

# Credit Where Credit's Due



Experiences with  
the Recognition  
of Prior Learning  
and insights for  
India



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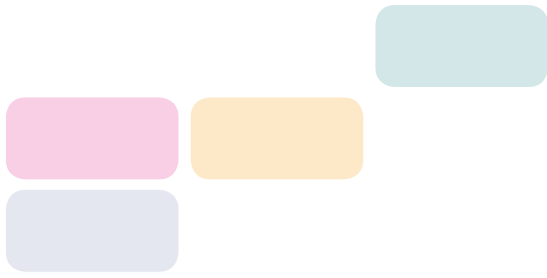
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LabourNet is a social enterprise that creates sustainable benefits for school drop outs and workers in the informal sector. They build end to end solutions focussed on bridging the gap between skill demand and supply by initiating industry relevant and job market necessary vocational training and education for various age groups, including the unorganised sector, and through additional measures to ensure that trainees are able to lead a skill based empowered economic life. These measures include financial and social inclusion, and facilitating work/employment post skill training and up-gradation. To address the challenges of the unorganized sector workforce LabourNet provides industry relevant vocational skills training through unique training models implemented across schools, multi-trade skill training livelihood centres and on-site "earn and learn" platforms.

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## Executive Summary

This report focuses on the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) in the Indian context. Through an examination of evidence concerning the introduction of RPL elsewhere, and through an evaluation of an existing RPL initiative being undertaken by a social enterprise in Bangalore, it seeks to shed light on the potential of RPL to support skills development in India, the challenges around its introduction, and the lessons for policy and practice that can support further development in this area.

RPL has increasingly been the focus of skills development policy in a number of countries in recent years, as a way to offer a more flexible, inclusive and efficient route into skills training or better jobs for people whose skills have not been formally recognised. It has, however, often proved a difficult concept to implement in practice, calling for a strong supportive regulatory environment, clear communication of its benefits to stakeholders, a strongly collaborative approach, flexible delivery, robust quality assurance mechanisms, strong support for learners, and guarantees of reliability, transparency and consistency, among other requirements. International experiences show that stimulating learner demand, managing time and resource constraints, keeping costs under control, ensuring consistency, language issues, and establishing parity of esteem with other forms of assessment have all caused difficulties in implementing RPL.

All of these issues need to be taken into account when introducing RPL in India. However, India is already establishing a stronger regulatory environment, including the national qualifications framework, and it has a unique opportunity to build in concepts of RPL from the very beginning of its framework. There are good reasons to do so: India's large informal sector includes millions of people with unrecognised skills for whom RPL could be a much-needed step back into education and training, from which they may have been excluded to date. As such it potentially has a key role to play in achieving India's skills goals.

While a qualifications framework is a prerequisite of a full, national RPL system, initiatives are already beginning to experiment with the concept. One such initiative, run by the Bangalore-based social enterprise LabourNet, is the focus of this report. Through a series of interviews with LabourNet staff, assessment teams and workers who had undergone the RPL process, we aimed to evaluate the programme's successes in terms of developing and administering RPL, and the views of the initiative's customers - the workers themselves - on the success and value of the programme. Given the early stage of development this initiative is at, the evaluation does not draw conclusions on the post-assessment impact on job roles, access to training or other forms of progression.

LabourNet's RPL programme, which is carried out for informal workers in the construction sector, highlights both what can be achieved with RPL projects on the ground and what some of the challenges are in implementing it. The organisation has developed an innovative approach to assessment design in the absence of national occupational standards that form the basis of RPL elsewhere, and has successfully developed assessments that can be seen as largely rigorous and

accurate. However, challenges exist around the implementation of the assessment process and around developing full stakeholder buy-in to the concept of RPL - particularly in terms of communicating the value of RPL to workers and employers. Resource constraints have also had an impact, in particular by limiting the RPL activity to tests of knowledge rather than including observation of practical skills.

The report concludes with two sections containing recommendations on how the lessons learned and insights gained can be taken forward elsewhere in India. Firstly, we look at the practice lessons from LabourNet's activity and identify key considerations and good practice for the replication and expansion of RPL in India. Finally, we consider the insights for policy makers and make recommendations for how they might begin to lay the groundwork for the wider introduction of RPL and how policy can help make it as effective as possible in contributing to skilling India.



## Introduction

The Recognition of Prior Learning is a concept that has been gaining increased interest from policy makers in the area of vocational education and skills in recent years. Two features combine to make it of particular interest in India: it particularly speaks to engaging people in learning who have previously been excluded for one reason or another, and it offers the possibility of capturing the latent skills present in an economy where much of the workforce is informally employed. India aims to skill 500 million people by 2022, a large proportion of whom will necessarily be people who are already working. Of these, many belong to socially, economically or otherwise disadvantaged groups for whom embarking on any form of education or training may be a daunting step. In these circumstances, interest in RPL as a tool for engagement is unsurprising.

However, India, along with other emerging economies, faces significant challenges in introducing RPL - principally the lack of a national qualifications framework. A true system of RPL requires some kind of framework against which to map individuals' skills, with agreed standards and a shared system of recognised credit for learning; without such a framework, it is difficult to articulate skill levels in any meaningful way that can allow employers and training providers to assess an individual's suitability for employment or further training. India is in the process of developing these frameworks, but faces an immediate challenge of upskilling millions of people already working in the informal sector.

The initiative evaluated in this report, which has been instigated by the Bangalore-based social enterprise LabourNet, represents an attempt to introduce the principles of RPL at a local level, before the national frameworks are in place that will allow for the development of national RPL initiatives. LabourNet's management are well aware that the full benefits of RPL can only be achieved in the context of such a framework. However, by developing a scheme with local validity and by introducing informal sector workers to the concept of recognition for their skills, they hope to both deliver concrete benefits for those workers and to further understanding about RPL in India.

This report has been prepared for a number of reasons. Firstly, we wished to support LabourNet's efforts by evaluating the project and making recommendations for improvement and for the organisation's planned



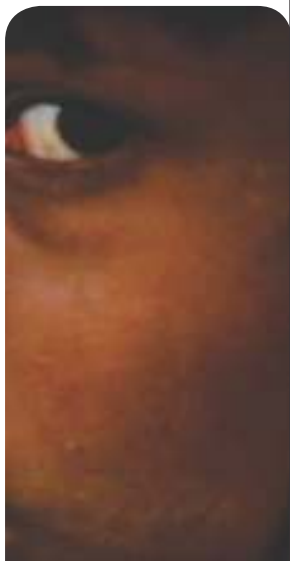
## Introduction

expansion of the initiative. Secondly, we wished to share LabourNet's experience with others in India who may be interested in developing similar schemes in their own local context. Finally, we wished to raise awareness about the concept of RPL, its benefits, and the challenges of implementation, with a view to promoting the incorporation of RPL into the country's emerging policy frameworks.

RPL is not an easy tool to get right; nor is it a 'quick fix' solution to India's skills challenges. However, we believe that if India's policy makers and skills practitioners take on board the lessons from LabourNet's work and from other experiences with RPL around the world, this may help to develop a system of RPL in India that can facilitate improved access to further training and employment for millions and make better use of the skills already present in the country's workforce.



# Background



## 3.1 The Recognition of Prior Learning: International Evidence

RPL is a relatively new policy focus for most countries. The idea that individuals deserve credit for their skills, knowledge and experience even when they have gained them outside of formal learning processes is not new, but it is only since the early 1990s that the concept of RPL has been formally incorporated into public education policy on a large scale, most notably in Australia and the UK. This section examines what these international experiences with RPL can tell us about the concept in theory and in practice, before looking at what these insights might mean in the Indian context.

There is no universally agreed definition of the term 'RPL', but it is an essentially simple concept: that learning takes place in a wide variety of contexts other than through formal settings; that such learning is often not formally recognised in terms of qualifications or learning credit; and that there should therefore be mechanisms to assess and recognise it. Such recognition may allow the individual being assessed to progress to further training, or to compete for jobs or for a promotion; or it may be done for its own sake as a badge of achievement. Beyond this general understanding, however, there is little consensus on the practical details of RPL even in countries where it is well established<sup>1</sup>, and it has taken divergent forms in different national and subnational contexts<sup>2</sup>. In India's case, therefore, there is ample opportunity to develop a model of RPL in the coming years that is suited to the country's specific context and priorities.

A number of factors lie behind the recent increase in focus on RPL internationally :

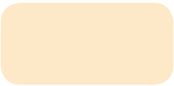
- **Social justice and equity concerns.** RPL is seen as a way to bring excluded or disenfranchised groups back into learning and to improve their job prospects, motivation and self-esteem. It can be seen as a way to boost learner confidence by helping them to recognise their own existing levels of competency<sup>3</sup>, and to promote their interest in education and training by avoiding the need to spend time on unnecessary modules<sup>4</sup>. This factor has been particularly important in countries with a recent history of repression and inequality, such as South Africa.

<sup>1</sup> Smith, H. (2008). *RPL in Australian Vocational Education and Training: What do we know about it?* Presentation to the 11th Australian VET research association conference, Adelaide.

<sup>2</sup> Steenekamp, S. and M. Singh (2012). *Recognition and validation of informal and non-formal learning, and NQFs: Critical levers for lifelong learning and sustainable skills development. Comparative analysis of six African countries.* Paper for the ADEA Triennale on Education and Training in Africa, Ouagadougou, February 2012.

<sup>3</sup> Romaniuk, K. and F. Snart (2000). *Enhancing employability: the role of prior learning assessment and portfolios.* Career Development International, MCB University Press 5:6 318-322

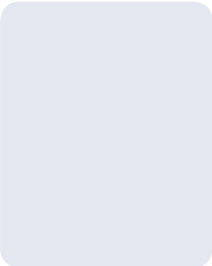
<sup>4</sup> Deller, K. (2006). Presentation made at the SAQA think tank on the recognition of prior learning in South Africa, Pretoria, 16 October 2006

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- **A need to make use of existing resources.** By shedding light on the current skill sets present in the workforce, RPL can improve use of these resources by enabling them to serve as the basis of further training and development; it can also save time and money by avoiding duplication of learning.
  - **The promotion of a positive learning culture.** By offering formal recognition and reward for non-traditional learning, RPL can help encourage a culture in which learning is seen as attainable and desirable for all.
  - **An employer-focused approach.** RPL has been seen as a cost and time-effective way both to reach a better understanding of skill levels in an organisation and to demonstrate investment in staff.
  - **An emphasis on the learner as customer.** RPL is seen as a key tool for delivering greater flexibility and customer choice in training and education systems, and for improving the relevance of education and training to learner needs. It can give trainers a better understanding of learning cohorts' knowledge and skill levels at entry, and enable this to inform tailored delivery.<sup>5 6</sup>

In the Indian context, the first three of the above factors are particularly significant. India's policy makers are particularly concerned to include vulnerable groups (such as scheduled castes and tribes, economically marginalised people, disabled people and women) in training opportunities; it has a large informal workforce whose skills are largely unrecognised; and its education system has tended to focus on a narrow academic path that has excluded many. RPL is thus very attractive for Indian policy makers as a means to address these issues.

#### Context: where should RPL happen?

Existing literature indicates three key environmental factors that are likely to support effective implementation of RPL:

- 
- **A clear, established and well developed regulatory environment.** An established framework of credit, qualifications and/or occupational standards is a key precondition to the successful introduction of RPL.<sup>7</sup> Werquin (2010a) identifies examples of RPL outside of established Qualification Frameworks, but these tend to be limited to recognition between formal education institutions;<sup>8</sup> RPL outside the context of strong regulatory frameworks also tend to suffer from a lack of transparency and validity that may deter learners, employers and education institutions.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Wagner, D.A., A. Babson and K.N. Murphy (2011). *How much is learning measurement worth? Assessment costs in low-income countries*. Current Issues in Comparative Education, Teachers College, Columbia University, vol. 14, 3-23

<sup>6</sup> Sims, C. (2010). *Recognition of Prior Learning*. City & Guilds Centre for Skills Development briefing note series #27.

<sup>7</sup> Sims, C. (2010). *Ibid*.

<sup>8</sup> Werquin, P. (2010a). *Recognition of non-formal and informal learning: country practices*. OECD, Paris

<sup>9</sup> Björnavåld, J. (2000). *Making Learning Visible: Identification, Assessment and Recognition of Non-formal learning in Europe*. Vocational training European Journal no. 22, Cedefop, Thessaloniki



- **Clear need and the potential for high demand.** RPL is of particular relevance in sectors and countries where large proportions of workers do not have formal qualifications<sup>10</sup>, and in sectors where formal recognition of skills is deemed to be of high value to employers and employees.<sup>11</sup> Evidence indicates that only a small proportion of RPL systems can be described as coming about as a result of demand from learners or employers. Most have tended to be supply-driven, developed and established at regional or sectoral level, thanks to the availability of public funds.<sup>12</sup>

It may be inferred that this supply side impetus is required to raise awareness of RPL, and to stimulate demand amongst workers and employers. This is most likely to prove successful where there is existing recognition within a sector of the need for:

- o Qualifications;
  - o A stronger understanding of existing skills levels;
  - o A platform for raising skills levels.
- **High accessibility of learners and other stakeholders.** The majority of RPL models deliver assessments in workplace environments or in educational institutions. There are clear advantages to focussing activities in these locations. They may allow for observation of a learner performing skilled tasks within a real or simulated workplace setting and RPL can be made more visible to employers and education institutions (the recognisers of prior learning). Basing activities in the workplace can also minimise disruption to employers and employees, and can serve to raise awareness of RPL amongst other workers. There may also be value in setting aspects of RPL programmes in other 'everyday' environments, in order to raise awareness and widen access. These can include 'sports stadiums, shopping centres, cultural centres and the premises of immigrant worker associations'.<sup>13</sup>

#### What makes for successful RPL?

Several core principles of effective RPL programmes are identified in the literature, in particular in national guidance documents on the adoption of RPL within existing education and qualifications frameworks. Given this focus on RPL as a process introduced through established frameworks, these core principles generally translate into activities that both rely on and reinforce formal mechanisms for regulation and governance.

<sup>10</sup> Bowman, K, B. Clayton, A. Bateman, B. Knight, P. Thomson, J. Hargreaves, K. Blom and M. Enders, (2003). *Recognition of prior learning in the vocational education and training sector*. NCVER, Adelaide.

<sup>11</sup> UNESCO (2012) *UNESCO Guidelines for the Recognition, Validation and Accreditation of the Outcomes of Non-formal and Informal Learning* UNESCO, Hamburg.

<sup>12</sup> Björnaváld, J. (2000). *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Werquin, P. (2010b). *Recognising non-formal and informal learning: outcomes, policies and practicalities*. OECD, Paris, p. 75.

Principles of RPL commonly referred to in the literature include:

- **Learner centred approach.** RPL should promote positive aspects of learners' experience, rather than deficiencies. It should promote learner reflection and active participation in assessment.<sup>14</sup>
- **Collaboration.** RPL should be promoted between learning providers and employers.
- **Accessibility.** RPL should address barriers to engagement, such as low levels of literacy or prior engagement in education, and include provision of initial and continuing advice and guidance to learners.<sup>15</sup>
- **Flexibility.** RPL programmes should be delivered in a variety of different settings, and at different schedules.
- **Reliability, transparency and consistency.** This is essential to ensure users (employers, training providers and workers) can be confident of the validity of RPL outcomes.
- **Clarity of roles for provider and learner.** This should be ensured through appropriate training for assessors and providers.
- **Quality.** RPL services should be underpinned by quality assurance mechanisms.
- **Emphasis on competency and knowledge.** Assessors and learners should focus on identifying what has been learnt through an experience, rather than just identifying an experience.
- **Parity of esteem.** Formal learning should not be given greater significance than learning gained through other contexts. This should follow from a focus on knowledge and competency rather than the learning route followed.<sup>16</sup>



Issues around the implementation of RPL

### Recruitment and early learner guidance

The process of providing information, advice and guidance is often targeted at the recruitment phase in an RPL programme - raising awareness of the RPL offer, and supporting learners to engage in RPL. Werquin (2010b) summarises the issues associated with the initial process of engaging with potential learners:

*'For those who know that recognition is possible, personal support... may enable them to shorten the period between their first exploratory contacts, including perhaps registration itself, and completion of the recognition procedure with (for example) a certified qualification. It would also make others aware that recognition is possible.'*

<sup>14</sup> Romaniuk, K. and F. Snart (2000). *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Werquin, P. (2010b). *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Romaniuk, K. and F. Snart (2000). *Ibid.*

*In concrete terms, this may mean drafting accessible, clear and self explanatory information. It may also involve recruiting employees who are specialists in the recognition of non-formal and informal learning outcomes. Above all, it will mean training staff who engage with people in general, whether in public employment agencies, municipalities or at any of the levels to which the public and end users, including enterprises, may turn. Information may be more effective if it reaches into people's lives in everyday locations - for example, sports stadiums, shopping centres, cultural centres and the premises of immigrant worker associations. As already noted, this is the case in both Australia and Portugal. A disadvantage is that effective information and guidance has a cost.'*<sup>17</sup>

This initial guidance serves the purpose of engaging potential RPL users. It also provides a foundation for continued information and guidance throughout the assessment process and into exit routes from RPL into further learning or employment. Successful RPL requires active learner participation in reflective processes, identifying what competencies have been developed and how, and presenting evidence of that learning - tasks that are often completely new to learners.<sup>18</sup>

### Gathering and presenting evidence of learning

Given the learner-centred nature of RPL, mechanisms for gathering and presenting evidence of learning tend to place an onus on the learner.<sup>19</sup> Methods for providing evidence can include:

- Learner portfolios and other forms of documentation. This is a popular method for gathering and reflecting on learning that comes with two clear challenges. Firstly, where learners have low levels of literacy they may struggle to engage fully with text based portfolios, and other resources such as audio-visual materials may be required. Secondly, portfolios require learners and assessors to work together to translate experiences into learning, which can prove difficult for both parties.<sup>20</sup> Supplementing portfolios with additional mechanisms can aid the process of identifying the knowledge and/or competencies gained from an experience.
- Transcripts, certificates and licences.
- Learner demonstration through standardised tests.
- Oral interviews.
- Review of worker products.

<sup>17</sup> Werquin, P. (2010b). *Ibid*, pp 73-74.

<sup>18</sup> Romaniuk, K. and F. Snart (2000). *Ibid*.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>20</sup> Whittacker, U. (1989). *Assessing learning, standards, principles and procedures*. Council for Adult and Experiential Learning, Philadelphia; and Björnaväld, J. (2000). *Ibid*.



- Observation of learners performing work tasks.

This is an illustration of the mechanisms used, and not an exhaustive list.

### Assessing evidence

National guidance documents on RPL frequently refer to the following general rules of assessment:

- Reliability
- Validity
- Authenticity
- Sufficiency
- Concurrency.

Guidance documents also place an emphasis on ensuring assessments are processed quickly, and on providing RPL practitioners with support to maintain standards and continuing professional development.<sup>21</sup>



### Communicating with the learner and identifying areas for further learning

Whittaker (2005) lists the following potential outcomes and activities to be explored through dialogue between learner and RPL provider:

- Recognition of the value of competencies gained through prior informal learning - by the learner and others
- Notional levelling of this learning within the context of a Qualification Framework to help identify possible progression routes
- Planning of individual learning pathways and personal/career development plans
- Preparation of RPL claim for credit in order to gain entry to, or credit within, a formal programme of study.<sup>22</sup>

In order to deliver on transparency and accountability RPL programmes may also include an appeals process for learners. In informal settings additional care must be taken to ensure communication with learners meets their individual language and literacy profiles.

### Recognition of learning and engagement between RPL providers and employers and educational institutions

Recognition is usually provided by, or on behalf of, employers and formal education

<sup>21</sup> Joosten-Ten Brinke, D., D.M.A. Sluijsmans, S. Brand-Gruwel, W.M.G. Jochems, 'The quality of procedures to assess and credit prior learning: Implications for design', *Educational Research Review*, Volume 3, Issue 1, 2008, Pages 51-65

<sup>22</sup> Whittaker, R. (2005) *Report on Consultation on SCQF RPL Guidelines*, SCQF.

institutions. Educational institutions may provide recognition by allowing access to formal education programmes, by applying credit towards education programmes, or by providing full qualifications. Employers typically provide recognition through the appointment of learners to relevant positions.<sup>23</sup> In informal labour markets, however, recognition may take different forms. In such contexts, recognition from formal employment and education bodies may be less immediately relevant to learners, compared to recognition from customers (such as construction sub-contractors, local households and informal businesses).<sup>24</sup>

### Quality assurance across RPL procedures

For RPL programmes operating in well established regulatory environments, provision is usually integrated within existing quality assurance systems.<sup>25</sup> Whether such systems are already well established or not, mechanisms for quality assurance typically include:

- Establishing clear guidance lines and policies for programme staff
- Setting regular monitoring, review and evaluation checkpoints
- Making programme policies, outcomes and evaluations publicly accessible
- Providing regular staff training and assessment against guidance lines and policies.

### RPL in informal settings

RPL provides formal recognition of informal learning. As such it is often discussed in the literature as a mode of transport from informal to formal conditions.<sup>26</sup> Documented studies on recognition of learning in the informal sector are few and far between, but Steenekamp & Singh's (2012) study of RPL in six African countries provides some insight into the delivery of assessments in informal settings. This study focuses on linking these activities to National Qualification Frameworks, rather than on the practical challenges of delivering RPL in informal contexts. That said, the study does highlight the importance of ensuring the principles of RPL systems and the 'methodologies for assessment and procedures for validation' are made explicit and highly visible to all stakeholders in informal settings.<sup>27</sup> The same study also highlights ILO guidance on developing frameworks for the recognition and certification of skills:

*Measures should be adopted in consultation with the social partners and using a national qualification framework, to promote the development,*

<sup>23</sup> Romaniuk, K. and F. Snart (2000). *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> African Union (2007). *Strategy to Revitalize Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) in Africa*. Addis Ababa: African Union.

<sup>25</sup> Whittaker, R. J. Brown, K.H. Benske and M. Hawthorne (2011). *Streamlining RPL Processes: facilitating the award of credit for prior informal learning*. Centre for Research in Lifelong Learning, Glasgow Caledonian University

<sup>26</sup> Steenekamp, S. and M. Singh (2012). *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.



*implementation and financing of a transparent mechanism for the assessment, certification and recognition of skills including prior learning and previous experience, irrespective of the countries where they were acquired and whether acquired formally or informally.*<sup>28</sup>

### Implications: common challenges in introducing RPL programmes

The literature highlights several interrelated challenges faced when introducing RPL programmes. This section provides some additional detail on some of the key issues.

#### Learner demand and engagement

In environments where there is a demand for education and training, learners eligible for RPL have been found frequently to favour education and training courses even where these cover areas of existing proficiency. While this may not be deemed resource efficient, covering existing skills and knowledge in such a way can help familiarise learners with formal education and training, confirm skills levels, and address gaps and bad habits that RPL assessments might not be able to capture.<sup>29</sup>

Environments where there is poor demand for education and training present further challenges. RPL tends to be targeted at learners who have had very little interaction with formal education and training. Such learners present a challenge to RPL practitioners - they may not 'see the point' of RPL, and may find it difficult to engage in a rigorous assessment, whether formal or informal.<sup>30</sup>

#### Time and resource constraints

RPL programmes face a balancing act of ensuring rigour in assessments on the one hand, and minimising disruption for workers and employers on the other. This can be addressed to some extent by delivering assessments and IAG support on site and in everyday settings for learners. However any thorough RPL process will require some time commitment from learners, and learners (and employers) must therefore buy into RPL for an effective service to be provided.

#### Sustainability

Learners engaging in RPL tend to have lower incomes, in addition to lower levels of prior engagement in formal education and training. In developed countries learners are often expected to bear some cost for RPL services. In developing country contexts, learners are unlikely to be able to cover the costs of RPL. Successful, sustainable delivery of RPL in developing country contexts must therefore feature a combination of the following:



<sup>28</sup> International Labour Organisation (2004). *Lifelong Learning in Asia and the Pacific: Background Report for the Tripartite Regional Meeting, Bangkok, 8-10 December 2003*. Geneva:International Labour Organization (ILO), p.6.

<sup>29</sup> Sims, C. (2010). *Recognition of Prior Learning*. City & Guilds Centre for Skills Development briefing note series #27.

<sup>30</sup> Werquin, P. (2010b). *Ibid*.

- Lower cost models for RPL assessments
- Business and/or state sourced funding
- Campaigns to raise awareness of the RPL offer, targeted at employers and job seekers.



### Ensuring consistency in assessments

The literature identifies two potentially conflicting drivers within RPL:

- Consistent application of the core principles of assessment, and consistent referencing against wider standards of skills, knowledge and competency
- Adaptation of RPL delivery in line with learner/worker contexts, and local labour market demands.

Delivering on both of these requires a learner assessment process that guards against subjective judgement, as well as mechanisms for assessor feedback on assessment structure, processes and focus areas.

### Language

Language and literacy levels can represent a barrier to measuring other skills, in particular where assessments rely on written materials, and in locations with multiple dialects.


### Esteem

RPL assessments and qualifications are often held in lower regard than equivalent assessments based on formal learning. Attempts to remedy this have focussed on public campaigns and on targeted engagement with employers and educational institutions. Concerns over esteem also highlight the importance of ensuring that assessments are aligned with occupational standards and that areas for learner development are addressed clearly.

## 3.2 The Indian context and the rationale for this study

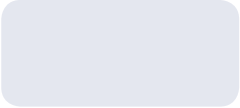
Many of the issues and challenges raised in this brief summary of existing evidence about the recognition of prior learning will be familiar to those involved in skills development in India. The lack of a qualifications framework or well-established regulatory environment; the low proportion of potential beneficiaries who can be accessed through formal workplaces; and the low demand for vocational education (let alone RPL) are all factors that make the introduction of RPL as usually understood a difficult undertaking in this country.

In addition to this, a number of areas that have proven to be problematic as other countries introduced systems of RPL are likely to be significant barriers for India also. In particular, India's linguistic diversity will create practical challenges; issues of esteem are likely to be a factor; cost and resource constraints are considerable;



existing quality assurance mechanisms are still underdeveloped, as are provisions for learner guidance; employer engagement with training initiatives remains limited; and continued low levels of basic skills and literacy are also likely to have an impact. For all these reasons, it would be a mistake to think either that a widespread, fully-developed system of RPL can be introduced quickly and easily into India, or that RPL is a simple solution to India's skills development challenges.

However, there are good reasons why this is a good time for India to focus on RPL as a part of its approach to skills development. The country is now establishing those frameworks and regulations that are necessary for RPL systems to develop. The national qualifications framework is currently in the process of taking shape; India has a unique opportunity to build in concepts of RPL from the very beginning of its framework. To do so, however, awareness of the concept - and of its limitations and difficulties - must be far greater established.



India's large informal sector - which accounts for a large part of the millions the country aims to train by 2022 - includes many people who have acquired skills through their work but who have had little or no engagement with formal education. If those people can be accessed and given the opportunity to have their skills recognised, then this could potentially act as motivation for them to engage in further training. For people who may never have considered themselves as candidates for a certificate of achievement, the very act of recognition has the potential to change deep-seated attitudes and contribute to a movement towards a positive learning culture in India.

Now, then, is a good time for India to be exploring RPL and to be developing those models for introducing it that will best suit the country's unique characteristics. RPL in India is unlikely to look like it has elsewhere. Innovative approaches will need to be found, for instance, in order to access the 93% of the workforce that is in the informal economy<sup>31</sup> - much more emphasis will need to be placed on community-based routes than on employer-based routes. But if India can begin experimenting with RPL now, as it is just beginning to develop its qualifications framework, then it will be well placed to learn for itself what will and will not work in the Indian context.

This experimentation is already beginning, and is the reason why this report has been written. We focus on the initiative taken by a single organisation, LabourNet, in a single city, but in a country this large this is unlikely to be the only one. The initiative described in this report is still young; it is still experimental; and it is, as its managers acknowledge, constrained by the lack of a wider regulatory framework in which to place its RPL. But the experiences of LabourNet represent a bank of information about what steps can be taken now towards the introduction of RPL; what practical challenges exist; and what policy makers should keep in mind if they wish to develop the concept as a key plank of Indian skills development.

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<sup>31</sup> Chen, M.A. (2011). *Urban Employment in India: trends and trajectories*. Presentation to the Inclusive Cities in India Workshop, New Delhi, 7-8 June 2011



### 3.3 The LabourNet RPL programme

#### About LabourNet

LabourNet is an initiative of MAYA (Movement for Alternatives and Youth Awareness), a non-governmental organization based in Bangalore. It began largely as an effort to provide a one-stop platform for unorganised sector workers to obtain services which are currently available and accessible by formal sector workers. LabourNet now provides financial inclusion, social protection and welfare services to workers, builds the capacities of workers and markets their services to customers. The organisation's vision is to transform the lives of informal sector workers, who make up 93% of India's workforce, from poverty, deprivation, and lack of social and economic mobility, to become a strong, professionally competent, empowered asset to the nation.

LabourNet identifies the following as its mission:

- LabourNet seeks to provide easy and institutionalised access to jobs, and enhance the incomes of over one million workers in India in the next 5 years.
- LabourNet is a social enterprise that creates sustainable benefits for workers in the informal sector by offering them a platform to access services. LabourNet focuses on improving workers lives through seven strategies:
  1. Enabling workers to build an identity
  2. Improving productivity through a process of continuous assessment and skill training
  3. Facilitating work linkages
  4. Providing workers with information to live in the city
  5. Facilitating access to accident insurance as a first step to social security
  6. Linking workers to state sponsored social protection schemes (i.e. Construction workers welfare Board, Unorganised sector workers welfare board etc.)
  7. Facilitating financial inclusion by opening bank accounts and encouraging savings by encouraging workers to participate in bank linked savings programmes.

More information about LabourNet is available at [www.labournet.in](http://www.labournet.in)

#### Why was the RPL programme started?

RPL was started so that LabourNet could take an end-to-end approach in its efforts to improve livelihoods of informal sector workers in general and workers from the construction industry in particular. A large proportion of the workforce in the construction industry is made up of migratory labour. These workers generally

do not possess documents to prove their identity, and this can lead to a greater risk of harassment and exploitation (including economic exploitation). LabourNet works to register these workers and provide them with identity cards. As part of the registration process, LabourNet also helps them open bank accounts and obtain accident insurance cover.

Besides worker registration, LabourNet is also involved in two other activities that make skills evaluation necessary. Firstly, it runs extensive worker training courses for corporate clients such as Gammon India, L&T, Godrej, Bangalore Metropolitan Rail Corporation (BMRC) and has trained more than 40,000 workers in various trades, related mostly to the construction industry, for these clients. LabourNet's training activity requires it to make decisions on what training to provide to whom.

Secondly, LabourNet is involved in providing skilled and semi-skilled labour to both industry and individuals (persons needing the services of a mason or a carpenter, for example, can obtain one through LabourNet's call centre service). Supplying skilled and semi-skilled labour to companies and individuals created a need for wage benchmarking.

To address these two needs, LabourNet decided to put in place a skills assessment scheme so that it could take a more effective and ultimately more profitable role as a supplier of labour, and go beyond helping workers with documentation to providing them access to employment and wage enhancement opportunities:

*"LabourNet believes that to enable livelihood, training is not the only thing...we believe in taking it an end to end approach. So we register workers, we give them an ID card, we give them a local address, we give them an accident insurance policy. Then we look at their recognition of prior learning to see where they stack up. Based on where your RPL is, logically speaking we should put you in the right training programme, once you are trained and skilled and come out of the training you should have a wage increase, based on your skill set, once that is proven in the industry, we will enable job engagement. The underlying thing for this to happen is occupational standards because the training is linked to occupational standards, skills are linked to occupational standards, the jobs are linked to occupational standards. Now where are we today? Just one, two and three. RPL is just being piloted. At the same time we already have a worker training programme. We already train workers. We have already trained about 40,000 to 50,000 workers. RPL is just catching up with our training programme..."*

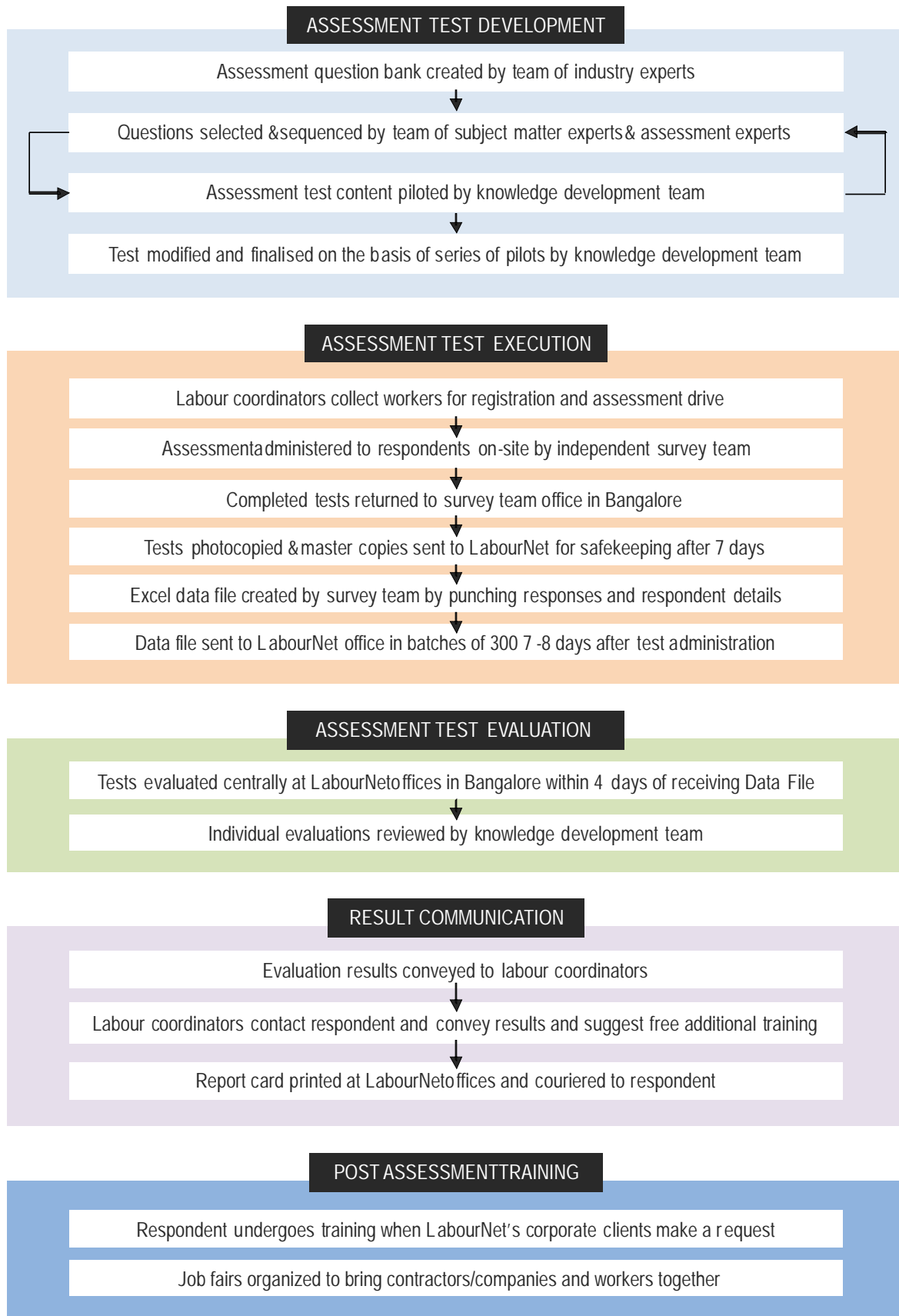
*LabourNet Representative*



A brief overview of the LabourNet Model

Figure 1 below gives a visual overview of the RPL model developed by LabourNet and used by them in delivering RPL for informal workers in the construction sector.

Figure 1: Overview of LabourNet's RPL model



## Assessment design

LabourNet's RPL programme stands out from examples in other countries in that it operates in a space where no recognised occupational standards are available. This is a key challenge for the LabourNet RPL programme, and makes assessment design a particularly tricky task.

In the absence of recognised occupational standards, LabourNet currently relies on a team of industry experts, vocational experts, instructional design experts, content writers, and assessment experts to ensure assessments measure competencies that are relevant to a specific trade. Development of the assessments starts with creation of a question bank by this team, who select questions to be included in the test and arrange them in increasing order of difficulty so that those taking the test may be categorised as unskilled, semi skilled or skilled. These questions are adapted from curricula and assessments developed in consultation with industry clients for LabourNet's training programmes. This is an iterative process and several "pilot-review-modification" cycles are conducted before a workable test is agreed.

## Administration of assessments

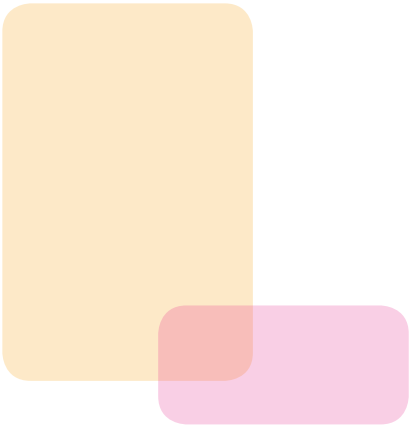
LabourNet arrived at its current model for assessment administration after an initial testing phase of two different approaches.

LabourNet first tried conducting assessments through local labour coordinators (LabourNet's front line workers who contact workers, explain to them the benefits of registering with LabourNet and convince them to get their ID cards, bank accounts and insurance done for a small fee), who were in regular contact with workers and contractors in their area. This was seen as the cheapest, simplest method available for the programme, but its reliance on labour coordinators who were not professionally trained in assessment or interview techniques led to concerns over the quality and reliability of assessments.

LabourNet then tried using labour coordinators to gather workers so that subject matter experts could conduct skills assessments on a one-to-one basis. While this model strengthened the level of industry knowledge applied in assessments, it was again held back by a reliance on agents with a lack of training and experience in assessment practice. This mixture of high industry standards and limited experience in conducting assessments led to a large proportion of workers failing the assessments.

Following these two approaches, LabourNet then opted to outsource assessment delivery to a professional survey agency. Under this (their current) model, labour coordinators work to raise awareness of the RPL programme, and help recruit participants. Assessments are then conducted on site through questionnaires delivered by experienced survey professionals, with completed tests then





evaluated centrally by industry experts. This model has allowed LabourNet to strike a balance between assessment expertise and industry expertise without exceeding resource constraints.

### Post-assessment processes

Completed assessment tests are sent to the survey company's office where they are photocopied and the original sent to LabourNet's offices. The responses and identification data are then punched into an Excel database. LabourNet receives hard copies of original response sheets and soft copies of the data file every 10 days in batches of about 300 workers.

Evaluation of the tests is conducted centrally in LabourNet's offices. The evaluation process takes about 4 days after which a report card is printed and either couriered (via speed post) or handed over to workers. The results are communicated to labour coordinators who may then advise workers accordingly and/or invite those with low scores for further training as and when such courses are available. Report cards are delivered to workers two to three weeks after they have taken the assessment.

At the time this report was prepared (in September-October 2012), LabourNet had registered 3500 workers of whom 3018 had been assessed; 600 of those assessed had yet to receive their report cards.

### The RPL Programme and LabourNet's Overall Strategy

As a first step towards achieving the goal of supporting one million workers to access better jobs and wages, LabourNet has been conducting a massive registration drive based on which it can provide workers with the most basic needs such as an identity card, a bank account and insurance cover for a small fee. It also has strong links with industry and has been partnering with various companies to acquire and train human resources. It has developed its own training curricula and content modules through in-house and contracted teams of industry experts, subject matter experts, instructional design experts, school teachers and both onsite and off site trainers.

LabourNet has focused particularly on training programmes and industry linkages in the construction sector. 11 of the 14 training programmes it offers currently are related to the construction industry (the others being Tailoring, Electrician and Beauty related courses). Within the construction industry LabourNet chose to develop assessment tools for four trades (masonry, carpentry, painting and plumbing), taking into account content availability, subject matter availability, number of workers in the pipeline and location of catchment areas where these workers are found.

LabourNet needs to be able to evaluate the skills of carpenters, masons, plumbers and painters so that it can train the right people for the right roles. It aims to help both employers (by increasing productivity and reducing wastage) and workers (by

creating an opportunity for them to get better jobs and higher wages).



*"...For me RPL success is important because it feeds into everything else because if RPL doesn't give me a skill set level, it is not going to help me define the right (training) content and hence the instructional design to support it. So I need to know what is coming in, see for me RPL is the entry gate, the exit gate you can define but the entry gate is RPL. The entry gate becomes absolutely critical to see what is coming out, what are the questions, what are the problems, what is it that people understand etc ..."*

*LabourNet Representative*

*"...Once you create occupational standards which are accepted by industry then you have an exit gate. Entry gate is RPL. You map the RPL rating to exit gate I will be very clearly able to tell him and the industry that "Mr. X" is an unskilled retail worker who currently can do a job role of someone who can arrange things on a shelf. Hence his wage is what? If he gets skilled on this and this skill set his DKSB (data, knowledge, skills, behavior) will move up so we have an entry gate as RPL and exit gate as DKSB..."*

*LabourNet Representative*

LabourNet recognises that a fully effective RPL programme depends on the existence of a supportive policy and regulatory environment. The organisation believes that only after shared, agreed occupational standards are in place will it be able to successfully provide end to end support to workers and move them up the skills value chain. LabourNet is working closely with both industry and the Government in trying to define and push for acceptance of occupational standards. This is the bedrock on which RPL programmes have to be designed and will form the basis on which decisions regarding how to measure skills, what skills to upgrade so as to provide wage enhancement opportunities following RPL can be taken.

### Key points to note about the LabourNet model

It is important to note three key differences between LabourNet's RPL activity and more typical RPL programmes.

First, this activity was started because LabourNet identified a need for it. There was no expressed demand from workers and little indication of support from the industry for such a skills assessment programme (it should be noted, however, that lack of demand is not the same thing as lack of need, and that RPL programmes elsewhere have also often needed to raise awareness among key stakeholders in order to develop demand for RPL).<sup>32</sup>

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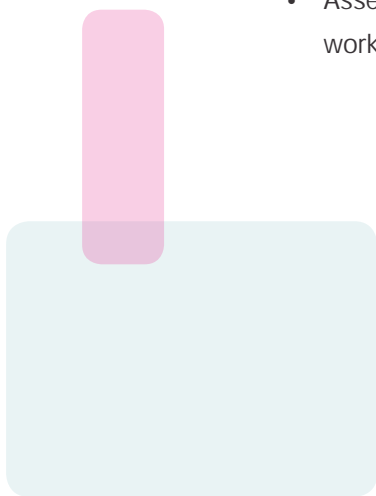
<sup>32</sup> Björnaváld, J. (2000). *Ibid.*

Secondly, LabourNet's RPL offer is currently limited to skills assessment. It does not necessarily lead to training, information advice and guidance, skills improvement and wage enhancement. Training and employment happen as and when LabourNet's corporate clients demand. Post-assessment linkages are not currently in place.

Thirdly, LabourNet has invested its own money and taken a loan on commercial terms to set up and implement the RPL activity. The cost for assessing workers is currently borne entirely by LabourNet. Similarly, follow-up training for skills enhancement is generally available free to workers.

Certain features of this model have an important bearing on the design and implementation of assessment tests:

- An iterative process is needed to develop assessments. This involves a core team working with industry experts, subject matter experts, instructional design experts and content writers who are contracted by LabourNet as and when necessary; these experts may be located in Bangalore or in other cities.
- Assessment drives are conducted together with worker registration drives for the LabourNet programme as a whole, and are delivered with the support of labour coordinators who assemble workers for assessment.
- Assessment is conducted on-site.
- Delivery of tests is outsourced to a professional survey team.
- Evaluation of the tests is conducted centrally at LabourNet's offices.
- Report cards are prepared and mailed/couriered to labour coordinators for distribution to the workers.
- There is no standardised pathway from assessment to training
- Assessments and any follow up training are currently offered free of charge to workers.



## LabourNet's RPL Experts

The LabourNet RPL programme makes use of a range of different knowledge and skill sets provided by a team of industry and subject matter experts as well as instructional design (ID) and assessment design experts. The key criteria for selection of such 'experts' is extensive experience in their given field and prior involvement in content/ assessment design (preferably in vocational training).

### Industry and subject matter experts

Industry experts are responsible for ensuring that the assessments cover critical and relevant knowledge/competence areas of workers in a particular trade. The experts map the different occupations, related skill levels and finalise the knowledge/ concepts and skills that will form part of the assessment. This is then validated with a panel of Subject matter experts with extensive domain and training experience for consistency / peer review purposes.

Nikhil was identified as an industry expert because he had extensive knowledge of different civil construction trades (including hands-on experience as a plumber, carpenter, painter and mason), had performed different functions (including managing workers from different states) at various levels in the construction industry. He knew what a specific tool or process was called in different languages and how to translate technical terms into the language used on construction sites.

### Assessment experts

Alongside industry experts, assessment experts design assessments framework, develop the outline based on ground conditions and monitor the outcomes of assessments; this is done to ensure that the assessments are reliable, valid and accurate. They also detail out the assessment processes and map technology, training and people requirement to carry out assessments.

Kirti qualified as an assessment expert based on nine years' experience in Human Resources with performance management, learning development and assessment centre design experience; he also had three years' experience in training and assessment design in the vocational skill development sector.

### Instructional design experts

LabourNet's instructional design experts use Instructional Design principles to break down knowledge/training concepts and arrive at a methodology that assists adult learning (people with low literacy and numeracy). These experts help develop training curricula and assessment methodology (types of questions, tone, image led formats etc) that can be delivered on site in resource constrained settings and to informal sector workers who have little or no formal education. The RPL team used the expertise of these Instructional Design experts to increase the effectiveness and relevance of these assessments.

# Objectives and Methodology



# Objectives and Methodology

## 4.1 Objectives

The key objectives of the study were to gain an understanding of:

- The credibility of the assessment designed by LabourNet (more specifically, to assess the extent to which the assessment processes align with the principles of validity, reliability, authenticity, sufficiency, concurrency, accessibility, adequacy of feedback and transparency).
- The relevance and consistency of the assessment with the core performance outcomes and skills for the relevant trades (specifically to assess how the core competencies were established, if they reflect the trades' actual practices and to what extent the assessments capture the relevant competences).
- How the workers who have undertaken the RPL offered by LabourNet found the experience; what they understand as its objectives and the extent to which they think it achieves those goals.
- The challenges faced by the LabourNet initiative, the solutions developed to date, and the lessons for other practitioners and policy makers in India.

As the objectives outlined above indicate, the study was designed to help answer three key questions regarding LabourNet's skills assessment processes

1. Is the RPL programme measuring what it is intended to measure?
2. How well is it able to do so?
3. Is it meeting the needs and goals of different stakeholders and beneficiaries?

Using the information collected in this study, this report sets out the lessons that can be learned from LabourNet's RPL initiative, makes recommendations for applying these lessons when developing similar programmes, and makes recommendations for Indian policy makers to promote RPL as part of the solution to India's skills challenges.

## 4.2 Methodology

The study was conducted in two phases:

- Phase 1 - early in the RPL project implementation stage (after LabourNet had completed 1500 assessments);
- Phase 2 - a little later in the RPL project implementation stage (after LabourNet had completed about 3000 assessments)

Both phases involved conducting in-depth interviews with:

- Senior LabourNet management staff who were involved in conceptualizing the RPL project, integrating it with other LabourNet activities, getting buy-in from external stakeholders and guiding overall development of the assessment processes
- LabourNet knowledge development team members who were closely involved in developing the actual assessment tools
- Persons involved in actually implementing the assessment tests
- Workers who had completed the assessment test

In addition to these in-depth interviews, an observation study was also conducted during which observers watched and reported on actual assessment tests being conducted on site. A detailed observation and recording tool was developed to ensure a systematic and consistent approach to observation.

To understand the relevance of the RPL assessments, a group discussion was conducted with labour contractors who employ and work with workers evaluated by LabourNet.

The interviews with LabourNet staff and assessment team were conducted in English by Research Pacific India (RPI) executives. Interviews with workers and the group discussion with labour contractors were conducted in the local language Kannada, or Hindi, by freelance moderators and/or RPI executives.

The one-on-one and group interviews were audio and video tape recorded. The tapes were transcribed and translated into English. The English transcripts were reviewed and content analysed, and form the basis of this report.

The observations were recorded and analysed to further understand how well these processes aligned with the principles of validity, reliability, authenticity, sufficiency, concurrency, accessibility, adequacy of feedback and transparency.

The same research tools were used in both phases; however in Phase 2 the focus was on examining lessons learned and improvements incorporated in the process as the RPL assessments progressed from the initial phases to about a month later when Phase 2 was conducted. The fieldwork for Phase 1 was conducted between 12 June and 28 August 2012, and for Phase 2 between 29 August and 5 September 2012.

The number of interviews proposed to be conducted and the number actually conducted in each phase of the study is detailed in the table given below:



Table 1: Research activities

Respondent Category	Wave 1		Wave 2	
	Proposed	Achieved	Proposed	Achieved
Depth interview with LabourNet management	2	2	1	1
Depth interview with LabourNet knowledge development staff	2	2	1	1
Depth interview with assessment team leader	1	1	--	--
Focus groups with assessment team	1	--	--	--
Depth interviews with workers	12	12	12	12
Group discussion with 6 - 8 workers at different stages of the assessment process	1	0	1	0
Observation of worker assessments	30	30	30	30
Depth interviews with external stakeholders i.e. employers/trade representatives	8	--	--	--
Review of latest available LabourNet data sets, occupational standards, documents, and policies	--	Done	--	--

As shown above, in both phases most of the interviews were conducted as per the proposed plan. However the following changes had to be made in the proposed sample composition/size:

- Instead of a focus group discussion, interviews were conducted with two key members of the assessment team as they were available at LabourNet offices on the appointed day (the others were conducting on site assessments)
- Onsite group discussions with workers were replaced with short one-on-one interviews in response to concerns about the possible adverse impact (contractors reacted suspiciously to requests for a discussion with their workers that would include subject such as wages, job prospects, benefits, training etc.). Gathering workers on site for an hour long discussion also posed practical difficulties as workers had very little free time on site.
- In-depth interviews with employers and other external stakeholders to obtain industry perspectives on the relevance of assessments could not be conducted because very few workers had gone through post assessment training and job upgrades. As such, while employers have had significant input into the design of the assessment tools (which were adopted from training programmes developed in consultation with industry) they were yet to see the outcomes of the RPL programme. This reflects the programme's early stage of development.

## Selection of Worker Samples

Worker interviews and assessment observations were conducted on site at locations selected by LabourNet. Individual workers were also selected for interview by the assessment team.

Workers at different stages of the process or different trades could not be met as proposed. Given the early stage of the RPL project and the time taken to evaluate assessment tests, most interviews had to be conducted with workers who had just been registered / assessed. The evaluation team were only able to meet a very small number of workers who had received their report cards (to assess their reactions), and no workers had yet undergone post assessment training.

Another aspect of sample selection that has a bearing on the findings reported in this document is that most respondents were masons because masonry work was in progress at the sites where workers were interviewed/observed taking the assessments.

## Respondent Profiles

A brief background and profile information on the respondents surveyed is provided below.

*Table 2: Respondent Profiles*

Respondent Category	Respondent Designation/Position	Respondent Profile
LabourNet Management	CEO	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Economist; PhD in Human Development studies</li><li>• Worked with ILO and UN on labour related issues</li><li>• Involved with the RPL programme from inception</li></ul>
LabourNet Management	LabourNet Representative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Associated with LabourNet since January 2012.</li><li>• Main responsibility is to develop new services to meet LabourNet clients' needs involved in implementation of RPL</li></ul>
Knowledge Team	Head - Certification	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Associated with LabourNet for two and a half years.</li><li>• Has nine years of corporate experience in HR</li><li>• Specialises in design of skill development programs</li><li>• Key member of assessment development team</li></ul>
Knowledge Team	Team Leader - Certification	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Has experience in most construction industry trades</li><li>• Worked as a building contractor in different states and with workers of different ethnicity</li><li>• Is multi-lingual and assists in development of localised, trade specific assessment tools</li></ul>
Assessment Team	Assessment Team Members	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Works in LabourNet's partner agency that executes the assessment tests</li><li>• Has been living in Bangalore for 13 years; fluent in Kannada.</li><li>• Associated with LabourNet since March 2012.</li><li>• Coordinates all the on site assessment activity</li></ul>
Workers	--	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Most were male masons in the 21 - 40 year age group</li><li>• They were contacted at Gottigere, Nagarbhavi (Phase 1) and Channapatna (in Phase 2)</li><li>• Most were local residents of Bangalore based; a few were from Bihar and spoke only Hindi</li><li>• Experience in construction from three months to 10+ years</li></ul>

# Key Challenges and Opportunities



# Key Challenges and Opportunities Highlighted in the LabourNet RPL Model

## 5.1 Assessment Design

### Ensuring consistency

In the LabourNet model, the early pilots of assessments revealed some inconsistencies in the way workers were classified. Some workers who scored high on advanced tests ('level two', intended to be more difficult) were scoring low on more basic tests ('level one'). Because of the extensive piloting process LabourNet was able to identify this issue, and, based on team feedback, was also able to test a changed sequence of questions from basic to advanced, to ensure tests yielded consistent results. This highlights both the importance of initial pilots and of continued monitoring and feedback on assessments. It also highlights the wide range of skills levels an informal worker may have. While an individual in this setting may have quite advanced knowledge and expertise (in technical tasks, for example) they may also have significant gaps in others (such as literacy and numeracy).

### Ensuring Validity

The LabourNet programme highlights two key challenges in ensuring the validity of assessments.

1. **Internal validity:** Ensuring assessments accurately and reliably classify workers by skill level. The LabourNet model illustrates the importance of extensive piloting, and of using assessment design and delivery professionals rather than relying solely on industry experts. LabourNet has also placed great emphasis on keeping assessment questions as simple and direct as possible, in order to mitigate any risks that workers provide incorrect answers due to a failure to understand the question.
2. **External validity:** Ensuring assessment results are accepted by stakeholders outside of the RPL programme, such as contractors, companies in the construction industry, and training institutions. This is a particular challenge for RPL activity that operates in areas without recognised occupational standards. LabourNet's approach has been to base assessment criteria and questions on the competencies addressed in the organisation's trade training programme curricula. As with training curricula, assessments are also designed by teams that include 'industry experts'. These knowledge development teams regularly review competencies and the weightings assigned to different modules as part of efforts to match the changing skills requirements on construction sites.

When asked by the independent evaluation team about the validity and relevance of LabourNet's assessments, workers were often positive:

"...Those who know the work will only be able to answer the questions..."  
Worker

"...It was related to our work, levelling and all, the person who is new in the work shall not be able to answer. There was not any question which should have been asked...."

Worker

Some proof of the relevance and validity of LabourNet's assessment tests was provided by the fact that 1800 of the workers assessed by it also qualified for the modular employable skills (MES) test conducted by the Construction Industry Development Council (CIDC) - an independent assessment body representing the industry and set up under the Skill Development Initiative Scheme of the Ministry of Labour and Employment.

This evaluation was, however, unable to gauge the perceptions of industry contractors and companies, arguably the group of stakeholders who hold the casting vote on whether an RPL offer is valid. LabourNet's model does not currently include any formal mechanism for external feedback from industry on the validity of its assessments (for example from contractors that hire or use workers tested by LabourNet). Such mechanisms are valuable for securing buy-in from industry (the key 'Recognisers' in Recognition of Prior Learning) and for ensuring RPL provision meets industry requirements.

The importance of external feedback channels should therefore be recognised when developing and expanding RPL programmes, including LabourNet's.

Questions of relevance and consistency should be seen in the context of an operating environment which as yet does not fully support the development of RPL. In this context, LabourNet has arguably achieved considerable success in terms of developing curricula that match industry needs. Indeed, their experience in developing standards and curricula represents a useful resource for Indian policy makers seeking to move to a system of national occupational standards that can be the starting point for a more fully developed system of RPL.

Balancing the need for rigour and observation of practice with time and resource constraints

Although LabourNet's assessments do not currently feature observation of practical tasks, the organisation staff and representatives did highlight the importance of these for ensuring assessments were accurate and relevant. Such activities, however, require more time and resources than the simple administration of a questionnaire. Observation and evaluation of practical tasks requires a more highly skilled, and therefore more expensive, assessment delivery team, and may



also require access to equipment and raw materials.

For RPL programmes operating in informal and lower income sectors, such as LabourNet's programme, resource constraints are likely to make such activities unfeasible. Cheaper, scalable models, potentially using technology such as video recordings of workers on-site for central evaluation, may be worth exploring. However, regardless of the mode of delivery, more thorough assessments that incorporate observation of practical tasks are likely to require additional funding.

More thorough assessments are also likely to take longer. This represents a significant challenge for programmes that target informal sector workers, who may be unable to take time off from work or family commitments to participate in assessments.

RPL programmes must therefore seek to:

1. Minimise the duration of assessments;
2. Convince workers that assessments are worth their time;
3. Convince employers/contractors that workers should be allowed the time to participate.

The LabourNet RPL programme, much of which is delivered on work sites, opted to keep assessments down to no longer than 25 minutes. Based on experience of the construction industry, the design team believed that longer tests would put workers at risk of having their wages docked, and would also risk disengaging the majority of workers who had never been through a formal test before.

The use of very short assessments that rely only on questionnaires is clearly limited, and unlikely to be compatible with any categorisation of workers beyond the basic structure (unskilled, semi skilled and skilled) used within the LabourNet programme. This approach may, however, be effective as the first stage in a more comprehensive RPL process, providing initial categorisation of workers for further assessment and training.

### Capturing experiential skills

Assessments often require two different types of skills

1. The ability to do something
2. The ability to describe how to do something

In interview or questionnaire based assessments, additional care must be taken to ensure that the two are distinguished; a candidate may be able to execute a technique but may not be able to communicate clearly every step involved in that technique. It is important, therefore, that an individual's ability to do something is not hidden by an inability to fully explain how the process works.



Originally, for example, LabourNet's assessments included questions meant to evaluate ability to estimate quantities and provide quotations. During the pilots, however, it became evident that these were not fit for purpose. While workers were able to answer estimation questions correctly, they were not able to show how they worked out estimates in ways that aligned with mathematical formulae. When asked to estimate the quantity of paint required to paint a room, for example, workers could correctly estimate that they would need one bucket of paint without necessarily being able to work out the area of the room.

In order to assess such competencies without requiring workers to have the ability to describe a competency in detail, multiple choice questions with visual cues were introduced. Use of the image below, for example, is likely to be more effective than simply asking a participant to describe what a 'Butt hinge' looks like.

1. Which of hinges given below is a 'Butt hinge'

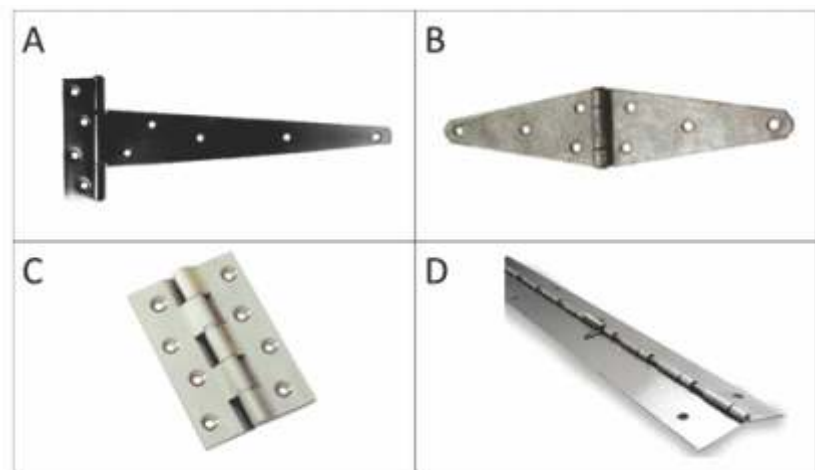


Figure 2 : sample assessment question

### Negotiating language barriers

This evaluation identified two particular language challenges for assessment design in India's informal construction sector.

1. The lack of recognised technical terms for construction equipment, techniques etc in local languages. This makes it difficult to translate questionnaires developed in English to local languages.
2. The diversity of workers on construction sites, many of whom have migrated from other parts of the country and may therefore have different first languages. On the construction sites visited in LabourNet's programme there were as many as five working languages in use. As a result, tests must either be translated into several languages (requiring input from experts with a working knowledge of construction terms in those languages) or a common worksite language must be identified and used for assessments. LabourNet was able to adapt assessments to a language common to all construction workers in the region covered by its RPL programme.

## 5.2 Administration of assessments

### Worker recruitment

The process of recruiting workers for RPL involves raising awareness of the service, what it involves, and its benefits and limitations.

### Raising awareness

In LabourNet's model, the RPL offer relies heavily on other activities carried out under a broader support programme for workers. The RPL assessment team is asked to contact all workers who are already registered for LabourNet's insurance and/or identity cards schemes. Assessment teams are also incorporated into LabourNet's drives to register new workers for these services. Registration teams (which include local labour coordinators) first gather workers into groups for registration or contact them on a one to one basis. Workers are then introduced to LabourNet and told about the benefits of registering for identity cards and accident insurance cover. Once workers are registered they are then approached by the assessment team, told about the RPL offer and its purpose, and invited to participate in assessments.

This cross-promotion of services has helped open up the RPL offer to a very large audience and has been integral to LabourNet's efforts to offer a holistic support package to workers. It does, however, also carry a risk that negative perceptions of one service may taint the image of others. Several workers expressed doubts about the value of the RPL offer, based on delays experienced in registration for ID cards.

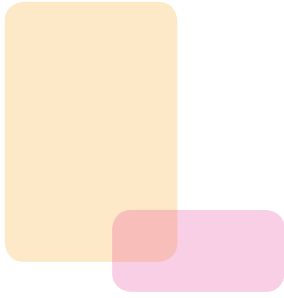
For larger scale projects, and those that seek to provide RPL to different types of workers, it may be necessary to devise other methods of collecting workers for skill evaluation, in a range of different locations. Working with community leaders in workers' residential neighbourhoods, to encourage others to participate in RPL, is one potential alternative. Interviews conducted with workers suggest this approach may work better for the significant numbers who did not live on site and who did not seem to know their local labour coordinator well.

### Explaining the RPL process, its benefits, and limitations

For an RPL programme successfully to recruit participants and achieve positive outcomes for them, clear communication from the first point of engagement should be considered a priority. Before beginning assessments participants should have a clear idea of why they should participate (what RPL can do for an individual, and what it cannot do) and what participation involves.

With LabourNet's RPL programme still at a relatively early stage of development, this step of communicating the benefits has not yet been fully established. Similarly, the programme does not currently include any mechanisms for tracking outcomes for participants, in order to confirm what the actual benefits of participation are.





LabourNet has instead opted to focus first on getting right the internal, technical aspects of assessment design and delivery.

As a result, the workers interviewed in this evaluation said they were not told much about the overall purpose of assessments or the benefits associated with it. Many of those who had been through the assessment process seemed to have a vague impression that assessments were intended to help increase their knowledge.

Somewhat surprisingly, participants did not express any great curiosity about the assessment process or its consequences for their careers or lifestyles. Most seem to have undergone the assessment either because others (peers or their immediate supervisor/employer) had done so and/or had advised them to do so, or because of their existing relationship with LabourNet.

Workers did, however, have a clearer picture of the value of identity cards, associating them with access to bank accounts and insurance cover.

Many workers said they found the tests interesting as questions were related to their work. Many also said that the tests gave them an opportunity to learn new things and reminded them about workplace issues such as safety precautions necessary while working on site.

*"...It was nice. it was related to our work. The questions were related to work, it was about what we do on our job. Those who know the work will only be able to answer the questions..."*

*Worker*

*"We can come to know so many things and we can learn and then we can also improve..."*

*Worker*

However the majority of workers, including those who had received their RPL report cards, also indicated that RPL assessments were unlikely to help them get better jobs, higher wages or more benefits. They believed employment and earnings were dependent on their own ability and did not feel RPL assessment and certification would help them get better jobs or earn more.

*"...With contractors it will not be beneficial as they do not need certificate. It will not increase my salary as they see work and not certificate. May be in company it is of use..."*

*Worker*

The workers interviewed also appeared not to be overly concerned about future employment prospects, and rarely expressed a need for support to open up new job opportunities. Workers tended to retain a strong, long term link with one contractor and move with them from site to site. They also relied on contractors to raise their salaries from time to time in keeping with the general rise in prices of commodities.

Among workers who had got their RPL reports cards a few did say that having such a report card would make it easier for them to find jobs or to negotiate better salaries.

*"...From that card it is very useful to us we can earn where ever we want..."*  
Worker

*"...If I go and meet a big contractor or company, I can show this LabourNet rating and through that secure my work. Even when working with a civil engineer, it should work..."*  
Worker

These comments suggest that there are potential benefits for workers participating in RPL, but that within the LabourNet programme these benefits have not yet been clearly understood, defined and communicated to stakeholders (including workers and contractors).

There are a number of potential drawbacks to not including such communication throughout RPL programmes.

1. Activities may fail to engage with those who stand to benefit most from RPL (by failing to attract participants who require support to access better employment)
2. Participants may not be aware of how best to make use of RPL
3. Participants may be less likely to buy in to the RPL programme due to not being aware of its potential benefits. Conversely, where there is communication on the benefits of RPL that is not based on adequate evidence, workers may develop unrealistic expectations (such as dramatic increases in wages), resulting in disappointment and potential damages to worker-employer relations.

### Ensuring assessments are inclusive

Observations of assessments highlighted the need for programme staff to be sensitive to the needs of different categories of respondents. Women, for example, may prefer not to be assessed in front of male colleagues, while in the evaluation senior workers occasionally expressed concerns over being assessed in front of junior/younger workers.

Out of the 60 assessments that were observed in this evaluation only four participants were women workers. While this reflects to a large extent the male dominated workforce in the local construction sector, the lack of female assessors in the survey team may also have discouraged women workers from participating. It is possible that if assured of 'same gender' assessment, the tests would become more accessible to women, who represent a comparatively marginalised segment of the construction work force. Similarly, use of a multilingual team of assessors may also ensure assessment of a wider cross section of the work force.



## Worker preparation for assessments

RPL often involves introducing learners to new or unfamiliar processes of recording skills and competencies. The ability to reflect on and verbalise one's competencies is a skill in itself, and time and guidance is often needed to develop this skill.

LabourNet's model seeks to combine recruitment and assessment in the same field visits. Registered workers are able to arrange assessments in advance, while those engaged at registration drives are able to sign up on the spot, then come back a short while later for an assessment. This saves on travel time for the assessment team, and allows for a quicker turnaround of assessments.

However it does not give workers much time to prepare for assessments. The assessment process and language must therefore be simple and accessible. A minority of workers said that giving them some time to prepare for the test would have helped improve their performance.

*"They came and took exam directly. Yes if we had got preparation time, then we could have answered well..."*

*Worker*

However the large majority felt that no preparatory time was required, as all the questions pertained to what they did every day.

*"...preparation was not required means when it was about our work only then we didn't feel anything like that..."*

*Worker*

The fact that assessments were relatively brief may also have limited the need for workers to prepare for assessments. A more extensive RPL assessment or series of assessment activities would be likely to place more preparation demands on workers.

## Integrating RPL Assessments with Other Services

RPL can make an important contribution to skills development, which in turn can make an important contribution to improving workers' livelihoods. It should be clear, however, that there are several other important factors that have an impact on livelihoods, and efforts to address these multiple factors in a coherent, joined up way can be expected to have a greater impact than those that address skills, or RPL, in isolation.

LabourNet's model places RPL within a broader programme of worker support services, and as such is very well positioned to deliver a positive impact on worker skills and livelihoods. By integrating RPL with other worker support activities, LabourNet has been able to access a very large number of potential participants. Access to social protection and bank accounts appeared to have a positive impact on workers' self esteem, and better position them for participation in assessment

and training. The evaluation also suggests that workers' positive perceptions of the identity card offer could promote a better level of engagement than would reasonably be expected for an offer from an unfamiliar organisation. Meanwhile the knowledge developed and applied within LabourNet's training offer has informed assessment design, and a basic pathway from assessment to training and enhanced employment opportunities is in place.

LabourNet could, however, do more to clearly define the pathways and overlaps between its RPL, training, insurance and identity card offers. A clearer mapping of these offers could be used to improve the information, advice and guidance provided to workers, and ensure workers who could benefit from further training and support are able to do so. This might also communicate a realistic timeframe to workers about delivery of different services, so that uninformed delay of one service (typically delays in getting registration cards or insurance cover) does not create a negative perception of and engagement with other LabourNet services.

### Leveraging local industry partners

Local labour coordinators were found to be of particular importance to the success of LabourNet's RPL activities. The number of workers who registered and the number who participated in assessments were highly dependent on the local labour coordinators' existing relationships with workers. Where labour coordinators were well known and perceived to be honest, reliable and dependable, workers were far more likely to register and participate.

Much of LabourNet's success in recruiting large numbers of RPL participants can be attributed to the activities of these labour coordinators; however, this reliance on one set of local actors may also limit the scope of the programme. The evaluation highlighted the potential value of engaging with leaders in local residential communities, as well as with work site contacts, in order to broaden access to the programme.



### Timing and Location

Through observation of assessments and interviews with workers the following considerations were identified regarding RPL schedules and locations:

**RPL assessments should take place in areas that are easily accessible to workers**

When workers were asked where they thought assessments should take place, the majority said that the construction site itself was the most suitable venue. This is likely to be particularly preferable for the large proportion of workers (especially those who had migrated to the area) who live on site. Workers who did not live on site were often found to commute from long distances and could only spare some time during their lunch time on the site for participating in assessments on construction sites. For this group, and to open out RPL service beyond those on

construction sites, a potential alternative would be to base activities in workers' residential communities. The workers who were interviewed responded positively to this suggestion.

### Assessments should be scheduled to avoid disrupting work

Most workers interviewed for the LabourNet evaluation said they would be happier to participate in tests on a Sunday (their day off), and that this would allow them to pay more attention to assessments without having to worry about any negative repercussions from contractors for taking time off during working hours. Conducting assessments between 10 am and 3 pm was considered preferable by most workers as this allowed them to spend their evenings with their families.

*"...Sunday would be better as site is closed and should be here only. Here itself, I gave the exam. It was fun. Yes we live here only so the place is comfortable. In the afternoon or at 10 o'clock time is fine..."*

Worker

### Assessments should take place where workers are able to concentrate without distractions

Conducting assessments at noisy or very busy venues (for example a construction site or roadside in peak hours) is likely to have a negative impact on participant performance. Finding a suitably quiet setting for assessments was found to be a frequent challenge in LabourNet's RPL programme. For programmes that seek to conduct assessments on location, agreements to base activities in local tea shops, construction site offices, or education institutions could help ensure consistent, suitable test conditions, where this can be achieved without adding significantly to the length of time respondents are taken away from their work. Providing assessors with guidelines for venue selection is also advisable.

### Centralised or on-site?

RPL programmes may opt to deliver all assessments on-site, or all at a centralised venue, or offer a mixture of the two. LabourNet's RPL programme follows a model of on-site testing, and centralised processing of tests. Going to the workers has obvious advantages in terms of making RPL more accessible, while separating on-site administration of tests and centralised processing of tests helps keep costs fairly low. There are other advantages and disadvantages associated with central and on-site assessment models, which address the considerations listed in the previous paragraphs.

Basing assessments at a central location can allow for controlled and standardised assessment conditions, and may also support more extensive tests, including observation of practical activities. Central venue testing may also enable on the spot processing of test results and subsequent information advice and guidance support for participants.

RPL programmes that aim to broaden access to informal workers and support further skills development may therefore wish to consider a combination of on-site initial assessment followed by more extensive assessment and training at a central venue.

## Ensuring Standards in Delivery

### Assessor selection, training and performance evaluation

Even under LabourNet's model, which is designed to minimise the need for industrial expertise in assessment delivery, assessment standards are highly dependent on the quality of the assessment delivery agents. With this in mind, staff selection, training and monitoring is critical.

LabourNet's assessment delivery staff were selected based on language skills (knowing Kannada was a must), and on a demonstrated ability to set the survey context, to probe for responses, to explain questions without prompting, and to explain the benefits of participating in the survey.

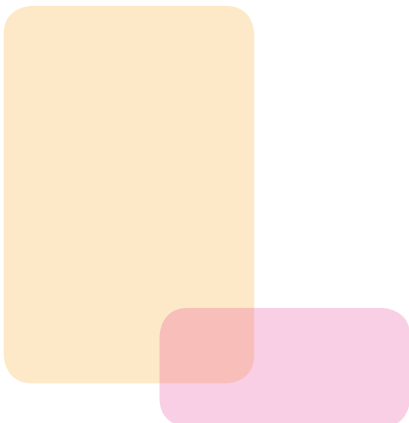
The selected assessors were given a one day induction on conducting assessment tests and recording responses etc. More extensive training was not considered necessary as the assessment task had been made as simple as possible (read out a scripted question and get the respondent to select the right answer out of four options - usually visually depicted).

To monitor the assessment process, LabourNet sets independent targets for its registration team as well as its assessment team. LabourNet supervisors, trainers and corporate clients also accompany assessors in the field and observe their performance. They are provided feedback on the basis of these visits.

### Guidance and safeguards for consistency in assessment delivery

The LabourNet programme evaluation highlighted several major challenges in structuring assessment administration to guard against discretion and subjective judgement.

LabourNet's RPL programme allows for assessment administrator discretion in rotating and skipping questions. Administrators were required to skip a different question at random for each test and rotate questions in order to ensure tests were not overly predictable. Without guidelines on varying which question to skip, however, some assessors were found to skip the same question each time, typically the last question on the sheet. Occasionally, administrators were also observed to make judgements about the skill level of workers, and to leave out sections of tests that they felt were not appropriate. As a result, some workers were not tested on areas that may well have been relevant to their jobs, competencies and ambitions.





This subjective judgement by test administrators also meant the duration of tests varied considerably. The average time taken for most assessments in the first phase of evaluation was around 20 minutes if estimation exercises were included and around 10 minutes if these were excluded. In phase two, assessments took less than 10 minutes because most respondents did not complete a section on estimation skills.

The majority of workers interviewed said they did not need more time to complete tests, although a small number of workers said that they would have preferred to have more time to answer the questions.

The level of discretion in assessments, applied by actors without substantial industry knowledge, is likely to increase the risk of inaccurate and inconsistent assessments. The evaluation found that several measures may be needed to mitigate these risks. These include:

- Extensive preparation of assessment administrators
- Clear standards and requirements for assessment (such as a stipulation that all workers undergo every section of assessment, regardless of administrator assumptions about their skill level, and that administrators time and seek to standardise duration of assessments)
- A thorough monitoring and evaluation process.

LabourNet were found to be proactive in identifying and addressing these issues.

There are also clear limitations to what can be achieved in an assessment as short as ten minutes. While keeping assessments brief might help engage workers, minimise disruption in the workplace, and allow for a higher volume of assessments, this should be balanced against the need for a reliable and detailed level of assessment. Longer tests, or a series of short tests, may be a more effective approach than an individual, very brief assessment phase.

### 5.3 Post-assessment processes

#### Communication of Assessment Outcomes to Workers

##### Minimising the time gap between assessment and certification

While LabourNet's programme aims to deliver report cards 15 days after assessments, the gap between assessment and certification is often substantially longer. The long processing time for identity cards (post registration) and report cards (post assessment) was an issue of concern for workers participating in LabourNet's programme. Many workers were found to complain to labour coordinators about delays, and a slow turnaround on one service (such as identity cards) was found to have a negative impact on workers' perceptions of other services (such as RPL or insurance).



RPL programmes should therefore seek to:

- Set clear and realistic expectations on service timetables;
- Minimise the time taken to process assessments for certification.

LabourNet plans to bring the assessment to certification process time down to three to four days by introducing online assessments delivered through tablet computers, in place of the current paper based system. LabourNet estimates that at least 12 months are needed before this technology is put together and a beta version of the software ready for pilot testing.


### Providing fit for purpose report cards/certification

Workers interviewed for this evaluation suggested that RPL report cards should:

- Be merged with an ID card into one document so they would always have their ID, trade, and skill grade on their person.
- Have the worker's picture on it (so as to prevent it from getting mixed up with other workers' report cards or being deliberately misused).
- Be available in the language of their choice, as well as English.

### Feedback and Decision Review Systems

Decision review and participant feedback systems are a standard feature of the majority of formal RPL programmes. These allow participants who are not satisfied with the outcome of their assessments to appeal for a review of the decision and/or reassessment of their learning. They also provide an important resource for identifying any issues for improvement in a programme.



Where RPL programmes operate in more informal environments, and where participants are not paying customers (either using their own money or directing public funds), feedback and review systems may be less well established. This is the case for LabourNet's RPL programme, which does not include any such decision review system for RPL assessments, but does have a review system for post-training assessments.

Although few workers interviewed for this evaluation expressed complaints over assessments and grading, there were some instances where the programme could benefit from providing a clearer channel for workers to feedback on assessments.

*"... They have not told anything about the evaluation system. Yes it should be there. We can complain them that score is less, we will like to give exam again..."*

*Worker*

It is possible that as the programme scales up, and as LabourNet further raises awareness amongst workers of the uses of RPL, a greater number of workers will

seek to feed back on or challenge the assessment process. Putting in place a formal mechanism for feedback and review at an early stage in an RPL programme's development is likely to help provide the transparency needed to build up trust and engagement amongst potential participants. Such a mechanism can also operate as an early warning system for any problems with assessments.

#### Post-assessment services: Training, Careers Guidance and Recruitment

LabourNet's RPL programme does not currently feature a standard process for referring workers to training or careers advice and guidance after assessments are completed. In place of this, LabourNet invites workers who have been assessed to attend training when a client (a construction employer) requests a number of trained workers for a specific project.

This approach reflects LabourNet's experience of low interest in training amongst construction workers. While many of the workers LabourNet engages with are willing to participate in free training, a large proportion have been reluctant to participate, either because of a lack of time or because they feel they do not need to further develop their skills. This appears to be a particular issue for the construction sector, which is viewed as low paid and low status. In contrast, LabourNet staff indicated a greater interest amongst informal workers for training in beauty and hair care or tailoring - where trainees expect to see immediate improvements to their income.

LabourNet also organises regular job fairs that bring workers who have been registered and assessed together with contractors and employers.

Although LabourNet's approach is a response to the perceived lack of demand for training amongst workers in the construction sector, efforts to communicate clearly the pathways from RPL assessment to skills development and employment opportunities should be seen as a crucial part of RPL regardless of the sector or profile of participants. As LabourNet's programme suggests, promoting progression from RPL into further training is likely to be far more challenging in certain sectors and in informal labour markets.

#### Measuring outcomes for participants

Measuring the impact of RPL on participants is important for several reasons, including:

- Evaluating the effectiveness of the RPL service
- Assessing the demand for RPL amongst employers
- Identifying key issues to address to improve RPL provision, such as employer engagement, links to training provision etc.
- Helping set realistic expectations when recruiting participants.

This evaluation provided an initial small scale assessment of some of the outcomes



for RPL participants. As the LabourNet programme develops, more comprehensive mechanisms for tracking outcomes for participants are likely to become increasingly important.

### Impact on Workers' Self Esteem

The participants interviewed for this evaluation felt that only someone who was good at their job would do well when assessed.

*"It was related to our work, levelling and all, the person who is new in the work will not be able to answer."*

Worker

Participants who had received their report cards said they felt proud and had shown their cards to others in their community.

### Impact on Ability to Negotiate Benefits

The majority of participants did not expect RPL assessments to have a positive impact on their income, and they did not feel that they could use report cards to negotiate with employers or contractors. Increases in wages were usually seen to be dependent on their performance (i.e. how much work they do and how well they do it) and on the judgement of their supervisors and contractors.

*"Our mestri [supervisor] decides those, he will come and check how much work you have done and then accordingly he will pay, he does so much work, provides so much work to us, he should also earn something. No, he himself gives the rates we don't have to say anything. He sees our work and then increases the rates. Have to work day night to increase wages then..."*

Worker

*"The supervisor decides the wages, I don't complain. We trust him; we know he will give proper rates at proper times..."*

Worker

*"...As long as the rate keeps on increasing, inflation is there so there is hike in our wages also. Yes this can happen, if all the workers say that raise rates or else work will be stopped then rates might increase..."*

Worker

*"...With contractors it will not be beneficial as they do not need certificate. It will not increase my salary as they see work and not certificate. Maybe in company it is of use..."*

Worker

Workers thus do not expect the assessment to have any impact on their ability to negotiate wages or job related benefits. This evaluation was unable to compare worker expectations with actual earnings post assessment. Some workers, did, however, indicate that report cards would help them find and/or stay in work:

*"The certificate is given for the information. If certificate is given then on that matter I will have more information. It is also for identification. The contractor will not give more salary but he will give work..."*

*Worker*

### Impact on Lifestyle and Livelihood

Workers did express a desire to earn more in the future and improve their lifestyle, but they did not think that to have a better lifestyle they needed to undergo training and/or enhance their skills. However, having registered with LabourNet, they did feel more secure about their jobs and prospects. Armed with an identity card and a certificate, they felt contractors would not be able to cheat them or make arbitrary decisions about their wage dues.

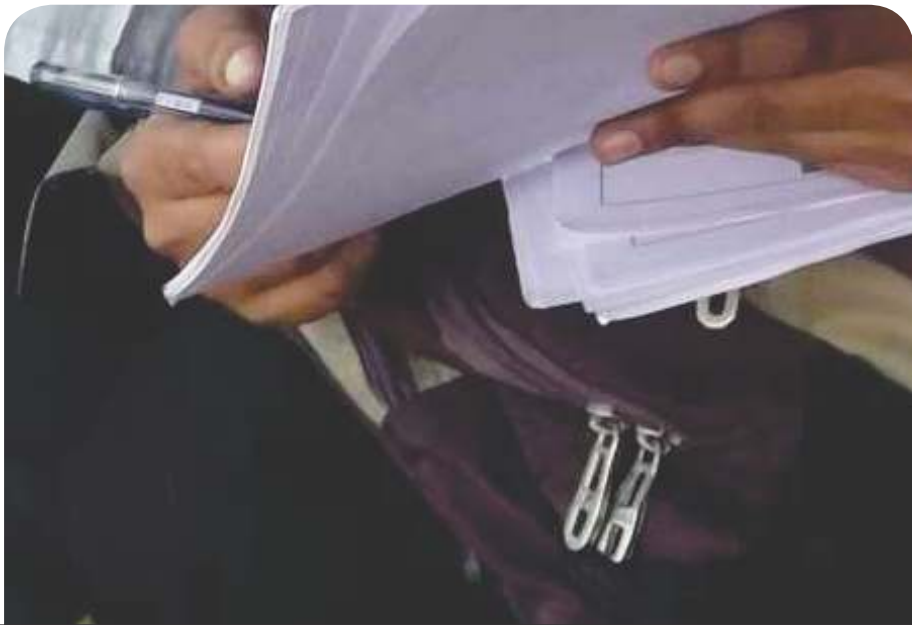
*"That card will be like an identity, when some worker has some problem he can get help if he has this card, nobody can abuse us then, and if this happens case can be filed on the other person..."*

*Worker*

The comments above show the importance of labour contractors and supervisors as stakeholders in the process of delivering RPL in the construction sector. While clear communication of the benefits of RPL to workers is needed, there is a significant risk that raising expectations concerning wages and employment opportunities could create tensions between workers and their superiors. Accordingly, a key recommendation of this report is that LabourNet, and other RPL programmes operating in similar contexts, engage in extensive stakeholder engagement with construction site managers and seek to agree with them how the initiative and its benefits will be communicated to workers.



# Lessons for RPL Practice



## Building on the LabourNet RPL Model: Lessons for RPL Practice

This evaluation identified a number of innovative and highly promising aspects of LabourNet's RPL programme, and a number of areas that will require further development as the programme expands. These hold valuable lessons for both new and existing RPL programmes in India, as well as for RPL practice in other similar settings.

This section summarises the key lessons from the LabourNet RPL evaluation for replication and expansion of RPL practice in India, drawing out the headlines from the aspects of practice discussed in depth in the previous section. See the appendix to this report for an overview of the LabourNet RPL model incorporating this evaluation's recommendations.

### Linking RPL to other related worker support services

The LabourNet model illustrates the potential value of incorporating RPL into a holistic programme for labour support. Using recruitment drives to promote RPL and other related services at the same time is likely to be more cost efficient than individual recruitment drives, and more likely to attract workers in with one offer, in order to pitch other related services to them.

Placing RPL within a larger programme can allow knowledge developed in one offer (e.g. training curricula and assessments) to be adapted and applied for another (RPL assessment criteria).

This also presents an opportunity to set out a clear pathway towards improved jobs and salaries, from registration, to social protection, to RPL, to training and on to recruitment services.

This interdependence of services does however come attached with a risk that poor provision in one area may damage the reputation, and potentially the quality of provision in another. Programmes that incorporate several different offers should therefore **seek to clearly map out the links between these services, and communicate these links in appropriate ways** to programme staff, and to service users (including industry stakeholders and workers).

### Making access a priority

RPL programme accessibility can be enhanced by **taking assessments to where service users work and where they live**. This can present some challenges, in particular for ensuring a standardised and thorough assessment process.

Starting small with workers, by offering short assessments that don't require much time, can also help make RPL more accessible. Basic, brief assessments do have

significant limitations, and these should be made clear to all programme stakeholders. Such assessments can only be expected to provide a basic profile of a worker's skills. Programmes may wish to explore ways of using short assessments to provide an initial profiling and to introduce a worker to RPL. This initial assessment can then be followed by an offer of more extensive assessment (incorporating a wider range of assessment methods, including observation) and/or training.

**Minimising the time between registration and recognition** is also likely to be particularly important for workers who have had little engagement with formal education and training. Online assessments offer a potentially faster method for processing RPL than paper based methods. Alongside this, programmes should seek to **create clear and realistic expectations on processing times**. Failure to deliver assessments and certificates within a stated timeframe is likely to result in reputational damage, and in learner/worker disengagement.

Care must be taken to **ensure that all potential participants are able to access RPL**, and not just the majority. This requires a strong understanding of the level of diversity in a given area, and efforts to take this diversity into account when providing RPL services. While the construction industry may be male dominated, for example, women workers should not be overlooked. Including the option of being assessed by a woman may help include women participants in RPL. Similarly, assessing participants away from their colleagues may help avoid any concerns they have over their reputation or relationships with others.

#### Leveraging a diverse range of expertise in RPL design and delivery

Effective RPL design and delivery requires a wide range of knowledge and skills. The most prominent competency areas required in RPL include:

- General industry expertise
- Specific trade/technician expertise
- Assessment design
- Assessment delivery
- Assessment evaluation
- Quality assurance
- Provision of Information, Advice and Guidance.

While it is possible for RPL programme stakeholders to have the full set of skills required to design and deliver RPL, most programmes will require a mixture of people with different skills and types of experience.

#### Providing clear guidelines and training for assessors

Even in programmes that seek to minimise the required skills and knowledge levels



of assessors by limiting their role to questionnaire delivery, staff will require clear guidelines and training. Guidelines and training may be structured in different ways; however, this evaluation highlights the **importance of substantial induction phases and regular 'refresher' training sessions for assessors to maintain programme standards.**

For programmes that follow a similar structure to the LabourNet RPL model, guidelines, inductions and continued training should cover a combination of the following:

- Understanding and addressing the specific needs of different participants, including those from vulnerable or marginalised groups.
- Communicating a clear, consistent and relevant message on the benefits and limitations of RPL to participants.
- Phrasing and translating questions appropriately, and understanding when and how to probe for further responses to questions.
- Using standardised systems for rotating or varying questions.
- Selecting appropriate venues for assessments.
- Communicating clearly the processes and timelines involved in an RPL programme to participants.
- Engaging with construction employers, contractors and managers to secure their buy-in.
- Guarding against preconceptions of an RPL participant's knowledge and skills, and against too much assessor discretion in selecting questions for participants.
- Good practice in identifying and recording aspects of assessments that require improvement, including feedback on questions and assessment structure.

Programmes that feature different assessment methods, such as the gathering of evidence in learner portfolios, and learner demonstration of tasks, will require additional guidelines, training, and recruitment criteria for assessors.

#### Continuous testing and monitoring of RPL processes

Alongside robust guidelines and training for assessors, continued monitoring of participant recruitment, assessment, and post assessment processes is needed to ensure standards are maintained. The LabourNet evaluation illustrates **the value of an extensive pilot phase as the first step in achieving appropriate standards**, and in mapping out the necessary next steps in maintaining or raising programme standards.

The evaluation also highlights the **significant impact of setting targets for assessment staff, and of regularly reviewing assessor performance** based in

part on these targets. Given the significant influence of targets on performance, it is particularly important that **targets accurately reflect programme priorities**, and do not over-emphasise one particular aspect at the expense of others. Setting goals on the number of assessments completed and incentivising assessors to complete as high a number as possible, for example, may undermine efforts to make RPL accessible to marginalised groups, and to ensure rigour. While such targets can perform an important function in RPL programmes, it is important that **the targets themselves are tested and regularly reviewed** to ensure they promote both quality and accessibility.

Monitoring and quality assurance activities may also incorporate the following:

- Regular observation of programme communications with participants in the field (at the recruitment, assessment and post assessment stages).
- Feedback from participants, including through anonymous channels after assessments and certification.
- Feedback from employers and other industry stakeholders on assessment content, and on experience of employing/managing workers who have participated in RPL.
- Further consultation with potential participants and industry stakeholders.
- Independent evaluations of RPL programme processes and impact.

#### Communicating the limitations and uses of RPL assessments

RPL programmes are more likely to reach the right people if the purpose and benefits of the RPL service on offer are communicated clearly. In informal sectors this is likely to take time.

RPL programmes must make clear the specific functions and limitations of different types of assessments to all stakeholders, including service users (workers/jobseekers and employers) and programme staff. As discussed throughout this report, questionnaires alone can only provide a basic profile of a person's skills, and basic directions for improving skills and job prospects. Use of multiple assessment methods, meanwhile, can provide a more detailed picture. This can in turn support a clear career and learning development plan, and can support a worker to access better employment and learning opportunities.

#### Continuing engagement with participants post-assessment

RPL programmes should seek to demonstrate a positive impact on participants' learning and livelihoods. This requires **tracking outcomes for participants** - such as subsequent employment, wages and training activities. It also requires a process of **recording feedback from participants** on their experiences of the RPL provided, and facilitating appeals where participants feel assessments are incorrect. This information can be used to identify potential improvements to the



RPL programme, and can also help set out realistic expectations for future RPL participants.

The **provision of information, advice and guidance to participants** who have completed RPL assessments is also critical to an RPL programme's success. Participants may require advice on how best to use their RPL certificate to access opportunities that are relevant to them, and this need can be most effectively addressed done through the communication channels already established within a programme.

### Working closely with labour and community leaders

Labour coordinators and other workplace and community leaders often represent the 'gatekeepers' to the workers and jobseekers targeted by RPL programmes. This is clearly the case in the construction sector examined within this evaluation, and a similar picture may also be expected in other sectors. Community and labour leaders can play three particularly important roles in RPL:

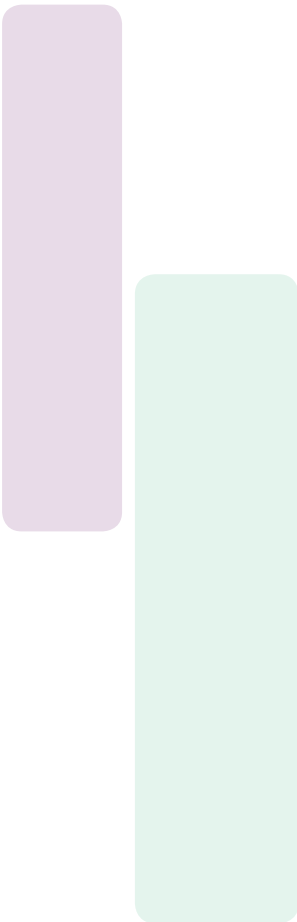
1. **Factoring important, context specific information into an RPL offer.** Labour leaders, for example, may help adapt assessment language to fit the terms used on a work-site, or highlight skills areas not covered in a standard questionnaire. Community leaders, meanwhile, may provide insights to tailor a programme to the particular contexts and sensitivities of a community.
2. **Brokering relationships with other key stakeholders,** including contractors and employers. Local leaders are likely to have existing relationships with employers, and to therefore be well positioned to put forward a compelling case for employers to buy in to RPL.
3. **Promoting RPL amongst workers and community members.**

RPL providers should therefore seek to identify community and labour leaders, and build relationships with them early on in the development of a programme. These relationships can range from informal agreements to collaborate, to formalised agreements to cross-promote mutually beneficial services, or contracting leaders as programme consultants.

### Engaging with the Recognisers of Prior Learning: Employers and education and training institutions

In the absence of formally recognised occupational standards and qualifications frameworks, securing employer and education institution recognition is a far greater challenge, and should be considered a critical aspect of individual RPL programmes.

Recognition is most likely to be secured where employers and education institutions have some stake in a programme from the beginning. Involving these stakeholders in the design of an RPL programme means it can be directly aligned to



their needs and concerns. This alignment can be reinforced by involving the same stakeholders in quality assurance, and in programme reviews.

Input from employers and education institutions can be used to:

- Set out relevant and well described competencies.
- Share good practice in assessment.
- Link RPL to education and training programmes.
- Build clear pathways from RPL into employment and career development.

Involving these stakeholders in RPL design does, however, depend on them having an initial interest in the RPL proposition, and on them having time to commit to activities that they may see as outside of core business. In circumstances where there is little initial interest or willingness to engage, RPL programmes are likely to require additional public funding and support from labour and education regulators to drive employer and institution engagement.

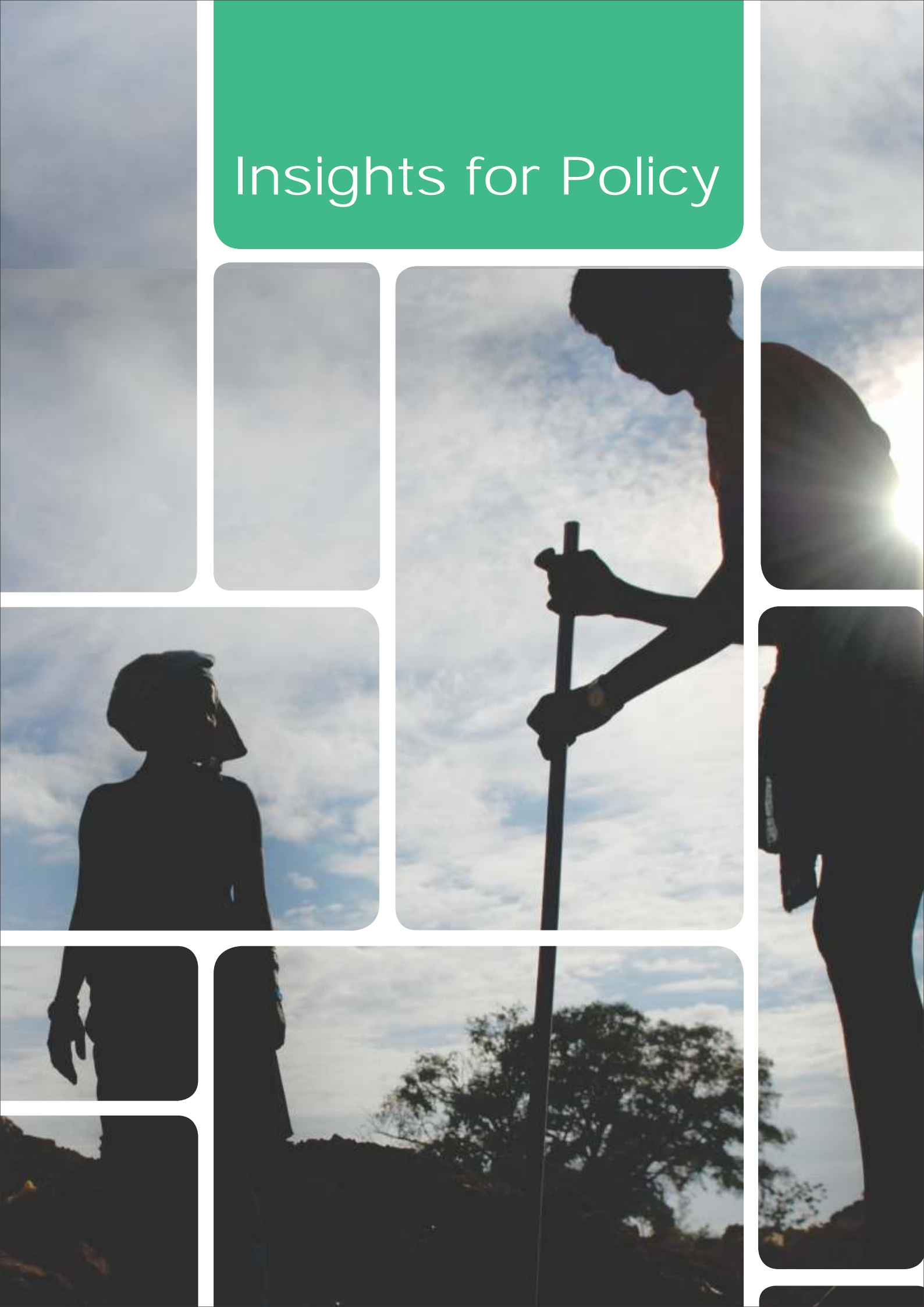
#### Engaging with policymakers

RPL is dependent on policy and regulatory frameworks for education and training. Formal, industry recognised occupational standards provide the foundation for RPL to deliver a reliable, valid and relevant offer.

Existing RPL programmes have an important role to play in highlighting the importance of strong frameworks and standards, and in informing the development and improvement of these frameworks. RPL programmes should therefore seek an **active role in influencing emerging frameworks, and in ensuring such frameworks support good practice in RPL.**



# Insights for Policy



The LabourNet RPL programme is a grassroots level initiative that has, as acknowledged by LabourNet itself, limitations due to the absence (as of now) of an institutional and regulatory framework that could support a fully effective system of RPL. Given these current institutional constraints, the strongest recommendations in this report concern the potential to replicate existing practice; these have been covered in section 6. In policy terms, the key factor for successful RPL - the existence of a nationally shared qualifications and credit framework - is already underway in India. We strongly welcome this development.

There are, however, a number of policy-level steps that we believe can be taken now to better facilitate the development of RPL in India. As stated earlier on in this report, we believe that by engaging now with RPL, Indian policy makers can lay the groundwork for it to be a cornerstone of future work to support skills development.

We therefore believe that policy makers in India should:

- Support initiatives such as LabourNet's that seek to introduce RPL on the ground, on the condition that implementing agencies commit to rigorous evaluations and the development of a comprehensive set of good practice lessons that can be shared nationally. Such evaluations should include parameters not covered in this report, particularly around impact on career trajectories, access to training and meeting employer requirements.
- Ensure that the emerging national qualifications framework is compatible with RPL: that is, that it is based on demonstrable outcomes and competencies rather than inputs such as hours spent in training.
- Develop, as part of the work to introduce a national qualifications framework, a national policy on recognition of prior learning that affords equivalence to appropriately recognised skills even when these have not been gained through formal training.
- Sponsor events to promote awareness of RPL, particularly among employers, and encourage them to support the concept by working in partnership to recognise the skills of their own workers.
- Begin engaging now with potential partners who might help to implement a national roll-out of RPL. Besides social enterprises such as LabourNet, this might include public and private ITIs, NGOs, and other private training providers. Such engagement should aim to promote awareness of RPL and allow for potential partners to begin investing in the capacity and skills needed to carry out RPL assessments.

### Assessment development

- Assessment question bank created by team of experts
- Questions selected & sequenced by team of Subject Matter Experts & assessment experts
- Assessment content piloted by knowledge development team
- Test modified and finalised through pilots by knowledge development team

### Pre-assessment preparation

- Initial meeting held with site managers / contractors to secure buy-in
- Labour Coordinator collects workers for registration/assessment drive
- Face to face briefing with workers to explain value and purpose of RPL
- Briefing and training for assessors, based on agreed quality criteria

### Assessment execution

- Assessment administered to on site by survey teams using tablets
- Excel datafile automatically created
- Completed tests automatically sent electronically to LabourNet office
- Regular monitoring of assessments by LabourNet team and occasional spot-checks by independent verifiers

### Evaluation of results

- Tests evaluated centrally at LabourNet offices in Bangalore within 4 days of receiving data file
- Individual evaluations reviewed by knowledge development team

### Result communication

- Evaluation results conveyed to Labour Coordinators
- Report card printed at LabourNet offices in English and the worker's native language and couriered to worker

### Post-assessment processes

- Post-assessment advice from LabourNet, including information on possible training
- Feedback and appeals process communicated clearly to workers
- Worker undergoes training as and when LabourNet's corporate clients or the worker request
- Job Fairs organized to bring contractors/companies and workers together

