

CLOSING THOUGHTS

If we are to codify what is learnt in informal apprenticeship and by implication, if we legitimate the competences in the informal apprenticeship, it is certainly important that we understand why, how and what happens during the learning and teaching/training process. Do we really know enough of informal apprenticeships 'systems' in various country contexts? In the case of informal apprenticeship system there is still much that needs unpacking at the local level where learning takes place. Yet, while RPL usually takes a personal and individualised response to learners and their learning and development pathways and journeys, this is less needed in the context of informal apprenticeship. Apprentices have all followed a more or less structured on-the-job training with an experienced master craftsman for a given occupation. RPL, even as an end-point of apprenticeship, calls for a collaborative effort of craftspeople to jointly agree on a competence standard to be achieved. This helps set and assure quality standards, facilitates cooperation between enterprises, and emphasises skills and lifelong learning as leverage for local economic development. However, the question of the resource implications of this undertaking cannot simply be wished away. It will require concerted and dedicated attention at all levels of governance.

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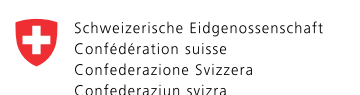
THEMATIC BRIEF

RECONCEPTUALISING RPL FOR INFORMAL APPRENTICESHIP

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STRENGTHENING APPRENTICESHIP SYSTEMS
IN THE INFORMAL ECONOMY IN AFRICA TO PROMOTE QUALITY,
INNOVATION AND TRANSITIONS TO FORMALITY

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INTRODUCTION

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) Outcomes provides an important opportunity for countries to **document the competencies in place and at once serves as a mechanism for expanding learning opportunities in general**. In the case of the informal apprenticeship systems in various countries, recognition of learning will not only serve to open up pathways to both formal labour market entry and further learning, but by so doing will also give credibility to an education and training largely neglected in many emerging economies.

This short fi che provides a think-piece of RPL implementation in the informal apprenticeship system. It explores the way in which RPL can impact on, and is impacted by, current informal apprenticeship systems. **RPL is often cited as an essential element in advancing learning in the informal economy, in particular in efforts to upgrade informal apprenticeship**. As a means by which competencies-in-place can be recognised, it serves as an essential starting point for ensuring that learners trained in the informal apprenticeship system are not left behind. One of the primary reasons for RPL implementation is clearly an intent to ensure that informal apprentices are provided access to opportunities where they are available, including in the formal economy. Therefore, it can serve as a bridge between the informal and formal apprenticeship systems. This is not to say that opportunities will be created once RPL is in place, but that it does hold the promise of expanding opportunities for those involved. In the context of a lament for scarce skills, awareness of competence in place will enable strategies to respond meaningfully to national skills and competence challenges identified.

Existing RPL implementation sometimes “blurs” apprenticeship, by undermining the informal apprenticeship system. As a ‘yet-to-be-defined’ and ‘unrecognised’ (at least in official discourse) teaching and learning system, informal apprenticeship can be usefully served by a RPL mechanism that ensures recognition of learning happening outside of the formal system. This perspective will fit quite neatly into existing regional perspectives of RPL. As the SADC guidelines document into RPL points out, “*RPL is about what an individual knows and/or can do, regardless of how, when, with whom and where the learning occurred, as long as he (sic) can demonstrate his claim for such competencies.*” (SADC, 2017, p. 8). It resolves a critical issue in most African contexts, that of recognising skills and competencies that are present, but not visible.

The link between the recognition of non-formal and informal learning outcomes and skills shortages is self-evident in virtually all countries and the disarmingly simple reason is that knowledge, skills and competences are often present but are not visible because they are not recognised (Werquin, 2010, p. 7)

While RPL is important for older and experienced population cohorts, in Africa there is a particular and unique role it needs to play in resolving the vast **challenge of youth employment** and a way that countries make use of that youth ‘demographic dividend’ (SADC:2017, p.110). **Recognising the competencies of ‘graduates’ emerging from informal apprenticeship systems** will value a range of competencies that would not have been valued otherwise. The reported high school dropout rates in many SADC countries (accentuated by the Covid-19 pandemic) and the reality that most adult and young populations acquire skills, knowledge and competence through non-formal and informal means, serves as a powerful reason for the introduction of a vibrant relevant and appropriate RPL mechanism.

An RPL mechanism that ignores the reality of all apprenticeship systems in place might well work **AGAINST** a recognition of informal apprenticeship as a learning system. Unless RPL is operationalized as an “end of apprenticeship” exam – which is the case in Tanzania where MCs need to consent to the apprentice applying for RPL – it is likely to work against the informal apprenticeship system, and again relegate it to the periphery.

However, it is easy to ignore the need for system renewal in the euphoria of individual competence recognition. This brief thus advances the case for a perspective of RPL implementation that places **informal apprenticeship system rejuvenation** as a significant and arguably crucial focus of the **drive for RPL implementation**.

RPL RECONSIDERED - OUTCOMES-BASED AND INPUT-DRIVEN PERSPECTIVES

Two forms of RPL reflect different perspectives into its implementation: the ‘outcomes-based’ and the ‘input-driven’ RPL mechanism/system. The **outcomes-based RPL model** refers to the focus on end-of-learning certification and qualification and opens up possibilities for both apprentice and master craftspeople to document learning outcomes, by certification. The **input-driven RPL model** widens the understanding of RPL as simply an end-of-learning ‘event’, and focuses attention on what can be done systemically to achieve success in certification. While this perspective still sees the need to document learning outcomes, it focuses on what needs to be done to ensure success. It targets learning deficits with a view to overcoming them, both immediately and systemically. It needs to be understood, that this is not a dichotomy - the complementary approach to RPL implementation suggests that the two perspectives can co-exist and complement each other.

The input-based RPL system is driven by the need for the development of competencies where they are not present. It is underpinned by the need to **enhance the shortcomings of the skills system** – both formal and informal – by ensuring that those competencies that are not present, are developed. In informal apprenticeship, there is considerable demand for **expanding the menu of theoretical competencies**,

hence the input-driven approach will accommodate this need as part of the RPL process, in the same way that this model will respond to the perceptible lack of experiential learning in formal TVET systems, by for instance encouraging and opening up possibilities for on-the-job learning opportunities. An input-driven perspective, by not regarding the actual assessment as an end in itself, will serve as a **valuable tool to identify skills gaps and system deficiencies** and be able to initiate measures to respond to these.

In both the perspectives, RPL serves the invaluable role to **make competence visible and readily identifiable**, with a view to possible inclusion in the national qualifications/award system. This will go a long way in expanding opportunities for learners in the informal apprenticeship, while ensuring that the long touted ‘skills deficit’ challenge is (even partly) resolved at the national level. **By distinguishing between outcomes-based and input-driven RPL forms, the one-dimensional understanding of RPL becomes redefined**. Both perspectives are equally useful in tracking effectiveness of learning and this can serve as a powerful backwash effect to enhance learning in the informal apprenticeship system.

IMPLEMENTATION CONSIDERATIONS

The key benefit of recognising learning outcomes in the context of informal apprenticeship hinges on advancing and ensuring inclusion and access to further learning and labour markets. In the informal apprenticeship, RPL can legitimate learning in place and open up possibilities not available before.

RPL is in essence essential to the realisation of a national social justice and inclusion perspective. Recognition of Learning Outcomes becomes essential to a responsiveness to excluded communities. Apprentices, master craftspeople and the various stakeholders in the informal economy often belong to these disadvantaged and socially excluded communities, and so RPL holds the power and promise of access and advancement, both with respect to further learning and relevant labour market opportunities. It provides that second chance to those that were (or are still) unable to access formal learning opportunities. Indeed, RPL also holds the promise of including in formal learning those unable to be included as a result of conventional admission criteria, i.e. by means of formal certification.

If the **social justice imperative** embedded in all national constitutions is to be given substance, inclusion of those outside of the system needs to be prioritised. RPL, as mechanism for inclusion, then becomes an essential tool in securing social justice. This happens in the South African case, where there is an obvious need for ‘redress’ and inclusion of those excluded from a system designed to systemically exclude. In other countries, while this has not been so palpable, the need is nevertheless no less significant. **RPL serves as a powerful change mechanism** that gives substance to the rhetoric of a transformed education and training system.

Recognising what is learnt in Informal Apprenticeship represents an important start to wider system review of the legitimacy of learning in different contexts. That this is not (yet) done, is perhaps easy to understand given the primacy of the formal TVET system, but its effect in undermining local tradition and custom is clearly evident as is its exclusionary impact. It does in some respect reflect a continued colonial perspective in need of urgent review. **There is now very little choice, and very few excuses not to pursue a vigorous national RPL agenda for informal apprenticeship systems already in place**. A system that has stood the test of time, that is at once utilitarian, workable/practicable and most importantly relevant to the urgent and current national development imperatives, should not be underestimated.

An effective and inclusive RPL mechanism has to pay attention to implementation. A top-down (bureaucratic) approach to RPL implementation and one outside of a robust engagement with those in the system is unlikely to be effective. Thus, the **collaboration of informal apprenticeship structures and stakeholders is essential** (e.g. Jua Kali in Kenya or other relevant structures) in ensuring effectiveness. While the existence of an informal sector representative entity is necessary to success, the central role of master craftspeople in determining and agreeing on competencies, for instance, is a *sine qua non* for effective RPL implementation.

There are **a number of initiatives already underway in Africa** that will serve as insightful precursors of what is possible (but not always replicable). The following are illustrative:

- Burkina Faso offers a certificate in a number of occupations to anyone taking a test, yet the certificate is not equivalent to a nationally recognized qualification. What are the implications of this for the informal apprenticeship system in the country?
- Benin and Togo introduced an end of apprenticeship assessment with nationally recognized certificates. They haven’t quite referred to it as RPL. Could it be? What are the reasons for, and implications of not calling it as such?
- Tanzania introduced end of apprenticeship test and assessments for master craftspeople that are referred to as RPL. Should they be referred to as such? Is this a model that needs replicating? How?
- Kenya has long had trade tests offered as RPL, without calling them as such. Are current initiatives to reform and incorporate different types of RPL promising? Initiatives are underway to develop a financial model? Any challenges experienced with this? Why?
- South Africa has various initiative in place to allow RPL as part of the qualifications process. As an element of overall transformation and redress of education and training, challenges have been encountered. Are these worthy of review for effective RPL implementation in informal apprenticeships?