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AN ANALYSIS OF THE ADMINISTRATION OF TEACHERS' LEAVE FARES IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA

Musawe Sinebare

Introduction

The Teachers' Leave Fares (TLF) issue has been intensively pursued by teachers and seems to be the most difficult for their management to address every year. The TLF issue hits the news in the period leading up to the end-of-year school holidays. Every province has its share of the TLF problem.

The reasons for the TLF problem range from insufficient funds, fraud, allegations of corrupt practices, misappropriation, and underfunding, to incorrect computations, denial of leave entitlements, and downright incompetence of the staff who administer the TLF funds.

This article analyses some of the problems which are highlighted in the print media about the administration of the TLF, with a view to propose a possible solution that could assist provincial administrations to effectively manage and administer the TLF funds.

Legal Entitlement

Every teacher is legally entitled to a biennial leave fare to their home province. Where the

spouse is from another province, leave fares to the spouse's home province are allowed in the alternate leave year, when he or she is due for leave.

Government Funding

As required by the *Organic Law on Provincial Governments and Local-level Governments*, the PNG Government, through its annual national grant appropriation, provides TLF funds to each province based on the number of teachers they employ. This grant does not consider teachers' leave destinations, even if they are due for leave to their spouses' home provinces. Approximately K20 million is appropriated in the annual budget for TLF purposes.

Root Causes of the TLF Debacle

The media, especially the print media, covers the TLF issue with some passion in order to draw the attention of the authorities to the teachers' plight. What are some of the reasons behind the TLF issue? An in-depth document analysis is required to explain why the TLF issue attracts

much attention in the media every year. The following reasons are identified, among others:

Diversion of TLF funds

Teachers in Western Highlands Province have alleged that, of the K1.6 million allocated to the province for TLF purposes, only K835 000 was spent on 70 teachers (out of the 200 teachers employed). The rest of the money was allegedly diverted by the Provincial Administration elsewhere. In Simbu Province, it was also alleged that the then Simbu Provincial Administrator diverted K50 000 of the TLF funds to foot legal bills. As to how widespread the practice of diverting TLF funds in PNG is, is anyone's guess. We can only assume at this stage that some degree of diversion of these funds is possible in some provinces.

Corrupt practices

Teachers in the National Capital District claimed that officers who were responsible for the administration of the TLF were involved in corrupt practices by colluding with the travel agents to siphon off a certain percentage from the teachers' leave fare monies.

Underfunding

The Central Provincial Administrator blamed the TLF debacle squarely on the Minister for Education and his government for underfunding the requested TLF funds of K1.5 million. He alleged that his province was instead allocated K900 000 in 2007. Budget shortfalls were also reportedly experienced in the NCD, Morobe Province, and possibly other provinces as well. There is a strong possibility that the TLF funds which are allocated for a province are insufficient to cater for all eligible teachers annually because of lack of relevant and accurate data held in the provinces.

Incompetence

Teachers in the NCD, and Morobe, Central, and Western Highlands Provinces all alleged that the officers who administered the TLF were incompetent, and called for their immediate sacking. The Morobe Provincial Government was ordered by the Lae National Court to pay outstanding leave fares to teachers because the Education Division in the province had failed to do its job well.

Incorrect information (data integrity)

The then acting Secretary for Education, Mr. Luke Taita, was quoted as saying that teachers were partly to be blamed for the delay in processing their leave fare entitlements because they provided false information.

The National President of the PNGTA, Mr. Tommy Hecko, had diplomatically appealed to Provincial Education Authorities to ensure diligence in the administration of leave fares, by suggesting that discrepancies in the issuance of teachers' leave fares is an indication of the existence of maladministration at the provincial level.

He further stated that teachers' personal and professional records must be kept and updated regularly for the proper administration of their leave entitlements. One question that begs an answer is, 'What happens to the different forms completed by the teachers providing both personal and professional information for purposes of administration?' It is obvious that teachers' information, which is gathered annually, has not been effectively used to enhance and improve the administration of their leave fare entitlements.

Such is true for at least two provinces that rely heavily on paper-based information. Provincial Divisions of Education have also failed to maintain an accurate and up-to-date record of teachers in order to administer their annual leave fares efficiently. The ineffective information management system has contributed negatively towards the TLF debacle. The PNGTA statement puts the blame on the provincial administrations for the ineffective administration of the TLF which contributes to the TLF debacle.

What Do We Learn from the TLF Debacle?

Five problems are identified from this brief analysis, including:

- diversion of TLF funds;
- corrupt practices by officers;
- underfunding by the Government;
- incompetent officers; and
- incorrect information.

These problems are not difficult or impossible to address. They are simply management problems which any competent manager or CEO can handle.

The TLF problem has been a recurring one which surfaces towards the end of every school year. At least one provincial administrator acknowledges the problem of underfunding by the Government in its annual budgetary appropriations. Teachers in some provinces blamed their officers' tardiness in executing their duties professionally.

How can TLF Funds be Managed Effectively?

Intertwined with the five identified problems lies

management and administrative leadership and their responsibilities. The provincial administrators and provincial education advisers have a duty and responsibility to manage the TLF funds and effectively manage them. To avoid the TLF debacle and improve the management and administration of its funds, the following suggestions are offered.

Diversion of funds

A provincial administrator does not have any power to divert the national government's annual grant allocated to the province for TLF, unless proper approval is obtained from the Department of Treasury. The TLF fund is part of that grant. Provincial administrators or CEOs who divert TLF funds illegally should be disciplined accordingly.

Corrupt practices

Corrupt practices by officers who are responsible for the administration of teachers' leave fares have been reported as a common problem in most provinces. Such allegations must be thoroughly investigated by the provincial authorities, perpetrators disciplined, and where warranted, terminated on-the-spot, if found guilty.

Incompetence

Incompetent officers are those who do not know how to manage and administer the funds effectively and correctly. They either do not know how to manage the TLF funds (they are incompetent), based on correct information held, or the Division of Education does not have an efficient database system to effectively administer the TLF funds.

If the officers are incompetent, as alleged, then they should be removed or replaced promptly. We cannot rely on their outdated knowledge, as they have not resolved the TLF issue over the years. Their continued employment is a guarantee for disaster in administering teachers' leave fares.

If the system that is in use is an impediment to effectively administer the TLF, then we must use our intelligence to implement a new system, by employing new officers who possess expert knowledge in the system or technology.

The 21st Century is no excuse to be complacent about the roles which technology can play to assist the management. However, those in management must be technologically competent (or technocompetent) in the roles that technology and technical systems play to contribute towards improving the management's misery.

Underfunding

Underfunding of TLF allocations to provinces has been identified as one of the reasons for the annual TLF debacle. Underfunding could occur for two reasons. First, there is no accurate record of teachers' personal and professional information; that is, teachers leave destinations, their spouses' home province, and number of teachers' children who are entitled to leave fares. Second, under the guise of 'limited funds', fully costed TLF funds to the provinces are drastically curtailed, for administrative convenience.

Using electronic databases – the benefits

The way out for any provincial administration is to ensure that a database of all teachers occupying established positions is created and maintained by the Provincial Division of Education. This does not mean that one should maintain a paper-based database because this can attract a high degree of abuse, fraud, inefficiency, and redundancies on any interrogation or manipulation of teachers' information held in such a database.

The creation of an electronic database requires a modest, initial investment by the provincial administration, but the benefits from such an investment are enormous. In the current scenario, identifying the correct data for a teacher is like 'searching for a needle in a haystack'. It is not only chaotic in many provinces, but also inefficient, error-prone, open to abuse, subject to manipulation by rogue officers, and mind-boggling.

Maintaining accurate data

The establishment and creation of an electronic database will ensure that accurate information concerning each teacher is stored. With accurate and correct information, the provincial administration will be in a better position to correctly budget for the TLF, thus avoiding underfunding.

Such a database will allow the administration to periodically keep updated with new information; that is, new teachers transferring in or new graduates entering the profession and removing outdated information (deaths and outward transfers, or even new additions to dependants through births and adoptions). Adoption must be treated with caution because there are cases where teachers adopt more children than their own, so that their salary cannot possibly support them.

Minimising fraud

The database will enable the administration to

avoid entertaining false claims by teachers, minimise abuse or fraud of TLF funds (e.g. overpayment and multiple payments – at times denying genuine and eligible teachers) and at all times maintaining up-to-date data on every teacher. In that way, the data that is held has integrity and adds value to the quality of decisions that are made based on such data.

Bad decisions, such as underpaying teachers for their leave entitlements, or paying to wrong leave destinations (e.g. Mendi instead of Kerema), or ignoring the number of legal dependants, eventually amount to defrauding the State of huge amounts of money. Multiple TLF payments or overpayment are examples of bad decisions that contribute to fraudulent practices in administering the TLF.

Effective administration of the TLF

The database will also enable the provincial administrations to avoid the hassles the teachers experience as far as the TLF is concerned. The much talked about TLF towards the end of the school year will no longer be the same. Teachers will be paid their due entitlements on time and with minimum hassles. The management will know exactly how much it will cost for the TLF, so that it plans and budgets accordingly, therefore, minimising fraud and avoiding false claims by teachers.

A responsible administration is an administration that maintains an accurate database of all its teachers. This includes information on teachers' leave destinations, leave dates and duration, and leave entitlements which ensure that teachers are paid in good time, without much anxiety and stress inflicted on them.

Conclusion

The TLF issue seems to be an annual problem. The provinces have not worked out a successful method to create and manage teachers information in an electronic database. The annual problems identified in the administration of the TLF in the provinces are recurring. Provincial administrations and their Divisions of Education have yet to create a system that will solve the TLF problem.

Failing to take a proactive approach by the management to create an electronic database is a recipe for the worsening administration of the TLF in PNG. If this recurs, the management will have demonstrated its incompetence to manage the TLF, and teachers will be put through immense stress yet again. Over K22 million, which has been appropriated to the provinces for teachers leave fares in the 2011 school year, stands to be abused. Furthermore, teachers will be given a raw deal, if the critical areas that have been identified are not effectively addressed.

The manner in which the Division of Education in each province collects and manages teachers' personal and professional information for the TLF needs a major overhaul. The management of resources and funds is a critical element in public administration. The management of the TLF funds is an issue which attracts much criticism annually and must be rectified by adopting an efficient electronic database or records management system.

About the Author

Dr. Musawe Sinebare is Deputy Director–Research at the National Research Institute.

Contributions to Spotlight should be addressed to the Director, NRI:

Fax: (675)326 0213

Email: nri@nri.org.pg

Post: P.O. Box 5854, Boroko. NCD 111. Papua New Guinea

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