



FEATURE ARTICLE

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SDP to further develop Balimo Campus in Western Province

PNG Sustainable Development Program Limited (SDP), Kokoda Track Foundation (KTF) and the Member for Middle Fly, Hon. Roy Biyama have collaborated in making an important education initiative a reality in Balimo, Western Province.

This partnership opened a FODE Centre which is the first stage of a college, that will eventually see the facility deliver pre-service and in-service teacher training as well as training for community health workers and other health professionals. It is also making a concerted effort to create progression pathways for people who have not completed their secondary schooling, but who are committed to careers in teaching and health work.



The principal, Nauli Duwaba and his students outside their classroom.

Talks about establishing a Balimo Campus between SDP and KTF started some years back when SDP sponsored 15 students from Western Province to live and attend KTF's Kokoda College in Oro province.

In 2018, the two organisations started to investigate how they could establish a FODE centre somewhere in Western province that would ultimately become a holistic training college.

KTF's chief executive officer, Dr. Genevieve Nelson recalls travelling across Western province with her colleague in April 2018, meeting with governments, churches, companies, and communities to find out more; and to see if they could find the "right spot" to establish the college.

"After spending time in Kiunga, Rumginae and Daru, we travelled into Balimo via Kawito. We knew that the local member had previously tried to get a Teachers College established out in Newtown. We wanted to know more and so we travelled out to visit the campus. As soon as we got there, we knew there was something special about Balimo. The reception we received from the community was extraordinary. And the campus location had a very spiritual feel about it. Whilst the buildings were old and run down, we knew that it wouldn't take much to reinvigorate them. There was enormous land capacity to expand; we were right next to the airstrip (which wasn't operating at the time); and the generosity of spirit from the community was amazing. We knew this was the place," said Dr. Nelson.

Soon after, a team from SDP flew in to Balimo to meet with the KTF team and the people in Balimo to work out how soon the FODE centre could be set up. It was evident from speaking with the people that there is an enormous desire among the community to reconnect with their schooling, re-engage and matriculate. The local Member, Hon. Roy Biyama was a strong supporter and soon SDP signed an MOU with him whereby the unused buildings were made available for this joint initiative.

"They told us that there were no other opportunities in the region," said Dr. Nelson.

"Once we got the green light from SDP whereby, they would provide the funding to open the FODE centre, we had a two-week period to run around announcing the opening of the centre and undertaking enrolments. We had over 400 people show up hoping to enrol. We had only planned to enrol 70 students in the first year, but we spoke with SDP and told them about the extraordinary turn out we had received and they immediately agreed to increase the numbers to 105."

The excitement and warm welcome by the people in Balimo are always something SDP and KTF staff experience when they are there on the ground.

On one particular visit to Balimo, KTF with the local member, distributed 400 SolarBuddy lights to the children from three elementary schools. KTF normally receives a gift or two in return when they do these distributions; but on that occasion, the children were so grateful that every single person brought them a gift. They had coconut trees, fruits and vegetables, sets of deer antlers, bilums, paddles, shields and clubs.

"It was extraordinary," said Dr. Nelson.

"We left most of it behind to be put up at the college once the renovations are complete; and the Member planted coconuts in his garden which are now growing amazingly."

These coconuts have now been moved and replanted at the campus by the Chief Executive Officer of SDP John Wylie and Hon. Roy Biyama, as a symbol of growing and strengthening this partnership with the local member and his people.

SDP and KTF are also grateful that the Balimo government authorities have made a particularly valuable contribution by making vacant houses and buildings available for this initiative which is strongly supported by relevant health and education authorities.

So far, the FODE centre has been a positive addition to the Balimo community; but of course, with any new projects, it has had a few challenges. The wet weather created a bit of havoc during the wet season and made accessing the campus difficult. There are currently no boarding facilities, something SDP, Hon. Roy Biyama and KTF are working towards having in place by mid-2020. The lack of boarding facilities has limited enrolment to local students who can access the campus as day students (they either live in Balimo or can board with relatives in the town). This years' experience has seen students walking and paddling to the campus for long hours.

"It takes at least 2.5 to 3 hours each way for some of our students to paddle to the mainland and then walk to the campus. It can take longer in the wet season. It is not easy. But that is the dedication that these students have to the program," said Nauli Duwaba, school principal and lecturer at the Balimo Campus.

Mr. Duwaba said he is grateful for the work that is happening at the campus and thanks SDP, KTF and their local member for this initiative, and families of the students for their support throughout the year.



FODE students during class time.

The students have sat their exams in October and November respectively, and are awaiting their results.

The Balimo Campus is funded by PNG Sustainable Development Program Limited and implemented by Kokoda Track Foundation, with special thanks to Hon. Roy Biyama for his partnership and generous provision of the campus facility.