

TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE COMPLETION REPORT

Division: PRCM

TA No. and Name TA 3958-PRC: Improving Basic Education in Underdeveloped Areas Through Information and Communication Technology			Amount Approved: \$500,000	
			Revised Amount:	
Executing Agency: Ministry of Education	Source of Funding: TASF		Amount Undisbursed \$276,361.30	Amount Utilized \$223,638.70
			TA Completion Date	
Approval 30 Oct. 2002	Signing 29 Jan. 2003	Fielding of Consultants 5 Mar. 2003	Original 28 Feb. 2005	Actual 31 Oct. 2006
			Account Closing Date	
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<p>Description. In recent years, the People’s Republic of China (PRC) has maintained impressive progress towards achieving universal compulsory education (UCE; comprising primary and lower secondary schooling), evidenced by increasing enrollments, falling dropout rates and gender gaps, and increases in the proportion of qualified teachers. However, aggregate progress masks substantial disparities between coastal and interior regions and between rural and urban areas, particularly if one considers “quality” as well as “quantity” dimensions of education. Ensuring access to quality basic education for minorities and girls in poor and remote areas of the Western Region poses a particular challenge. International evidence from countries facing similar development contexts suggests that improving teaching in underdeveloped areas is a fundamental keystone for achieving national education goals.</p> <p>The PRC Government has recognized the potential of information and communication technology (ICT) to redress educational inequities (including related to access, teacher quality, and instructional materials) across areas and within poor localities. In late 2002, following discussions between PRC Vice Premier Li Lanqing and Asian Development Bank (ADB) President Tadao Chino, ADB and the PRC Ministry of Education (MOE, the executing agency) began discussions on technical assistance (TA) to explore new approaches for harnessing ICT to contribute to national efforts to address key education challenges. Both sides ascribed urgency to the TA, and ADB worked with MOE—in particular the Division of International Organizations (DIO), which directly oversaw the TA—to quickly design and process the TA.</p> <p>Expected Impact, Outcome and Outputs. The TA’s guiding longer term impact (formerly goal) was to “advance human development with improved access to quality primary and secondary education, particularly among disadvantaged populations, through targeted and viable applications of distance education and ICT”. As phrased in the TA paper, the TA’s twin objectives (now termed outcome) were to (i) undertake a broad assessment of and identify promising innovations and strategies for the application of distance education and ICT in education, with a particular focus on supporting access to quality UCE among disadvantaged populations including minorities, women, and remote communities; and (ii) support a very modest and targeted pilot test of promising approaches and technologies with a tight pro-equity focus.</p> <p>The TA paper envisaged three tangible outputs, to be accompanied by related policy dialogue: (i) a rapid assessment report of the status of ICT use in PRC education (particularly in poorer rural areas) as well as relevant international experience and models; (ii) a detailed proposal for the TA’s pilot test; and (iii) as the central output, a final report identifying lessons learned and policy and strategic implications from the pilot test and analytical work. In particular, the TA design and subsequent dialogue put a specific emphasis on: (i) teaching and teachers—i.e., developing approaches for using ICT as a tool help empower teachers to adopt more innovative, student-centered instruction pedagogies; (ii) soft components—particularly capacity building, locally relevant educational content and materials, peer and support networks, and monitoring and evaluation (M&E)—which are key to ensuring ICT hardware investments translate into advancement of education objectives; and (iii) applied research, with findings feeding into project refinements as well as policy dialogue.</p> <p>Delivery of Inputs and Conduct of Activities. The terms of reference for the TA consultants (recruited as individuals) were adequately formulated, with a logical iterative approach: coordinated by the team leader (TL) and under joint ADB and MOE guidance, consultants were foreseen to implement TA activities in two phases: (i) a rapid assessment aimed at clarifying the overall context and taking stock on the PRC’s experience to date in ICT in basic education; and (ii) a small-scale, well-defined pilot test, focusing on improving teaching and school management. The pilot’s exact design was to be developed by the consultants in concert with the National Center for Education Technology (NCET) based on findings from the rapid assessment and discussion with MOE-DIO, ADB, and other members of a steering committee.</p> <p>While the consultants were fielded in early April 2003, foundational work was interrupted by the outbreak of severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) in the PRC and the demobilization of consultants for several months. Work restarted in late 2003, but was then obstructed by the extended non-responsiveness by the original TL to ADB, MOE, or the other consultants. Despite continued efforts by the original and final project officer (TA oversight within ADB was transferred in mid-2004), the TL repeatedly failed to deliver promises rapid assessment and pilot test design reports, and ADB initiated termination procedures in December 2005. While this was complicated by the TL’s continued non-response to ADB’s then Consulting Services Division, a replacement TL was fielded in May 2005, and the TA built solid momentum in finalizing the pilot test design and launching initial capacity building programs by August 2005. Overall, inputs by the new TL and core domestic consultants were strong.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Cooperation with MOE was complicated by SARS (which forced the initial ADB project officer to cancel his participation</p>				

in the inception mission) and the original TL's non-performance, as well as transfers and health-related issues affecting MOE-DIO staff. While ADB missions and the new ADB TA officer's move to ADB's PRC Resident Mission (PRCM) facilitated dialogue, the intended steering committee never materialized and there remained some gaps in coordination within MOE (including NCET) and with the consultants and local partners. This obstructed cementing of a common understanding and clear division of labor, and required adjustment of expert inputs to take on a more direct role in implementing the pilot than foreseen in the TA paper, while also limiting the extent of pilot interventions.

The TA supported key innovations including: (i) progress in shifting mindsets toward viewing ICT as a tool and increasing the focus on soft components and education objectives; (ii) implementation of new models for capacity building, including an innovative training of trainers (TOT) program; and (iii) to support teachers' flexible self-learning and access to peer support networks, creation of an online "Fenghuang Learning Community" (FLC), which is believed to be the first such tool supported by MOE in the PRC or in any ADB project. Implementation also advanced dialogue to ensure complementarity across internationally-supported initiatives. In particular, fruitful linkages were established with the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) Strengthening Capacity in Basic Education in Western China Project: the ADB TA was able to incorporate materials emerging under the latter, while helping to field test these and also develop supportive new tools (e.g., the FLC model).

Evaluation of Outputs and Achievement of Outcome. While delayed vis-à-vis the original timetable, the TA achieved the general outputs and objectives identified in TA framework. The final report and other deliverables were generally of good quality: while MOE-DIO felt some of the findings were overly critical and/or under-recognized existing initiatives, the Ministry of Finance (MOF) expressed strong satisfaction with the assessment of key gaps and challenges and identification of clear directions for future analysis and ICT investments. Accompanying the final report, to enhance practical relevance and feed-in to policy dialogue, the ADB officer worked closely with the consultants to develop: (i) a Focused Synopsis document distilling key TA findings, focusing on key policy-related issues and constraints to effective use of ICT to promote education objectives in poorer rural areas along with related recommendations; and (ii) a set of annexes (including case studies, tools, and supplementary references) in a second print-based monograph and via DVD/CD-ROMs. While final (for-dissemination) versions of these could only be agreed with MOE after the revised completion date, PRCM was able to fund (under its 2007 budget) production and dissemination of these knowledge products to national and international stakeholders.

In terms of capacity building, staff of the prefecture-level teacher training institute emphasized the innovative nature and value-added from the TOT, with some indicating they had already adopted some new approaches introduced into their other work. Contrasting traditional lecture-type trainings, multi-modal capacity building approaches (including participatory face-to-face training and follow-up support via the FLC) were well received by local partners (especially the roughly 140 teachers and head-teachers from 28 target schools in Fenghuang County of Xiangxi Tujia-Miao Autonomous Prefecture, Hunan Province). At the same time, some activities had to be curtailed and/or achieved uneven success (e.g., FLC utilization), and it is unclear whether local ownership achieved is adequate to sustain pilot interventions post-project.

Overall Assessment and Rating. Despite the delays due to external factors (SARS and the original TL's poor performance), the TA delivered its outputs and achieved its objectives, and is rated as successful. While the TA fell short of high expectations in some regards, it made an important contribution in looking beyond more hardware-focused ICT-related initiatives to focus on the concept of ICT for education. The longer-term impact will depend on the extent to which relevant agencies (especially MOE and MOF) dialogue on and operationalize recommendations, but the creation of a Focused Synopsis and applied annexes (stepping beyond outputs in the TA paper) will help to facilitate accessibility of key TA findings. To some degree, the latter and the FLC model developed have already been incorporated in related work supported by CIDA and others, magnifying the TA's eventual contributions.

Major Lessons. A key first lesson is the importance of an integrated (versus hardware-driven) approach that is clearly focused on advancing education objectives rather than provision of high-tech equipment. One negative lesson is on the need to ensure an initial foundation of strong ownership and coordination, which were undermined by somewhat rushed TA design dialogue (due to pressure for rapid approval) as well as largely external factors early in the TA (e.g., SARS and unexpected problems with the original TL). These complicated efforts to ensure cross-stakeholder cooperation and dialogue horizontally—e.g., via a fully functioning steering committee and deeper NCET involvement—and vertically (i.e., coordination with local partners), which as well as a common understanding on the project and commitments to a clear division of labor. A third lesson is internal to ADB and regards the lack of clear, user-friendly, and operational documentation and tools on TA operations, even in English. This leads to misunderstandings by project partners (especially since the purpose and procedures of ADB TA are different from other agencies' projects), and diverts project officers' key inputs to tasks such as trouble-shooting on EA-administered expenditures, tracking down payments to individual consultants, etc.

Recommendations and Follow-Up Actions. The April 2007 Country Program Midterm Review Mission tentatively included a TA for sustainable distance education in the 2008 program. It is recommended that dialogue on this and similar assistance in the region be rooted clearly in education or training objectives (i.e., ICT for education), with early dialogue to reach consensus across stakeholders on how ICT can be used as a tool as part of broader approaches to address sector challenges. This can be supported by stock-taking and sharing of project experiences, materials developed, etc. PRCM will additionally follow-up in identifying broader suggestions on resources/tools for TA administration.