Background Note for E-Discussion on Recognition of Prior Learning

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Today’s globalized and fast-changing world is marked by an increasing diversity and flexibility in where people work (e.g. working from home versus working in an office); how people work (e.g. labour- versus technology-intensive jobs); the regularization of work (e.g. working in the formal versus the informal economy); and mobility for work (e.g. moving for work within organizations, and within countries and between countries). Because of these developments, workers have been able to obtain skills and knowledge through a wide range of sources and means, both within countries and across developed, developing and emerging economies. Capturing the competencies that individuals acquire over the course of their lives, regardless of where or how they were acquired, is important in ensuring that workers have evidence of all skills obtained. Proof of acquired skills also eases the transition between different jobs and can remove barriers to wage growth.

In developing countries with high school dropout rates, many workers acquire workplace skills via informal means. As a consequence they face significant challenges in gaining decent employment and furthering their education if systems are not in place through which knowledge, skills and competence acquired through non-formal and informal means are recognized. Against this backdrop, ensuring that workers have access to systems that enable them to “document” the worth of their skills for use in the labour market becomes increasingly important. With half of the global labour force working and producing in the informal economy (amidst growing informality in industrialized countries), and with the increasing internationalization of labour markets, the benefits of recognizing prior learning are vast. These include the transfer and recognition of the skills of migrants in new contexts, an easier capacity for workers to move from the informal economy to the formal economy, and the ability for older workers to better compete in the labour market through access to formal qualifications.

Yet, having systems through which a person’s knowledge, skills and experience are formally recognized not only benefits persons already in the labour market but also the more than 200 million persons worldwide who are unemployed. With the reality that most of an individual’s learning takes place through non-formal and informal means (work, home, elsewhere), individuals may not always have proof of the competences that they possess. Consequently, this lack of evidence could potentially pose a challenge to school leavers, retrenched workers and others seeking entry or re-entry into

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1 ILO: Recognition of prior learning: Key success factors and the building blocks of an effective system, 2015, p. 1
4 ILO: Recognition of prior learning: Key success factors and the building blocks of an effective system, 2015, p. 4
5 ILO: Recognition of prior learning: Key success factors and the building blocks of an effective system, Geneva, 2015, p. 1
the labour market. With access to and use of systems to recognize prior learning, prospective workers receive certified evidence of their skill sets that make them more employable, and increase their chances of finding decent employment and earning a decent wage. This increased prospect for inclusion in the labour market is a win-win situation for all as employers are likewise able to access proof of skilled personnel and better match them with suitable jobs, while also increasing productivity. And governments are further able to have better assurances of increased competitiveness and economic growth, as well as social inclusion and equity.⁶

**The ILO and systems of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)**

With an increasing recognition of the learning acquired through formal, non-formal and informal means, many countries have, with the assistance of the International Labour Organization (ILO) and other institutions, sought to implement established Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) systems. The ILO’s support is based on the belief that Member States should “establish a framework for the recognition and certification of skills, including prior learning and previous experience, irrespective of the countries where they were acquired and whether formally or informally.”⁷ Yet setting up these systems requires that they be created and implemented in line with country and sector-specific needs. Key stakeholders such as employers’ representatives, career counselors, employment services, workers’ organizations, education and training institutions, and skills recognition providers could be involved in this process.

Some examples include Tanzania, where RPL is used to identify skills gaps and the training needs of workers, and South Africa where RPL is widely used as a means of facilitating admission into educational institutions. For those in South Africa’s grain silo industry, where more than 1,000 workers used RPL, positive results included improvements in worker confidence, increased productivity and competitiveness, adherence to food hygiene and safety standards, and facilitated entrance into higher education programmes for those who were successful.⁸ Another example is Bangladesh where RPL is used in the formal recognition of skills and knowledge. Under the European Union-funded TVET Reform Project, the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) initiative was implemented by the Government of Bangladesh with the support of the ILO. Through this Initiative many applicants who had gained skills via non-formal pathways were given the opportunity to demonstrate their skills via practical ‘hands-on’ skills testing. Means of assessment of knowledge and skills included work simulation and/or verbal questions, and the submission of photographs or videos of work, skills log books, and letters from employers.⁹ As at February 2015, 890 candidates had appeared for RPL and 688 (77.3 per cent) had received accreditation of which 162 (23.54 per cent) were female.¹⁰

⁸ ILO: Recognition of prior learning: Key success factors and the building blocks of an effective system, Geneva, 2015, p. 4
⁹ ILO, European Union: Fact Sheet: Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) in Bangladesh, 2013, p. 2
The Way Forward
As countries extend and develop their knowledge and use of RPL systems, continuous efforts should be made to ensure that there is strict adherence to quality assurance standards, and that integrity and credibility are integrated into evidence gathering and assessment processes. Notably, assessment tools should be valid, reliable and consistent, transparent, equitable and flexible, manageable and achievable, and fair. Such targeted actions will stimulate greater confidence in users and beneficiaries (such as employers and educational institutions) regarding the quality of knowledge, skills, and competences that are being certified. Building on these foundational principles should be broad-based efforts to encourage greater ‘buy in’ from the public, such as awareness raising in RPL, building the capacity of RPL professionals, and arranging sustainable cost-sharing for RPL to ensure the affordability of services to members of the public.

E-Discussion questions:

1. How has your country used RPL systems and what results and lessons have emerged from this use?
2. What challenges has your country experienced in the implementation of RPL systems?
3. Recognition systems can be used to promote more inclusive and sustainable economic growth that benefits everyone. In your view, what potential benefits do RPL systems offer migrant workers/refugees?
4. How can we build trust around the assessments offered via RPL?
5. What cost-sharing mechanisms should be used to ensure the affordability of RPL systems for potential users and to encourage a recognition and support of RPL systems by third parties?
6. What role do/should education and training providers play in the recognition of prior learning?

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Visit: www.skillsforemployment.org
E-mail: knowledge@skillsforemployment.org

11 ILO: Recognition of prior learning: Key success factors and the building blocks of an effective system, Geneva, 2015, p. 9