of a need for more collegial support, support of a kind that can easily be offered and structured through the frameworks provided by clusters. A whole range of benefits have grown out of this kind of collaboration, of which the examples listed below are perhaps the most important.

benefits for teaching and learning

- Teachers get together to discuss and interpret syllabuses, and to draw up common schemes of work. This raises standards by encouraging teachers to keep in step with other schools in the group.
 - Test papers are set, typed, duplicated, assessed and moderated as a group effort. Teachers do not have to set their own question papers, time is saved, and the group is able to set better papers with a broader range of questions. Moderation helps to improve standards.
 - All learners in the cluster are exposed to similar levels of testing. Higher standards and greater equity are achieved between schools.
 - Principals and teachers meet within committees and learn from each other, sharing experiences and ideas, assisting each other with problems, consulting and co-operating at all levels.
 - Teachers' morale and confidence are boosted and their skills are developed as they work together to improve their teaching efforts within a supportive context.
 - School visits from teachers or principals from within the cluster create a culture of sharing and mutual support.
 - Good teaching practices and teaching resources at schools are shared with other schools in the cluster.
 - Advisory teachers can channel their inputs more effectively through cluster-based subject groups to reach all teachers within a given cluster.
-

It is now possible to draw on expertise from within the cluster. In the Khorixas Education Region, teachers from a secondary school have offered to train teachers from their cluster in the use of computers, for example.



Management applications

Clusters help to improve the management of education in several ways. Clusters work best when they are accompanied by as much decentralised and participatory decision-making as possible. This is the case in those regions where the cluster system is most active, with the result that many management decisions are made at local levels in schools and clusters.

Cluster management committees, made up of all principals in each cluster, provide a platform to share and resolve problems, as do higher level circuit management committees, comprising the cluster centre principals and the circuit inspector. The role of principals is thus broadened to include general management and education issues in their clusters. Inspectors can then concentrate more on the function of linking between clusters of schools and the regional education office, because they are less involved in local management issues.

examples of management applications

- Using a participatory approach, cluster centre principals support, guide and supervise the satellite schools.
 - The positive example of cluster centres that are well managed encourages satellite schools to improve their management practices. This goes along with the development of a constructive competitive spirit between schools.
 - The administration of schools is improved through training, which is followed up at cluster management meetings.
 - Schools can jointly ensure that all teachers have job descriptions so that they clearly understand their responsibilities.
 - Principals are encouraged to take more responsibility for staff supervision and accountability. Teacher absenteeism is reduced when more principals are involved in the joint management of schools.
 - Schools are managed more as networks rather than as individual “empires”.
-

Management skills have been improved in the Katima Mulilo Education Region because the idea of deputising has been promoted. Cluster centre principals stand in on a rotational basis for inspectors when they are absent, allowing the circuit office to remain open and working. Likewise, teachers deputise for principals when they are away. Senior teachers are included on cluster management committees in many clusters, thus improving the flow of information through the system.

Empowerment at cluster levels

The framework provided by clusters brings people together in various collaborative groups. This motivates them to do their work well, especially when they are given authority and their contributions are recognised.

some results

- Cluster school members form a unified front to deal with issues, resulting in faster and more effective solutions that have greater ownership and local relevance.
 - All participants develop greater competence as they learn to make decisions and take responsibility within their clusters.
 - The delegation of authority to circuits and clusters empowers principals - through circuit and cluster management committees - to make decisions about cluster centres and satellite schools.
 - Cluster centre principals are now encouraged to visit schools to share ideas and to identify problems. Previously they had little reason to interact with other schools.
-

Experience in many clusters shows that although the workloads of cluster centre principals have increased, this has not been perceived as a problem where the outcomes have been rewarding. Some cluster centre principals have balanced their workloads by delegating tasks to senior teachers, thus empowering these teachers as well. Many heads of department are involved in cluster management committees, sharing responsibilities and authority.



Improved efficiency

Clusters improve efficiency because they divide the very large circuits into a series of inter-related and more manageable parts through which information can flow and within which resources can be used rationally.

several benefits

- Communication is channeled through the cluster centres to all the satellite schools, helping to speed up communication between schools and inspectors, the regional education office and head office. Information is also shared more effectively.
 - Stationery and textbook orders are placed by the cluster centre and distributed from the circuit offices, rather than each school having to do this independently and centrally from the regional education office. The distribution of all materials is improved, and time and transport costs are saved.
 - The collection of statistics is coordinated through the cluster centre, again saving time and transport costs.
 - Decisions are often made efficiently because they are made collectively by a group of participants.
 - More efficient use is made of resources, such as classrooms, teachers and learning materials when schools share these resources.
-

Many schools in the Rundu Education Region are remote, and in the past many of them would go from year to year without receiving basic teaching and management materials. Now all business can be conducted through the cluster centres. The ordering of equipment, textbooks and stationery, and the distribution of material, is co-ordinated through each cluster. Statistical surveys are channelled through the cluster centre and deadlines are met. Even the remote inland schools meet deadlines by linking up to the cluster centre. Previously, inspectors spent days and days driving to all schools to collect the information.



Staff allocations

Teachers and other staff can be allocated more effectively if staffing needs are evaluated according to the needs of a group of schools that serve the wider community. This reduces the frequency of some schools being overstaffed while others remain short of staff.

some applications

- Appropriately qualified teachers can be shared between schools in remote areas where there are shortages of skills, or where enrolments at individual schools do not justify particular posts.
 - Appointments and transfers of teachers can be considered and recommended through a process of consensus involving the school boards, the cluster management committee and the cluster centre principal, before being referred to higher levels for approval.
 - Circuit management committees are able to adjust staffing needs in the circuit by recommending internal transfers.
 - Internal arrangements can be made to allow for cluster centres to be allocated additional staff from satellite schools that are overstaffed.
 - In the future, staffing norms can be applied using the total number of learners in a cluster, rather than trying to apportion teachers school by school (see page 38).
-



The Aranos Cluster in the Keetmanshoop Education Region has applied for a Basic Information Science teacher for the whole cluster because none of the schools have high enough enrolments to qualify for such a post. The teacher would be employed as a cluster teacher, teaching classes in all the schools.

Training

The cluster system provides a framework through which a more comprehensive and co-ordinated programme of training can be delivered efficiently at each cluster centre. Training needs can also be assessed cluster by cluster, rather than having a uniform programme for the whole region.

examples of uses

- Cluster management committees can determine what training programmes are needed to improve the skills of principals, teachers, secretaries and school board members.
- The cascade model for training enables inspectors and cluster centre principals to pass on the training to satellite principals or school board members, cluster by cluster. Follow-up by inspectors ensures that appropriate training is provided at all levels.
- Teachers are encouraged and motivated through their subject groups to upgrade their qualifications.
- Advisory teachers can be more effective by implementing training programmes for subject facilitators who can in turn pass on the information to teachers in subject groups.

Community involvement

By bringing parents and others together in various cluster-based groups, clusters allow the whole community to be better informed about the activities of their children and schools.

some consequences

- Because school boards are better informed, they are more interested in education, have a greater grasp of educational issues and can make better recommendations. Together with principals, they can also respond more actively to issues such as teacher and learner absenteeism.
- As parents become more informed about what goes on in schools, they can play a more active role in school activities, and encourage their children to attend school, complete their homework and to be involved in extra-mural activities.
- Parents begin to identify with the cluster, rather than focusing on their particular small school. They begin to understand the reasons for upgrading one school - rather than all schools - and for moving teachers to schools where they are most needed, for example. Even though their own school may not be upgraded, their children will benefit from the facilities provided by the cluster.



In the Rundu Education Region, where many schools are very remote, the idea is developing that the cluster centres should have informal hostel facilities to enable learners from the cluster to enrol in higher grades at a school relatively close to home. The hostels would be built and managed by parents.

Planning and access to schooling

In the past, most education planning has concentrated on individual schools, with the result that schools tended to develop independently from what was happening in nearby schools and without regard to the needs of the greater community. Clusters now provide a framework for planning the provision of schooling in a wider and more logical context. Planning recommendations made by cluster groups are broadly based, and groups or networks of schools can develop better to meet the needs of whole communities.

some applications

- Planning needs and statistical returns can be discussed at cluster management committees to make recommendations on needs for physical facilities.
 - Problems of access - where learners live far from schools - can be assessed. Within the larger context of the cluster, additional grades can be planned and offered at schools best chosen for this purpose. An example is given for the cluster of small schools shown on page 8.
 - Networks of schools can be established so that learners progress through the grades by moving to nearby schools that offer higher phases, rather than having to drop out or move to distant schools.
-

The Education Planner in the Katima Mulilo Education Region visited cluster centres to explain to principals and school boards the regulations and financial constraints that affect education planning. This allows schools and school boards to make more informed decisions about planning needs.



Frameworks for other programmes

The cluster system provides a single structure through which a variety of programmes and projects can be delivered. The system also provides new possibilities for regional development.

some applications

- The cluster system provides a framework for the planning of all regional development activities for facilities such as roads, electricity and telephone services.
 - The cluster system can be used for the planning of donor assistance programmes to help direct the aid to areas where it is most needed and where it can be used most effectively. This will also help to prevent the duplication of resources and services.
 - Administrative offices, such as personnel offices, government stores and financial offices can use clusters to deliver their services to schools.
 - Early Childhood Development Programmes can be strengthened by linking all local pre-primary schools and kindergartens through the cluster centres, and by linking these to Grade 1 programmes.
 - Likewise, adult education programmes can be organised using cluster groupings and can be delivered at the cluster centres.
 - HIV/AIDS programmes can train facilitators in each cluster to co-ordinate educational and counselling activities, thereby reaching all learners and parents in each cluster. Clusters can also be used to bring people together to open up discussion about the spread of this disease and the kinds of responses that are appropriate.
-





Implementing clusters

Ingredients for success

This chapter offers ideas and suggestions on how the cluster system can be implemented and supported. Some activities are really important to ensure the successful implementation of the system, while others are more supportive in helping to make clusters more useful.

Building awareness

The cluster system needs to be clearly presented and explained to build awareness and a clear understanding of its requirements, processes and potentials. This can be done through information campaigns, workshops and media releases. People working in the education system - teaching staff, inspectors and regional education office staff - are obviously the most important target audience, but information should also be provided to school boards, regional councillors and trade unions. An official launch can serve as a starting point for the implementation of each cluster.

Decentralised decision-making

Clusters work best when responsibilities are delegated down to circuit and cluster levels to involve people close to schools in decision-making. This is in line with the Ministry's goal of promoting democratic participation of all stakeholders. However, senior education managers have to be bold to actually relinquish some of their authority to lower levels.

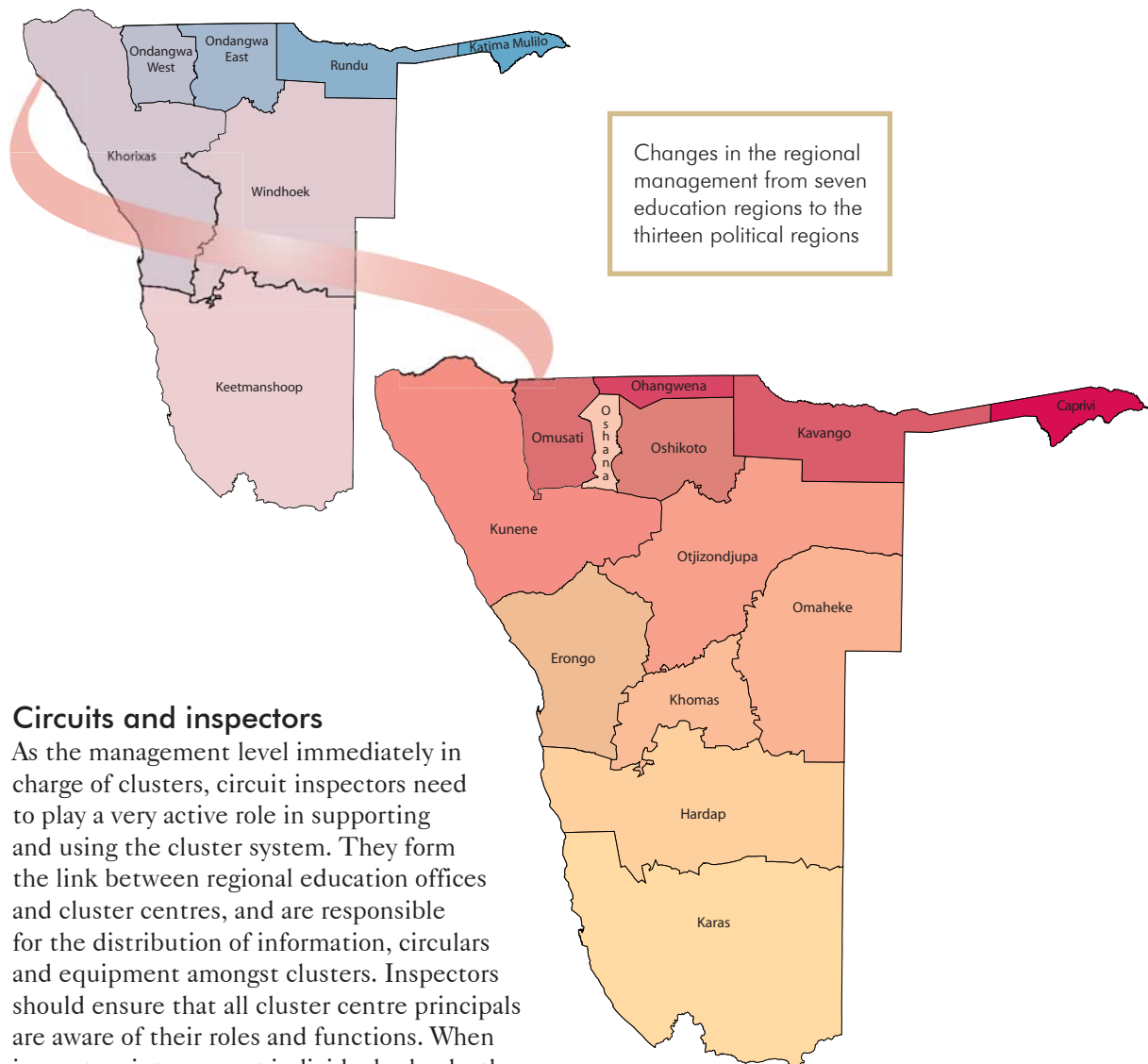
Decentralised structures, based on the cluster system, have been established in some regions in the form of circuit and cluster management committees (see below). The committees strengthen the management of circuits and clusters by involving a variety of people in making decisions and recommendations. More importantly, decisions and recommendations are made speedily, and have local relevance and ownership. The flow of information between different management levels is also improved.

Head office

Commitment and support from managers in head office is essential if the cluster system is to be sustained and further developed in Namibia. The system has many benefits, not least in its potential to provide a framework for the effective decentralisation of education to the 13 political regions. Steps should be taken to formalise and institutionalise the system so that clusters can become effective units to manage education. The system can also allow the massive amounts of money now spent on education to be used more effectively.

Regional offices

Regional directors and management teams need to provide clear directives on how the clusters should function. It is essential to give consistent support to the circuit and cluster management levels about their responsibilities, encouraging them to use the cluster system to improve the management and provision of education. Planning should be done on the basis of clusters, and cluster centres should be developed as a priority.



Circuits and inspectors

As the management level immediately in charge of clusters, circuit inspectors need to play a very active role in supporting and using the cluster system. They form the link between regional education offices and cluster centres, and are responsible for the distribution of information, circulars and equipment amongst clusters. Inspectors should ensure that all cluster centre principals are aware of their roles and functions. When inspectors intervene at individual schools, they should do so in collaboration with the cluster centre principal. Cluster centre principals can stand in for inspectors when they are away from their offices, allowing the circuit offices to remain open and the principals to gain experience in that kind of work. Inspectors should forge links between clusters and advisory teachers.

As the hub at the centre of different clusters in an area, the circuit office should ideally be developed into a local educational centre, as recommended on page 37.



Circuit management committees

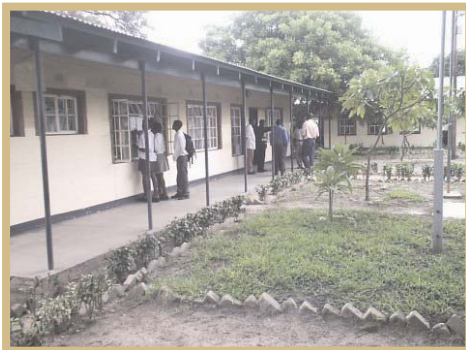
These committees are useful in co-ordinating the activities of the whole circuit. Each committee may consist of the circuit inspector as chairperson, an advisory teacher, and all cluster centre principals in the circuit. Other people, such as senior school staff, community members and regional councillors may be co-opted onto the committee. Minutes of the meetings should be sent to the regional education office to inform the regional managers about activities in the circuit, and to draw their attention to specific achievements or problems.

functions of circuit management committees

- to discuss and resolve issues referred to them by cluster management committees
 - to exchange ideas and experiences relating to the administration of schools in each circuit. This helps to inspire cluster centre principals to give effective service to their schools
 - to discuss and resolve matters of concern to the whole circuit, such as circuit-based exams, the distribution of materials, and collection of information
-

Cluster centres

These are the focal points for contact and co-ordination between the schools in the cluster. They serve as in-service training centres, and cluster centre schools ought to provide examples of good educational practice and management. Every effort should therefore be made to develop the centres so that they can perform these roles. Where appropriate, higher grades should be added to the centres. To improve working conditions, many of the centres need additional facilities such as meeting venues, audio-visual aids, flip-charts, and duplicating facilities. Additional staff should be provided to assist at cluster centres. Competent and committed principals should be appointed at the cluster centres and steps should be taken to replace principals who cannot take on the additional roles expected at cluster centres.



The Presidential Commission on Education, Culture and Training recommended that certain schools become *centres of excellence*. Cluster centres are well placed to become these good examples of educational practice and management.

Cluster management committees

A cluster management committee is a forum where teaching and learning problems in schools may be addressed, and where principals are empowered by being encouraged to search for solutions in collaboration with their colleagues. Each committee should consist of the cluster centre principal as chairperson, school principals from each satellite school in the cluster and co-opted members such as senior teachers and school board members. Minutes of meetings that reflect what is happening in the cluster are sent to the inspector and the regional education office.

roles of cluster management committees

- to serve as a forum where cluster centre principals and school principals exchange information and their experiences
- to allow principals in the cluster work to work as a team so that sharing and support between schools is promoted
- to discuss and resolve relevant issues close to their sources
- to allow for planning for the cluster so that the best use is made of resources, for example in recommending which schools should be upgraded and what building projects are necessary, and where teachers should be allocated
- to ensure that school boards function properly and that community participation is encouraged

Cluster centre principals

Cluster centre principals co-ordinate and promote activities in the cluster in collaboration with other principals in the cluster. The cluster centre principals also form links between schools and the circuit and regional education office. Where needed, training should be provided to cluster centre principals in such aspects as management and leadership, office administration, financial management, and education planning.

cluster centre principals can

- provide general leadership and supervision of all activities in the cluster
- visit schools in the cluster to offer support and solutions
- promote the formation of subject groups to improve the teaching and examination of all subjects
- act as deputies to the circuit inspector, filling in during his or her absence
- organise the functioning of the cluster management committees
- ensure that correct channels of communication are followed by staff throughout the cluster

- promote efficient and cost-saving approaches to the ordering and distribution of supplies, including helping to collate, submit and follow-up on orders
 - distribute, explain, collect and discuss statistical questionnaires
 - promote the efficient and equitable allocation of teachers
 - advise schools on how class groups should be arranged so that teachers and classrooms are used effectively
 - pass on training that they receive to all principals in the cluster
 - promote community participation by ensuring that school boards function properly, that community members value schooling and that communities respond to discipline problems at their schools
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Cluster groups or committees

Clusters provide frameworks for a range of groups or committees to be formed to support various needs. The most important of these are subject groups which help to upgrade the quality of teaching and learning.

subject groups may

- bring teachers together in goal-oriented groups dealing with teaching and professional development issues
 - encourage teachers to share experiences and skills, and to strive for improvement
 - foster a culture of sharing, openness and mutual support
 - provide a framework for in-service training, and a point of contact for advisory teaching services
 - encourage teachers to compile common schemes of work, set deadlines for the completion of curricula, and set common question papers
-

Each subject group in a cluster is usually co-ordinated by a subject facilitator who should be supported by an advisory teacher.

subject facilitators can

- check that teachers have relevant teaching materials and monitor the extent to which they cover the syllabus
- liaise with examination committees on the setting of question papers, help moderate papers, and check on how each school is progressing
- arrange subject group meetings
- design and prepare activities for cluster meetings to facilitate teaching
- undertake support visits to schools
- encourage initiative from other teachers, supporting them in designing and implementing tasks

Examination committees also enhance the quality of education. Such committees have been established to co-ordinate and assist teachers to prepare learners for examinations, especially for the external exams written in Grades 7, 10 and 12. The practice has been expanded in some regions to cover all examinations from Grades 5 to 12. The chairperson is usually a head of department, deputy head or a senior teacher.

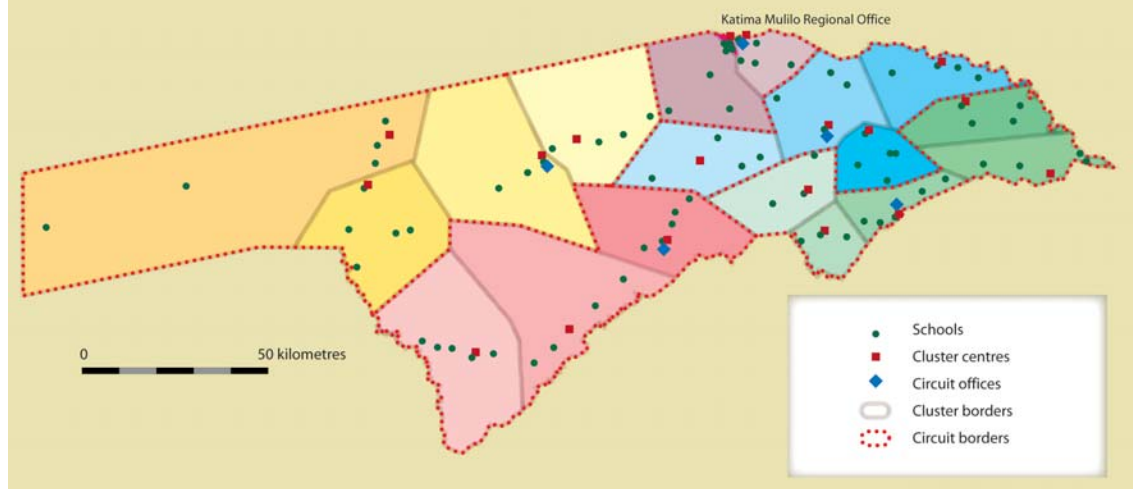
examination committees may

- co-ordinate the setting, duplication, marking and moderation of examinations so that each teacher no longer has to do all these tasks independently
- scrutinise the results of previous examinations to pinpoint problems
- inform teachers of classes that are due to write external examinations of the examination requirements and assist them with planning
- draw up timetables for meetings and exams to ensure that all teachers are aware of deadlines
- generally work towards the improved quality of education by setting common standards and goals that lead to the improved performance of learners

A range of other committees may be formed within the framework provided by clusters. In some clusters, each committee has a different principal as chairperson, and progress is reported to the cluster management committee. Participants benefit from all of these committees by sharing ideas, experiences and solutions to problems. School boards from different schools form cluster boards to discuss and resolve issues of concern to the whole community and cluster.

Clusters have encouraged the formation of a range of committees in the Katima Mulilo Education Region to meet certain needs, such as:

- A school board committee, consisting of members from all satellite school boards, meets to discuss and find solutions to common problems.
- A cluster library committee ensures that resources and skills are shared between schools.
- A counselling committee deals with emotional and social issues that affect the performance of learners.
- A sports committee co-ordinates and promotes sports events for the cluster, and promotes a competitive spirit where one cluster team plays against other cluster teams.
- A cultural committee encourages parents, skilled in crafts and music, to teach the learners. Parents also arrange cultural functions to raise funds.
- A life skills committee has been formed in one cluster to deal with issues such as learning techniques, HIV/AIDS, and emotional and social problems. Another cluster is considering delegating the task of teaching Life Skills to one teacher who will teach the subject at all the cluster schools.
- A disciplinary committee for the cluster involves school boards, and sets up a common disciplinary code for all satellite schools. The minutes and recommendations from the committee's meetings are sent to the inspector.
- A financial committee seeks to prevent the misuse of school funds within the cluster, to optimise the use school funds at schools within the cluster, and also organises a cluster fund for catering at meetings and for transport costs. Funds are raised at sports and cultural events and through donations.





The cluster system and education policies

Anyone may ask how a new system for managing and developing education relates to established policies and goals. How, then, does the cluster system contribute to Namibia's educational policies, which policies benefit most from clusters, and how are these contributions made?

Starting at the broadest, national level, it is useful to recall that education directly or indirectly contributes to the pursuit of all Namibia's goals. These are to:

- promote human rights and fundamental democratic principles
- revive and sustain economic growth
- create job opportunities and employment
- reduce inequity in income distribution
- create living conditions that enable a life in dignity
- reduce poverty



"Namibia shows one of the highest disparities between rich and poor. Since education is regarded as one of the key weapons in the fight against poverty, this lack of equity in the distribution of wealth increases the challenges facing the provision of basic education in particular, which is seen as contributing directly to the Government's development goals"
(Ministry of Basic Education, Sport and Culture Strategic Plan for 2001-2006).

Toward Education for All

In its guiding document *Toward Education for All*, published in 1993, the Ministry of Basic Education, Sport and Culture identified as its major goals improved access, equity, quality, democracy and efficiency. These five goals provide a useful policy context within which applications of the school cluster system may be considered.

Access relates to providing education for all by expanding the school system and removing barriers that prevent children from going to school. The cluster system improves access by helping to organise schools into networks which provide a range of grades within each cluster. More learners thus have better opportunities of attending higher grades. Planning within a cluster context also helps to improve the provision of classrooms, teachers and schools for children in a given area.

Equity reflects a commitment to allocate educational resources fairly throughout the nation. The cluster system contributes to greater equity in several ways. This is often as a result of improved conditions in many schools, but teachers, textbooks, school equipment and other resources can also be distributed and shared more efficiently and fairly. More learners are exposed to better teaching practices where schemes of work and examinations are standardised allowing learners to be taught the necessary basics for each level.

Quality refers to the provision of good education by supplying schools with well-prepared teachers and ensuring that inspectors, advisory teachers and other officials strive to improve the system. The establishment of cluster-based groups for each subject or phase improves the quality of teaching by allowing teachers to share ideas, lesson plans, examination questions and papers, and other teaching materials. Good teaching practices and teaching resources at schools are therefore shared with other schools in the cluster. Teachers are no longer left to work in isolation, but become members of teams striving for common goals and supporting each other.

The creation of subject groups is perhaps the most important innovation and application of the cluster system, not least because it reflects a “home-grown demand” for more collegial support that can easily be offered and structured through clusters. It also strongly indicates that the advisory teaching services could tailor their activities to meet the needs of subject groups. The cluster centres should also serve as good examples to other schools in terms of management, teaching practice and performance.

Democratic participation promotes the involvement of teachers, parents, school communities and learners in the education process. This happens most effectively when decentralisation is focused not only on the region, but also on the school community. One important role of clusters is to bring different people together and thus enhance their participation in schooling issues. Cluster centres also provide venues for various participatory activities, such as in-service training, school board training, and the organisation of sports and cultural events.

Clusters allow more management decisions to be made at local levels in schools and clusters, thus contributing to decentralisation. Cluster management committees, made up of all cluster principals in each cluster, provide a forum to share and resolve problems in the clusters. Principals thus take more responsibility for general management issues and can be held accountable for their decisions. Circuit management committees, comprising cluster centre principals and the inspector, ensure that information flows from cluster level to circuit level and on to regional level, and that checks and balances are properly in place.

Some clusters are represented through their cluster centre principals on constituency advisory committees. Similarly, inspectors and selected cluster centre principals serve on some regional education forums. School board committees representing clusters have been established in some clusters to provide wider representation and participation.

Efficiency policies aim to reduce waste and to increase the efficient use of financial, human, physical and material resources. Clusters provide a framework for assessing and planning development needs, both for individual schools and for groups of schools, so that developments can occur in a more rational and effective way. More efficient use can be made of resources, such as classrooms, teachers and learning materials. Communication between schools and inspectors, regional education offices and head office is improved so that information is more effectively

shared, and services are brought closer to the teachers and learners. The distribution of materials and collection of statistics is improved by channelling these activities through cluster centres to save time and transport costs. Cluster centre principals and management committees help to improve staff supervision and reduce absenteeism amongst teachers.

It is clear that some cluster centre principals expect to receive recognition for their roles in the form of higher salaries and/or other concessions. Current financial constraints mean that no provision can be made for these now, and many people might argue that the cluster system would raise overall costs if salaries were to be raised. In fact, just the opposite could happen if salary scales were to be adapted to recognise different levels of responsibility in cluster schools, as suggested on page 39.

Other policies and goals

The Ministry of Basic Education, Sport and Culture has published a number of documents that describe specific educational policies, plans and programmes. This is not the place to review them all, but comments on how clusters relate to several important ones are offered below.



Decentralisation

The national policy on decentralisation aims to move certain management functions from the head offices of various ministries to regional administrations in the 13 political regions (see the map on page 22). The Ministry of Basic Education, Sport and Culture outlined its position on decentralisation in a planning document that states that the Ministry will retain its responsibility for policy formulation, quality determination and setting standards. The existing regional education offices are to be fully incorporated into the new administrative structures of the 13 regional councils.

By partitioning schools into manageable groups, clusters provide the new regional council administrations with a framework for managing and planning education. Regional councillors and officials will relate more easily to groups of schools than to a large number of dispersed schools. The clusters also provide a logical framework for planning other regional services, such as water supply, transportation and electricity.

Experience has shown that it is often not possible to align the borders of clusters with the boundaries of constituencies because clusters have to consist of a given number of schools that are geographically close to each other. This is unfortunate, since it would be useful for each regional councillor to represent a group of clusters. Again, clusters could provide a framework for the delimitation of new political zones, allowing constituency boundaries to be more usefully aligned with those of clusters.

Education Act

A new Education Act will soon provide a legal basis for schooling in Namibia. Amongst other things, the Act will clearly set out the rights and responsibilities of school boards, regional advisory committees, regional education forums and related bodies. The role of school boards in promoting and representing parental participation is especially important, and cluster activities promote this by bringing people together to broaden communication in local communities.

The Efficiency Programme

The Ministry of Basic Education, Sport and Culture produced an efficiency programme in 1996 following the realisation that the large budget allocated to education needed to be used more effectively. Aspects described on page 30 show the variety of ways in which clusters can contribute to greater efficiency. The formalisation of clusters could also lead to a reduction in spending, as discussed on page 39.

Strategic Plan 2001-2006

The Ministry of Basic Education, Sport and Culture developed a strategic plan, largely in line with the challenges outlined in the report of the Presidential Commission on Education, Culture and Training. Most of these challenges relate to improving equitable access, education quality, teacher education and support, physical facilities, efficiency and effectiveness, and HIV-AIDS education.

The cluster system can make many contributions towards meeting all these challenges, as described earlier in the discussion on the major goals of access, equity, quality, democracy and efficiency. This also applies to the **HIV-AIDS Strategic and Operational Plan for the Education Sector**, where cluster groupings can be used to deliver training and awareness campaigns, and to stimulate discussions on how to respond to the consequences of the epidemic.

10-year plan for Educator Development and Support

The plan provides for a commitment to provide all teachers, teacher educators and education managers with continuous access to opportunities to acquire additional knowledge and skills. The plan also focuses on the provision of decentralised in-service training, which can be readily supplied through the cluster system.

Presidential Commission on Education, Culture and Training

The report of this important enquiry into Namibia's education system includes several statements and recommendations on clusters, as the following quotes show:

- through the cluster system it is possible to give some of the benefits of belonging to a large school to a series of smaller institutions
- the link between the regional education office and the schools becomes much simpler since most of the communication is undertaken with the central schools in the clusters rather than with each individual school
- school inspectors and advisers can be appointed to deal with a small number of clusters and to encourage their development
- the Commission recommends that wherever it is geographically feasible, the cluster system should be adopted. Indeed the system has caused so much interest outside the project area that is already being implemented in other regions
- where a cluster system of primary schools is in operation there should be, in addition to the individual school boards, a board for the general management of the entire cluster to ensure its efficient management. The responsibilities of the cluster board should be well defined and could include the sharing of scarce personnel and other resources, staff development, inter-school sports, etc. The cluster system may also provide enough flexibility for nearby schools to share one principal.
- the cluster system, which the Commission believes should be implemented wherever conditions permit, raises also the issue of the grading of principals' posts. The principal of the lead school of each cluster (cluster centre principal) has additional responsibilities relating to the whole cluster as well as his/her normal responsibilities as a principal. There seems little doubt that s/he should be remunerated accordingly. After appropriate consultation a scale of salaries should be drawn up, which reflects the variety in responsibility which is increasingly developing in the school system. If seriously implemented the cluster system could become the base for new staffing and salary structures within the teaching profession in order to improve efficiency and to save costs.





Conclusions

and future directions

Clusters now operate somewhat informally in Namibia. Much of the good work done through them happens voluntarily because teachers, principals, inspectors and regional education officers recognise the benefits offered by the system. How can these benefits be developed even further? What can be done to ensure that the system continues to function? How can the demands placed on cluster centre principals be recognised? These are some of the questions that need to be addressed in looking ahead to the future of schooling in Namibia. However, several general points need to be made before suggestions are offered for the future.

First, clusters can offer benefits to most, but not to all schools in Namibia. It is not known exactly how many schools can gain from clusters, but the figure could amount to at least 90% of all schools in the country. The remaining 10% of schools fall into two very different groups. One group is made up of the very remote rural schools that are simply too far away to have regular contact with other schools. They will always have to be given special attention. The second group consists of the large urban schools. Many of these do not require as much support from cluster activities because they have large numbers of teachers and access to good resources. Some of the large, busy schools may perceive the cluster system as disadvantageous because of the additional workload involved. This limitation needs to be recognised for the future, but it is also clear that many well-established urban schools can provide useful leadership for other schools in need of support.

Second, the cluster system can serve a great variety of purposes, and flexibility should be allowed in the future so that schools can use the system to their greatest advantage. This would enable schools to emphasise those aspects that work best for them while leaving aside applications that have little benefit.

Third, while clusters seem to benefit teachers and principals primarily, they are also of great advantage to more senior people. Inspectors and managers in regional offices and at head office gain by having local management committees and cluster centre principals take on more responsibilities and make more decisions. The jobs of these managers thus become more rewarding, allowing more time for more important duties. These incentives should encourage people at all managerial levels to support, own and promote the cluster system.

Lastly, the cluster system was essentially designed by people outside the immediate school network: staff of the Basic Education Project (BEP), the regional offices and consultants. That framework has now been embraced, adapted and used for a multitude of purposes to suit local needs. The fact that most of the innovations have come from people in the schools themselves suggests that there is both a high degree of ownership and a demand for the cluster system.

Clusters elsewhere

The emergence of clusters in Namibia was a local development, and it was not driven by external advisors seeking to introduce a system that worked elsewhere. It is therefore interesting to see how clusters are used in other countries, as reviewed by Gabriel Carron and Anton de Grauwe in their publication entitled *Current issues in supervision: a literature review*, published by IIEP, UNESCO in 1997. In Burundi, for example, most schools are satellite schools and the principal of the nucleus school has the explicit task of supervising teaching in all the cluster schools. In Cambodia, supervisory tasks are assigned to a chairperson who also gathers information to be submitted to the district officer who presides over cluster meetings. Each cluster has a resource centre which is used as a training centre for teachers and as a meeting centre for headmasters and teachers. These centres store a whole range of information gathered from all schools.

Similar school clusters exist in most Latin American countries and in many others, including India, Malawi, Myanmar, Nigeria, Papua New Guinea, Thailand, Vietnam, Zambia and Zimbabwe. Some countries have not formalised the cluster structure as such, but have teacher resource centres, which serve the schools in the neighbourhood. This is the case in Botswana, Belize, Gambia and Tanzania. Clusters came about spontaneously in some countries because schools and teachers felt the need to meet and exchange resources and information. In other countries, however, clusters resulted from government initiatives. In the context of a new educational policy for decentralisation in Mozambique, clusters have been used for in-service teacher training, and as a mechanism for enhanced inspection and supervision of teachers. The use of clusters for the professional development of teachers in South Africa was also recently proposed (see Du Toit, D. and T. Sguazzin. 2000. *A cluster approach to professional development support for teachers in South Africa: an illustrated proposal*. Learning for Sustainability Project, Johannesburg).

What is striking in this brief account are the similarities between cluster functions in Namibia and other countries. The system that developed here thus converges with the role of clusters in other countries, adding weight to the view that further development and support is needed for the system in Namibia.

Support for the system and strengthening of cluster centres

There are a variety of ways in which participants and managers in the education system can further the development of clusters.

supporting steps

- Regional education offices need to be even more committed to using the cluster system.
- Further endorsement of the system is needed from head office to ensure that the cluster system is supported and used. The planned National Inspectorate must support, strengthen and work through the cluster system.
- Regional education offices and inspectors should implement firm management structures at circuit management and cluster management levels, together with clearly delegated duties at each level. Where needed, decision-making powers of circuit and cluster management structures could be clarified and enhanced.

- Where necessary, circuit offices need to be developed as decentralised duty stations for inspection services.
 - Planning activities should be promoted at the cluster level, for example, in assessing needs for physical facilities, in allocating teachers efficiently, and in rationalising grades and schools with low enrolments.
 - Regional education offices and inspectors should make maximum use of the distribution channels provided by the cluster system, for example, for collecting statistics and other information and for distributing textbooks and stationery supplies.
 - Support for the development of school boards should continue, with an emphasis on increased community participation in education.
 - There is merit in developing cluster centres into the local centres of excellence proposed by the Presidential Commission on Education, Culture and Training. The centres would not be elitist institutions, but would serve as examples of good management and teaching practices.
 - Steps should be taken to provide cluster centres with adequate physical facilities, staff and other resources.
 - Clusters may provide an excellent framework for the implementation of new staffing norms, especially if the system is formalized, as recommended below.
 - Clusters also provide frameworks for the local co-ordination of different donor and other projects.
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Development of circuit centres and advisory services

Clusters work best where there are close links between cluster centre principals and inspectors. These connections, and the overall management of education, have improved in places where new circuit offices were constructed to move circuit inspectors closer to the clusters and schools that they serve. Thought should now be given to strengthening these links and services even further by developing the circuit offices into local education offices or circuit centres. These would be places from which all aspects of education in a local area could be co-ordinated, managed and served. In addition to an inspector, each centre should house advisory teachers and a teachers' resource centre, thus becoming the focal point for all schools in the area. In essence, circuit centres would bring management and support services closer to schools, and adult and community-based educational services could also be linked to or placed at the centres.

Each centre could have two generalist advisory teachers to improve and support teaching practices for all subjects in the circuit. One advisory teacher could focus on primary level subjects while the other person serves the needs of secondary grades in each circuit. These circuit-based advisory teachers could provide their services to clusters and schools in a variety of ways.

advisory teachers could


- support and co-ordinate subject and examination groups or committees in the clusters
 - assess and monitor teaching practices and professional development in the circuit
 - provide upgrading courses and training to subject groups and subject facilitators
 - encourage the development of common schemes of work and question papers
 - promote circuit-based examinations for all subjects
 - promote interaction between clusters
 - serve on circuit management committees to allow for better advisory support and rapid solutions when problems arise
 - provide feedback to teachers, principals, circuit staff and regional education office staff
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More complex issues that relate to specific subjects, and that cannot be addressed by generalist advisory teachers, could be referred to subject specialist advisory teachers who would be invited to the circuit or clusters as and when required. These specialists might be based at the regional education offices or at a central National Advisory Service, possibly in parallel to the service being planned for the National Inspectorate.

There are currently about 125 posts for advisory teachers in Namibia. Approximately 100 of these posts would be needed if two generalist advisory teachers were to be placed in each of about 50 circuit centres. That would leave some 25 other posts for subject specialists.

A formal cluster system

Although there may be merits in leaving alone a system that runs informally, it is also clear that the entrenchment of the cluster system would help ensure that its benefits are sustained. This would also encourage everyone to use the system. In exploring ways in which clusters can be formalized, several aspects seem most important.

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- The main benefit of a formal, structured system is the elimination of many problems due to schools being small and isolated. All teachers and principals will be able to meet more readily to share their ideas, problems, solutions, schemes of work, test papers, and experiences. This kind of contact is mutually stimulating.
 - Each cluster should become a formal administrative unit so that all schools in a cluster report to and through that management unit. Apart from serving to enhance the management of schools, such an arrangement will also ensure that all teaching staff in a cluster can benefit from each other.
 - The principal of the cluster centre should assume overall management responsibilities for all schools in a cluster, but he or she should be assisted by a cluster management team of deputy principals responsible for satellite schools and heads of departments.
 - A system of stratifying salaries or providing other incentives should be adopted to compensate both the cluster (centre) principal and heads of the satellite schools in accordance with their different levels of responsibility.

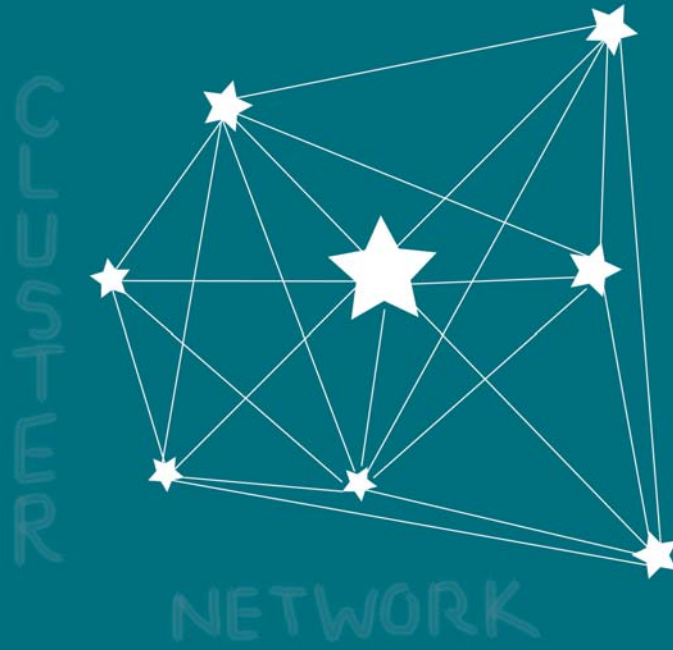
Given these issues, it may be useful to determine the size and composition of each formal cluster on the basis of the total number of teachers in all the schools. Some flexibility would be needed because there are some areas where almost all the schools are very small. Likewise, there are other places where most schools are comparatively large. Nevertheless, a range of between 25 and 45 teachers in a group of schools would provide a formula according to which most schools could be clustered. That range would mean that the total number of clusters and cluster centre principals in Namibia would amount to between 260 and 300. About 2,500 deputy principals and heads of departments could be needed if there were eight or nine such posts per cluster unit.

Considerable savings could be achieved if school management structures were organised along these lines and salaries were adjusted to recognise different levels of responsibility. For example, an estimated N\$42 million could be saved each year if salaries paid to the cluster centre principals were raised by 15% compared to those now paid to the best-paid principals, while salaries for deputy principals and heads of departments remained unchanged. These savings could not be achieved immediately because the salaries of existing principals who would serve as deputy principals or heads of departments would have to be maintained until they left the service or were promoted.

These are illustrative figures only, and issues of cluster sizes, numbers of posts per cluster, and salaries would have to be investigated (and debated) more thoroughly. Several concluding points remain clear, however.

- Clusters help to reduce many of the problems inherent to the small size of most Namibian schools and the isolation of teachers.
- Clusters allow people to collaborate in many ways to improve the quality of teaching and learning, and the management of education.
- The cluster system is a vibrant system that encourages creativity. People are encouraged to make decisions and offer their own skills in developing solutions.
- Features of the system mean that cluster activities can be adapted to meet the specific needs of the communities they serve.
- Clusters contribute to all the educational policy goals in Namibia, and can play a major role in enhancing the quality of education.
- The great majority of schools in Namibia will benefit by being part of clusters.
- While further development of the cluster system will require additional expenses, formalizing the cluster system would make it sustainable and save a good deal of money in the longer term.
- All of this means that clusters can contribute to an improvement of education in Namibia, helping to ensure that our children are well prepared for the future.





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