



# **GUIDELINES FOR RECOGNITION OF PRIOR LEARNING (RPL) IN THE SOUTHERN AFRICAN DEVELOPMENT COMMUNITY (SADC)**

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## Acronyms and Abbreviations

APEL:	Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning
APL:	Accreditation of Prior Learning
CEDEFOP:	European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training
DGET:	Directorate General of Employment and Training
EC:	European Commission
EU:	European Union
ILO:	International Labour Office
LLL:	Lifelong Learning
M&E:	Monitoring and Evaluation
NAMB:	National Artisan Moderation Body (South Africa)
NQF:	National Qualifications Framework
NQS:	National Qualifications System
PLAR:	Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition
QF:	Qualifications Framework
QS:	Qualifications System
OECD:	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
PLAR:	Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition
RAC:	Recognition of Acquired Competencies
RAS:	Recognition of Acquired Skills
RNFILO:	Recognition of Non-formal and Informal Learning Outcomes
RPL:	Recognition of Prior Learning
RVCC:	Recognition, Validation and Certification of Competencies (Portuguese abbreviation)
SADC:	South African Development Community
TVET:	Technical Vocational Education and Training
UNESCO:	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
VAE:	Validation of Experiential Learning Outcomes ( <i>Validation des acquis de l'expérience</i> )
VET:	Vocational Education and Training
VETA:	Vocational and Education Training Authority (Tanzania)

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## Glossary of Terms/Definition of Terms

Assessment standards	<b>Assessment standard</b> is a list of criteria used during an assessment process in order to compare the applicant's learning outcomes, the expected learning outcomes corresponding to the award aimed, and the method used to carry out the assessment.
Competence	<b>Competencies</b> indicate a satisfactory state of knowledge, skills, and attitudes, and the ability to apply them in a variety of situations.
Formal learning	<b>Formal learning</b> takes place in education and training institutions, is recognised by relevant national authorities, and leads to diplomas and qualifications. Formal learning is structured according to educational arrangements such as curricula, qualifications, and teaching-learning requirements.
Informal apprenticeship	<b>Informal apprenticeship</b> can be broadly defined as an informal system of skills transfer from a master craftsperson (MC) to a young apprentice, who acquires skills by way of observation, imitation and repetition, while working with the MC. The transfer of knowledge and skills is based on an agreement (written or verbal) between MC and apprentice, which is in line with local community norms and practices. The training is not regulated by law of a country.
Informal learning	<b>Informal learning</b> is learning that occurs in daily life, in the family, in the workplace, in communities, and through interests and activities of individuals. In some cases, the term <i>experiential learning</i> is used to refer to informal learning that focuses on learning from experience.
Learning outcomes	Learning outcomes are achievements of what a learner knows, understands, and is able to do as a result of the learning process.

Non-formal learning	<p><b>Non-formal learning</b> is learning that has been acquired in addition, or alternatively, to formal learning. In some cases, it is also structured according to educational and training arrangements, but is more flexible. It usually takes place in community-based settings, the workplace, and through the activities of civil society organisations. Through the recognition, validation and accreditation process, non-formal learning can also lead to qualifications and other recognitions.</p>
Occupational standards	<p><b>National Occupational Standards (NOS)</b> are statements of the standards of performance individuals must achieve when carrying out functions in the workplace, together with specifications of the underpinning knowledge and understanding.</p>
National Qualification Framework	<p><b>National Qualification Framework</b> is a national instrument for the development and classification of qualifications according to a set of criteria for levels of learning and skills achieved. This set of criteria may be implicit in the qualifications descriptors themselves, or made explicit in the form of a set of level descriptors.</p>
Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)	<p><b>RPL</b> is suggested as a process aimed at recognising that individuals may have acquired learning outcomes through many different learning processes, and in different contexts. It consists of identifying, assessing, and certifying all learning outcomes, however acquired.</p>
Recognition	<p><b>Recognition</b> is the keyword and has two significant meanings in this context. It is the recognition, by an assessor or a panel of assessors, that individual applicants actually have learning outcomes that meet existing standards, which is comparable and has parity of esteem with formal learning (and can be validated, once assessed).</p> <p>It is also the recognition by the society, and primarily the employers and the labour market actors that awards delivered to successful RPL applicants have currency in the society. This societal recognition is essential to the full RPL process, so that end-users find RPL attractive and may actually benefit from their investment in the RPL process.</p>

Validation	<b>Validation</b> is the confirmation by an officially approved body that learning outcomes or competencies acquired by an individual have been assessed against reference points or standards through pre-defined assessment methodologies.
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## 1. Introduction

Individuals learn everywhere and all the time throughout life, and it is important to give value to the potential corresponding learning outcomes, so that end-users (individuals and employers, typically) and individual learners in particular, may get benefits from them. RPL is a possible option to do so in an effective and cost-efficient manner. 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 can demonstrate his claim for such competencies. Most SADC Member States have been placing RPL at the top of their (lifelong learning) agenda; however, they are at extremely different stages of actual implementation, and the terms and concepts in use are not yet fully harmonised. These guidelines aim at providing commonly agreed elements among the SADC Member States for facilitating the implementation of RPL.

Together with this introductory section, this document contains 10 sections. Section 2 provides the background and some contextual analysis. Section 3 and 4 provide understanding of RPL and the rationale for these guidelines. Section 5 describes the purpose and scope of the guidelines. Section 6 provides the principles that guide the successful implementation of RPL. Section 7 describes the implementation stages of RPL. Section 8 lists the 12 building blocks identified for implementing RPL. Section 9 describes key implementation mechanisms and responsibilities, while section 10 describes the monitoring, evaluation, and reporting mechanism.

This document also contains a list of acronyms and abbreviations, as well as a glossary of terms at the beginning. A list of references is at the end of the document.

## **2. Background and Contextual Analysis**

### **2.1 Background**

SADC is a regional community comprising of 15 Member States with “a vision of a shared future” to be achieved through deeper regional socio-cultural, economic, and political integration. Article 5 (a) of the SADC Treaty outlines one of SADC’s main objectives:

“To promote sustainable and equitable growth and socio-economic development that will ensure poverty alleviation with the ultimate objective of its eradication, enhance the standard and quality of life of the people of Southern Africa and support the socially disadvantaged through regional integration.” (SADC, 1992)

SADC policy instruments and commitments in particular: Protocols on Education and Training (1992), Health (1997), Mining (1997), Declarations on Productivity (1999), Agriculture and Food Security (2004), Energy, Science, Technology and Innovation (2008), Gender and Development (2008), Poverty Eradication and Sustainable Development (2008), Employment and Labour (2014), and Youth Development (2015), among others recognise the importance of skills and human resource development in the region’s socio-economic development.

Sustainable development in education practices includes the ability to acknowledge alternative methods of valuing and recognising different forms of knowledge. In recent years, the development of lifelong learning policies globally has shown that it is important to recognise all types of learning, and make visible and value the outcomes of non-formal and informal learning, so that these may be identified, documented and/or formally recognised and validated. But because of issues such as gender bias, cultural dynamics, and rural living environments, many of those in the SADC region who have acquired knowledge and skills through informal and non-formal means have not been mainstreamed into the formal learning and labour market. Due to a lack of appropriate qualifications, a large proportion of people face severe disadvantage in getting decent jobs, migrating to other regions and accessing further education, even though they might have the necessary knowledge and skills. There is a growing demand by adults and young people for the recognition of the knowledge, skills and competences they acquired in non-formal and informal learning settings so that they can acquire decent employment.

The revised SADC Regional Indicative Strategic Development Plan (RISDP) 2015-2020 and the Industrialisation Strategy 2015-2063, places emphasis on development-relevant skills required to transform the region's predominantly informal economy to a formal one, and enhance productivity, value-addition and competitiveness. The participation, and leadership, in particular, by skilled and responsible youth in socio-economic development, along with peace and security of SADC is also integral to the revised RISDP and Industrialisation Strategy.

## **2.2 Context**

SADC is a region endowed with rich and abundant natural resources, with the biggest resource being its population of about 274 million. The population structure is young; 76.4 per cent are estimated to be aged below 35 years, 35 per cent of which are youth aged 15-34 years (SADC, 2011). The United Nations projections are that the absolute numbers of young people aged 15-34 will grow steadily, at least up to 2050. About 19 million children under the age of 18 are orphans, while millions of others are vulnerable as a result of poverty, diseases and conflict, all of which works in tandem to deny them adequate opportunities to enrol and to complete successfully their education in formal schooling and training institutions. Transforming this demographic window of opportunity into a dividend -- such as through skilling them to be productive citizens who have access to decent jobs, and are a viable market for goods and services -- is a priority for the region as it embarks on a period of accelerating industrialisation.

In SADC, 50-74 per cent of the population in the nine poorest Member States live on less than US\$1.25 per person per day (SADC, 2011). Poverty is acute in many rural and peri-urban areas -- an average of 63 per cent of SADC's population is rural, and 37 per cent is urban (with rural ranging from 39 per cent in South Africa, to 81 per cent in Malawi) (SADC, 2011). Studies conducted by, among others, UNICEF in sub-Saharan Africa, have shown that poverty is particularly acute among children and young people from poor households, such as those of orphans, and in households headed by older people, women, children, and young people themselves.

While primary school enrolment rates are generally high in SADC, completion rates and transition from primary to secondary school is low, with net enrolment rates of as low as 19 per cent, and high of lower than 45 per cent in a majority of Member States. School attendance is much lower among poor families than wealthy families, for reasons that include high cost of secondary education, selection examinations, inadequate number of vacancies in secondary schools, as well as inaccessibility of secondary schools.

Sub-Saharan Africa has the highest school dropout rate globally, with an average of 17 per cent of pupils dropping out between the first and second grades. Despite attempts in various parts of the region to introduce free schooling, the costs associated with

education are still too high for many vulnerable young people (Save the Children UK, 2006).

Failure rates of above 80 per cent for the few who progress to secondary school have recently been recorded in some Member States. Such pupils cannot proceed to higher levels of education or to most of the traditional professional training institutions either, for reasons that include the following: prohibitive fees, limited spaces, and ineligibility due to poor grades. Consequently, the SADC region has an average tertiary education enrolment of less than 7 per cent.

A majority of young people drop out of school. Education systems in the region do not provide enough opportunities for those who drop out of primary or secondary school, to re-enter school later in life. Neither can such people be accepted immediately into the labour market. This contributes to high levels of youth unemployment, which ranges between 25 per cent and nearly 90 per cent (SADC, 2011).

Efforts to equip the youth with appropriate education, as well as technical and vocational skills that can enable them to become successful entrepreneurs and secure decent employment are inadequate. For instance, Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) tends to have low status and low support in the SADC region, with an absence of clarity of national vision with regard to the purposes of TVET, a weak knowledge base for regional TVET, and a lack of definitional agreement regarding its nature and scope. There is also often a mismatch between education and skills training, on the one hand, and the social economy, on the other.

At the same time, formal education is not equipped well enough anymore to fulfil the growth in expectations and learning needs of individuals and communities in the rapidly changing global society. On its own, it does not produce enough knowledgeable and skilled people required by the African economy. In fact, in view of the high school dropout rates in many SADC countries, most adult and young populations acquire skills, knowledge and competence built up through non-formal and informal means. Workplaces, communities, apprenticeships, internships, family environments can all provide the type of knowledge, skills and competencies that the global economy requires, and that are valuable for citizenry, social and cultural participation and growth.

With the right policies and investment choices regarding children and young people, and with the purposeful, coordinated and integrated creation of opportunities for youth socio-economic and political participation, employment, entrepreneurship and productivity, the region's overwhelmingly young population can be transformed from a "problem" to a "demographic dividend or bonus". Thus recognition, validation, and accreditation of prior learning through non-formal and informal learning pathways can play a significant role in regard to addressing the critical skills shortages required to realise the renewed SADC vision for industrial development and socio-economic transformation, and most

importantly, "to address related challenges of poverty-reduction, job-creation, employment and social inclusion" (CEDEFOP: 2008).

RPL, therefore, has the potential to improve employability, mobility, lifelong learning, social inclusion and self-esteem. More and more countries are in the process of establishing RPL systems for which some of the key drivers include promoting social inclusion, and equity for disadvantaged groups by valuing prior learning and providing them with opportunities to obtain qualifications.

### **2.3 Process for Developing the Guidelines**

The guidelines were developed following an extensive consultative process of RPL experts and practitioners, and other stakeholders representing the government, the United Nations organisations -- ILO and UNESCO, in particular -- different sectors at the SADC Secretariat, and regional non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

A desktop study on RPL system and processes of selected SADC Member States, and those other regions was undertaken at the beginning of 2014, which led to first RPL document in February, 2014. The first draft RPL paper received inputs and feedback from member states, following which it was revised in January, 2015. The revised draft RPL paper was then presented for review at a regional consultative and sharing meeting on "RPL and Good Practices for Skills Development", held in South Africa in August, 2015, and attended by senior RPL experts and practitioners from all SADC Member States, and selected representatives from other African and international countries.

The meeting held in August, 2015, drew on the draft technical RPL paper to develop the draft RPL guidelines, with facilitation from a technical team comprising of experts from ILO and the SADC Secretariat. The draft RPL guidelines were validated by a task team of experts from Botswana, Namibia, Mauritius, South Africa, and Tanzania in January, 2016, before circulation to Member States. The draft final guideline will be presented in the next meeting between the Technical Committee on Accreditation and Certification (TCCA), and the Technical Committee on Technical and Vocational Education and Training, scheduled in 2016 for final technical review and consensus building, after which it will be submitted to SADC Ministers of Education and Training for approval in a meeting in 2016.

### 3. Understandings of Recognition of Prior Learning

The idea of RPL is aligned to main elements of the SADC policy discourse since the first conceptualisation of a regional qualifications framework in 1997. These main elements were transformation, harmonisation, referencing, lifelong learning, access, and mobility. RPL is suggested as a process aimed at recognising that individuals may have acquired learning outcomes through several different learning processes, and in different contexts. It consists of identifying, assessing, and certifying all learning outcomes, however acquired.

As the rest of this document will show, this puts a lot of weight on the assessment process, which is at the core of RPL.

**Recognition** is the keyword and has two significant meanings in this context. It is the recognition by an assessor or a panel of assessors, that individual applicants actually have learning outcomes that meet existing standards, and which is comparable and has parity of esteem with formal learning (and can be validated, once assessed).

It is also the recognition by the society -- and primarily the employers and the labour market actors -- that awards delivered to successful RPL applicants have currency in the society. This societal recognition is essential to the full RPL process, so that end-users find RPL attractive and may actually benefit from their investment in the RPL process.

**Prior Learning** indicates only learning outcomes that have been achieved prior to the assessment matter; recognition of future learning is not possible. Although various countries around the world use different terminologies<sup>1</sup>, SADC Member States use the term "RPL" for this process. What is worth noting here is that individual applicants may bring to the assessment process prior learning outcomes that might have taken place in any context, whether formal, non-formal, or informal. There is indeed a continuum of learning, from extremely formal (for instance, school, university), to non-formal (for instance, somewhat organised, or side learning), and to totally informal (for instance, private or occupational experience). What matters is that RPL assessors aim at identifying existing learning outcomes rather than their origin.

RPL broadly consists of providing evidence by applicants, to an assessor(s) support their claim that they have learning outcomes that meet the requirement of standards set up by an appropriate authority in a country. The assessment process, therefore, aims at checking these learning outcomes against those standards. The RPL process may lead

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<sup>1</sup> For instance, Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR), Accreditation of Prior Learning (APEL), Recognition of Acquired Skills (RAS), Recognition of Acquired Competences (RAC), or Recognition of Non-formal and Informal Learning Outcomes (RNFILO).

to the awarding of credits, partial qualifications, or full qualifications. It may also lead to the exemption of academic prerequisite to enter a formal study programme, or the exemption of all or part of the curriculum in such a programme. Finally, RPL may also lead to the awarding of a labour market certificate of competencies that have currency in the labour market, provided employers' associations are involved in the process, but not in the formal education and training system. The latter approach, consisting of awarding "local" labour market certificates, is more limited in scope, since it does not give the opportunity for successful RPL applicants to (re)enter a formal study programme, but is faster to organise. All the possible awards delivered to successful applicants at the end of the RPL process are not mutually exclusive. They may coexist in a comprehensive RPL system. It is for individual SADC Member States to decide according to their own needs and objectives.

These guidelines aim at shedding light on all the possible options so that SADC Member States may take informed decisions, and RPL practitioners may apply them accordingly. By providing guidelines, this document allows for SADC Member States to harmonise their practice in the implementation of RPL, while leaving some flexibility for existing idiosyncrasies in the region.

Box 1 provides a summary of cornerstones for practical definitions and mutual understanding about RPL.

### **Box 1: Cornerstones for Practical Definitions and Mutual Understanding**

- *RPL is a process.*
- *RPL may lead to several different outcomes; a qualification\* is only one of them.*
- *What is recognised are the learning outcomes, not the learning alone, since all learners are different. Some learners may never reach the acquisition of actual identifiable consistent learning outcomes.*
- *RPL assessment does not aim at distinguishing between formal, non-formal and informal learning outcomes. On the contrary, it aims at assessing what individual applicants know or are capable of doing, regardless of how they have acquired their learning outcomes.*
- *It is the learning context/setting that may be more or less formal -- from formal to non-formal and informal -- not the competencies, and even less the qualification. There is nothing more formal than a qualification.*
- *The assessment process could also be more or less formal, depending on the objectives of the applicant and the nature of the outcomes (in most instances, the awarding of a qualification demands a formal assessment process).*
- *Recognition has several meanings, two of them being extremely relevant to RPL: recognition of learning outcomes (the technical part, this is carried out by assessors, and is also called validation), and recognition of the awards delivered to successful RPL applicants (for instance, qualifications).*
- *To a large extent, qualification and certification may be taken for synonyms; they designate both the process and the outcome of this process. A qualification is a*

*document describing learning outcomes achieved, and delivered by a competent (preferably widely-recognised) body.*

- *RPL is another route to qualifications, thus making the lifelong learning system more equitable for those self-learners who could not attend, or could not attend long enough, the formal education and training system.*
- *RPL is about making all learning outcomes and competencies visible.*
- *RPL is not about deciding for the individuals; it is about providing opportunities to them.*

*\* A qualification is a document delivered by a competent body or a partner institution (for instance, a ministry), to an individual when this competent body determines that he has achieved learning outcomes up to specified standards. This document describes these learning outcomes, or the corresponding competencies (knowledge, skills and attributes). A qualification is the main constituting element of the National Qualifications Framework (NFQ), and the related catalogue of qualifications. A qualification has currency in the lifelong learning formal system and in the labour market, so that successful RPL applicants may as well resume formal studies and/or apply for any job demanding such a qualification.*

*In the case of the RPL process, the award delivered to applicants at the end of the assessment process may be only partial. In this case it could be a set of credits toward a qualification, or incomplete qualification, with clear caveats that the applicants have not met all expected standards.*

#### **4. Rationale for the Guidelines**

RPL is a complex process, and implementing it requires making essential and engaging decisions at almost every stage of the process. The publication of guidelines may, therefore, help decision makers to make informed decisions, for instance, by knowing all the possible alternatives at crucial stages, or the essential building blocks in the early implementation phase. These guidelines are intended for policymakers and practitioners who are involved in the implementation of RPL in the SADC region.

These guidelines are a result of cooperative effort of all SADC member states. Some of them have been implementing RPL for several years, while others are still at an early stage. However, all agree on the necessity to provide guidelines that would be valid across the region. The guidelines may even act as a roadmap to facilitate regional cooperation and integration in the area of RPL, among the member states.

A wide range of issues faced by decision makers and practitioners in the implementation of RPL arrangements at different levels, which are way beyond the sole education and training system, are addressed in these guidelines. Given that RPL provides a platform where different stakeholders -- for instance, employers, NGOs, the private sector and trade unions -- can meet, these guidelines aim at addressing the potential needs for information, clarification or actions for these stakeholders. The guidelines have been primarily developed to provide guidance about the concepts and the nature of the awards to be delivered at the end of the RPL process to successful applicants, the differences in the implementation stage, and the need for harmonisation within the SADC. They are meant to facilitate the decision-making process regarding all the components of any RPL process, from concept and assessment and award, and their societal recognition. Further elaboration of these guidelines and additional material will be needed over the course of time in order to facilitate effective cooperation and peer-learning in the SADC region.

## 5. Purpose and Scope of the Guidelines

5.1 The purpose of the guidelines is to provide guidance for use by member states in the recognition of prior learning, and a framework for regional harmonisation and benchmarking of RPL across the region.

### 5.2 Scope

These guidelines provide for further development and implementation of RPL, including its resourcing, effective delivery and quality assurance across the education and training system, which spans general, as well as further and higher education and training. The guidelines cover all aspects of RPL in as far as it is about what the individual knows and or can do, regardless of how, when, with whom, and where the learning occurred, as long as he can demonstrate his claim for such competencies.

The RPL guidelines can be used as a strategic guideline document by multiple users. It can be used by member states, government departments, quality assurance bodies, education and training providers, business and industry, labour unions, RPL practitioners, and citizens of member states.

### Guiding Principles

For the SADC member states to successfully implement RPL, we should be guided by these principles underpinning successful delivery of RPL. The RPL process is not meant to be prescriptive. It should not impose any particular approach, but rather a provision of new opportunities. The guiding principles for the development and implementation of the guidelines toward the establishment of a RPL system are:

- i. **Integration and comprehensiveness:** Policies, strategies and programmes aiming at recognising all learning outcomes must be tailored to the needs of individual applicants. Remaining barriers should be lifted so that individuals with any kind of educational background become legitimate in applying for the assessment of their non-formal and informal learning outcomes.
- ii. **Systemic approach:** Interventions for RPL should be implemented in a systematic manner under the lifelong-learning umbrella. They should consider the interrelationships, inter-linkages, interdependency, and overlaps of the core essential services of RPL, and how these influence the achievements of desired outcomes. They should be implemented in programmes, government budgets, and institutional arrangements, in order to facilitate coordinated partnerships and effective referral systems that can ensure access to all necessary complementary services.

- iii. **Inclusion and non-discrimination:** Policymakers, strategy designers, programme planners and service providers should consider non-discrimination in all forms, including that on the basis of gender, language, religion, socio-economic status, geography, cultural group, ethnicity and disability, membership of a marginalised group, or other grounds, particularly regarding availability and appropriateness of services to ensure that all potential applicants receive equal attention and services and are able to access proper guidance regarding RPL and enrol accordingly if they wish to do so, and achieve optimal educational outcomes.
- iv. **Participation:** RPL is premised on the inclusion of all affected role-players in the development of the responses necessary to address barriers to assessment and recognition of prior learning. All RPL planning, development, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation should contribute to building a conducive environment in order to facilitate participation by these role-players, including government ministries, assessors, careers guidance officers, teachers, parents, civil society, education and training institutions and RPL applicants themselves, and contribute to building a conducive environment.
- v. **Transparent:** All stakeholders and institutions must operate in an open and accountable manner. Different service providers should share their efforts and experiences with one another to enable synergy. The RPL process is clear, consistent and transparent.
- vi. **Sustainability:** Interventions and additions should be continuous so as to provide long-term benefits and ensure long-term effectiveness, without bringing about any harm or negative effects, or compromising the wellbeing of individual RPL applicants, potential applicants and graduates and that of service providers, at present, and in the future.

## 7. RPL Implementation Stages

Once the three supporting mechanisms are in place, a generic RPL process for a typical applicant consists of five stages. A generic flowchart explaining such a generic RPL process is shown in Table 1, and the key stages are described below.

### 7.1 Introductory statements

A somewhat elaborated but rather simple and adaptable RPL process contains five consecutive stages for the applicant. Such a generic RPL process revolves around two core elements: information and guidance, and assessment and certification. These are supported by mechanisms such as awareness and publicity, quality assurance, appeals and skills-gap training.

Before talking about the RPL process, there is indeed a need for systemic elements. There is a need to build awareness and interest about RPL in potential candidates, employers, and other stakeholders. The RPL agency (the national institution

responsible for RPL) and providers play a key role, publicising what RPL is, its benefits, whom to contact, the process, estimated costs, timeframe, eligibility requirements, and the assistance available. This publicity and awareness-building take place on different platforms, including websites, social networking, information sessions at workplaces and education institutions, fairs, sport events and the media.

Quality assurance is a necessary condition for building trust in the qualifications delivered to successful RPL applicants. It helps in ensuring the credibility and consistency of RPL qualifications. Quality assurance mechanisms should be so designed that they are comprehensive, and cover issues such as using competence standards for assessment; ensuring the availability of competent RPL practitioners; collaborating with employers' and workers' organisations and other relevant stakeholders; developing assessment tools and methods as references for practitioners; accrediting RPL centres; moderating assessments; developing monitoring and evaluation frameworks; conducting independent auditing of the RPL process as a whole; and disseminating results of evaluation and audit to all stakeholders. In addition, quality assurance mechanisms become more and more complex when the level of qualifications increases or when those qualifications lead to regulated occupations. The most frequently used quality assurance mechanisms are:

- Establishing common and widely-agreed assessment standards;
- Ensuring the availability of competent RPL practitioners;
- Collaborating with employers' and workers' organisations and other relevant stakeholders;
- Developing assessment tools and methods;
- Establishing an accreditation system for RPL centres;
- Evaluation of RPL policies and strategies, with data collection;
- Independent auditing of the entire RPL process and system; and
- Disseminating results, and communicating to the wider public about RPL.

An appeal mechanism -- which may be formal or informal -- should be in place for unsuccessful applicants.

Finally, evidence suggests that despite the screening process and the eligibility stage, some applicants do not meet the assessment standards, but this gap may not be wide. For them, it would be interesting to make provisions for the acquisition of further learning outcomes so that applicants can fill competence gaps and meet the desired standards.

### **7.1.1 Stage 1: Information and guidance**

Guidance takes place at each stage of the RPL process. It is not a stage as such, because it is essential all along the RPL process for applicants to understand RPL, and to make informed decisions. Evidence suggests that guidance is a key element of success in the RPL process, and of success later in life, when it comes to reaping the benefits of newly-acquired RPL qualifications.

There are other prerequisites for establishing an RPL system, which include development of competency standards; qualifications and assessment tools; accreditation of RPL providers and assessors; development of monitoring and evaluation (M&E) systems; including management information system (MIS); and the capacity-building of institutions and staff. Some of these might be available in a country as part of education system already (These issues will be discussed in the next section).

During the initial stage, applicants interested in RPL obtain detailed information and orientation from facilitators appointed by an RPL provider. The facilitators assess candidates' suitability for a specific qualification, provide the necessary information about learning outcomes required for the qualification, and the nature of evidence required.

At the end of stage 1, the applicant may decide whether to enrol in the RPL process or not.

### **7.1.2 Stage 2: Administrative registration**

Once the applicant has decided to enrol in the RPL process (Stage 1), he obtains an administrative application form -- or a binder -- and documents detailing the RPL process and its requirements in stage 2. This stage is purely administrative and aims at gathering information about the applicant for guidance later in the RPL process, research and evaluation of the RPL policies, strategies (for connecting initial profile and success, for instance), and verifying the applicants' potential rights (to a grant, or to a study leave, typically).

The administrative registration consists of basic biographical data and does not yet contain elements regarding the learning outcomes or objectives of the applicant. It is short and aims at making the process formal. Evidence suggests that some degree of formality may create motivation for most applicants. It may also be a strong deterrent for applicants not at ease with administrative formalities, such as illiterate people; great care should be exercised not to turn away potential applicants.

At the end of stage 2, the applicant is officially registered, and therefore engaged in the RPL process and knows about the RPL system and stakeholders. He may, therefore, benefit from the existing system regarding right to study leave and/or grants. This stage being administrative, a negative decision is rarely definitive; it may merely mean that the applicant has not provided all the necessary personal details or documents.

### **7.1.3 Eligibility**

Once the RPL applicant is officially registered (Stage 2), the RPL facilitator and the information provided help the applicant in deciding the qualification, and the level at which to apply. To this end, the applicant provides documentary evidence to back his claim.

Based on the documentary evidence provided, and on the qualification targeted, the applicant may be declared eligible. It means he has the right to be assessed towards the chosen qualification.

This stage aims at screening out applicants who do not meet the criteria to apply for RPL (for instance, they have little or no experience in the field) with the objective of containing the costs, and of not creating unnecessary expectations with potential applicants who would ultimately fail in the RPL assessment.

### **7.1.4 Assessment**

The assessment stage is the core of the RPL process. Provided there is quality assurance and the applicant is legitimate, it is the key stage of the entire RPL process. It directly leads to the award of a qualification for successful applicants and may involve a number of steps:

- Application screening;
- Guiding the applicant in gathering pieces of evidence;
- Elaboration of a portfolio of competencies;
- Written examinations;
- Practical testing; and/or
- Interview with a panel of assessors.

The objective of the assessment stage is to not only decide whether the applicant's learning outcomes meet expected standards, but also to help him self-assess his situation and make personal and occupational progress toward his objectives. A portfolio of competencies should typically aim at getting applicants to reflect on what they know or can do; and on the progress they have made regarding these competencies.

There is a vast choice of assessment methods; most convincing approaches use a mix of different methods such as:

- Portfolio of competencies (with varied pieces of evidence, from photographs to written reference by peers or managers);

- Simulation of a workplace situation;
- Observation at the workplace (for working applicants);
- Presentation (oral);
- Interview(s); and
- Written examination in some instances (for instance, for challenging a course in tertiary education).

A portfolio of competencies is usually considered a necessary first step since it may be used as evidence for learning outcomes, and because it helps applicants in formalising their learning outcomes, whatever the ultimate assessment method(s). A portfolio of competencies is a collection of evidence prepared by an applicant in support of his claim of meeting the requisite learning outcomes of a formal qualification. The nature of evidence recommended by various countries and development agencies includes:

- Certificates and awards;
- Letters of recommendation;
- Samples of work;
- Videos and/or photographs of work activities;
- Skills logbooks;
- Details of formal training, records of seminars, conferences and workshops attended;
- Resume and performance appraisals;
- Testimonials from current or previous employers; and
- Past jobs descriptions.

It is at this assessment stage that (preferably widely agreed) assessment standards are used. They guarantee that RPL applicants are assessed against the same expectations as learners in the formal learning system.

At the end of the assessment stage, the assessor(s) may declare the applicant successful at the level he has been aiming for. If not, additional guidance is needed to help the unsuccessful applicant to decide on his options, especially if he would like to be assessed again in a near future, which may entail further acquisition of experience, and/or enrolment in a formal learning programme.

### **7.1.5 Appeals**

Instead of a formal appeal procedure -- long, costly and uncertain -- countries may want to develop specific guidance for unsuccessful applicants. Nevertheless, the assessor(s)

should always motivate their decisions, and provide ample details of the missing elements in the learning outcomes of unsuccessful applicants.

### 7.1.6 Certification

Once the applicant’s learning outcomes have been validated (Stage 4), the last stage is the awarding of the corresponding qualification. Often, it involves a/the certifying body signing the qualification on behalf of a ministry.

A ceremony may be organised. There is evidence that such a ceremony may have virtue since it is a way to communicate success stories to the wider public, which in turn may raise awareness and create interest toward RPL.

**Table 7-1: Flowchart of the RPL Process for the Applicant**

Stages	Detailed actions	Decisions and possible consequences	
<b>1. Information and guidance</b>	Initial contact -- Greetings		
	Information and guidance		
	Decision by the applicant to enrol	Yes (Leads to Stage 2)	No (End of the process)
<b>2. Administrative registration</b>	The applicant receives the application form/binder		
	Guidance (light)		
	The applicant formally applies (by handing over the form/binder with personal details)		
	The application is being processed		
	Decision to accept the application	Yes (Leads to Stage 3)	No (The applicant is invited to provide the missing documents or personal details)
<b>3. Eligibility</b>	Guidance		

	The applicant chooses which qualification he wants to apply for (which implies choosing a level)		
	The applicant hands over documentary evidence for eligibility		
	Assessment of documentary evidence and/or eligibility interview (assessment fixed criteria)		
	Decision regarding eligibility	Yes (Leads to Stage 4)	No (Explanations about shortcomings are provided to the applicant)
<b>4. Assessment</b>	Guidance		
	The applicant hands over his portfolio of competencies, with learning outcomes		
	Assessment of the portfolio of competences (against existing standards)		
	Convocation		
	Written examinations and/or practical tests (assessment against appropriate standards)		
	Interview with a panel of assessors (assessment against appropriate standards)		
	Moderation		
<b>5. Appeal</b>	There needs to be an appeal mechanism		
<b>6. Certification</b>	Validation of the learning outcomes presented by the applicant	Yes (Guidance for further steps in the education and training)	No (Guidance; new acquisition of learning outcomes, that is, more experience or

		system and/or the labour market	formal learning programme)
	Delivery of a qualification		
	Ceremony		

- <sup>1</sup> A country should adopt the model to its own national education and training system and appropriate models and approaches to RPL. These should be applicable to their contexts and applicable to the NQF level, and the type of qualification the candidate wishes to achieve.
- Appeals: Countries should ensure that an appeals procedure exists.

## **8. Building Blocks of RPL**

In most SADC member states, RPL is yet to be fully implemented, that is, on a national basis and for all citizens. Therefore, new pieces of evidence about what works and what does not, will continue to be collected. Nevertheless, SADC member states have identified 12 key success factors or building blocks that may guide stakeholders when implementing an RPL system. There is no intention of prescribing one model for all countries, but paying attention to these 12 building blocks should have the potential to generate a momentum in SADC member states that are experiencing slow implementation and difficulty in up-scaling from project-based piloting to establishing a sustainable national RPL system that is accessible to all. The 12 building blocks are elaborated below:

### **8.1 Building awareness about RPL and providing effective career guidance services to RPL applicants**

The concept of RPL corresponds with many different terminologies and definitions; its processes and methodologies also vary from one country to another. Various definitions and languages hinder an effective discourse. In the SADC region, member states are in various levels of awareness about RPL process and approaches, thus making it difficult to be accepted by employers for employment purposes, and by tertiary education institutions for admissions. The low awareness of RPL in SADC member states, particularly amongst those with low levels of attainment in the formal education and training system, is the biggest challenge to increase its uptake. It requires targeted advocacy campaigns and information strategies.

In SADC member states, the RPL methods for assessing competencies (knowledge, skills and attributes) of people are fairly complex, and the candidates applying for RPL require significant support and counselling during the various processes -- from the initial stage of information gathering, to the final assessment and certification process. Career guidance services should also extend to the post-RPL process: those who do not satisfy all requirements to be awarded a qualification or part-qualification/partial qualification; it is about finding top-up or gap-training solutions. For those who succeeded in achieving the qualification or part-qualification, it is about making the best possible use of their newly-acquired qualification.

The career guidance officers must provide correct information about the process, as well as guide RPL applicants in collecting evidence, while also maintaining quality and integrity in the assessment. The full information package should include:

- Potential benefits of RPL to all stakeholders, especially the applicants;
- Requirements for entering the RPL process (eligibility condition/s);
- Assessment/qualifications standards used in the assessment process;
- Cost of the entire RPL process, especially for applicants;

- Timeframe and the potential flexibility with the timelines; and
- Any other aspects of the RPL process that may be of interest to applicants (process, forgone earnings, and opportunity costs).

The aim is to provide effective counselling at the earliest possible stage of the RPL process, so that suitable applicants are identified and the rejections at the final assessment stage are minimised. This also helps reduce costs and prevent the RPL system from being overloaded. To this end, and if possible, SADC member states are encouraged to use information and communication technologies for effective and efficient career guidance in the context of RPL.

A well-directed strategy must be developed to help in creating awareness about RPL, its potential benefits, and in building positive attitudes from all parts of the society.

#### **Box 8-1: Concrete elements regarding awareness about RPL**

- Career guidance services should be provided by trained, qualified professionals; assessors may also guide RPL applicants, mainly about the assessment process. However, the primary responsibility of the guidance process should be left to professionals.
- Career guidance officers are facilitators in the RPL process.
- There is a possibility to prescribe specific amount of time to be allocated to all RPL applicants for access to career guidance services.
- Mobile telephone and SMS communication system has proven efficient and effective to fight illiteracy; similar techniques could be considered for raising awareness about RPL and guiding potential applicants through the RPL process (key messages, reminders of deadlines and so on).
- Career guidance should be organised (and flyers available) in all languages used throughout the region.
- Dissemination of information by way of non-traditional means (that is, not written) such as radio, television, and cartoon should be organised as often as possible for illiterate potential applicants with strong practical skills.
- Nobody should be forced into an RPL process; key factors are awareness and an appropriate set of incentive.

### **8.2 Integrating RPL policy with policy, legislative and regulatory frameworks for lifelong learning systems**

The RPL system should be an integral part of SADC member states' lifelong learning systems. It should promote alternate pathways to acquiring qualifications, ensuring parity between RPL and formal education and training. It should facilitate lifelong learning, and ensure the allocation of sufficient resources, so that stakeholders can take it seriously and thereby prioritise its development and implementation. These objectives

can be accomplished if national policies within SADC member states concerning employment, poverty reduction, development, migration, education and training emphasise the implementation of RPL.

Member states must ensure parity of esteem toward all competencies, whether acquired in a formal, non-formal, or informal context. Competencies are about what individuals know, are able to do, or their ability to behave in an appropriate way, regardless of how these competencies have been acquired. These competencies should be assessed in a valid, fair and reliable way, regardless of learning pathways. The role of SADC in promoting RPL within the Regional Qualification Framework (RQF) is crucial, and synergies should be established within the regional process, and mainstreaming migration in RPL processes at member states level.

### **Box 8.2: RPL and qualifications frameworks**

- As much as possible, involve institutions responsible for NQF, and RQF in the discussion about establishing the RPL system. Some concepts (learning outcomes) and objectives (transparency of the lifelong-learning system, mobility of qualified workers and equity) are common to both the RPL system and the qualifications framework.
- RPL promoters usually find it easier to implement RPL when there exists a qualifications framework, but its existence is not a pre-requisite for implementing an RPL system.

### **8.3 Ensuring active participation of all stakeholders, particularly social partners, in the development, implementation and evaluation of RPL**

The effective participation of stakeholders, especially employers' and workers' organisations, in lifelong learning systems, including initial formal education and training, is essential to ensuring that the needs of the labour market are matched. This presents a challenge for many countries, all the more so in those with a large informal sector in their economy, since establishing cooperation with informal sector enterprises is an obstacle in itself. Accordingly, the involvement of social partners in RPL is also impacted by their overall involvement in the lifelong learning system. However, low participation in RPL does not necessarily reflect apathy towards it.

### **Box 8-3: Definition and potential stakeholders in the RPL process**

Stakeholders are actors passively or actively interested, involved, or committed to RPL. Typical examples of stakeholders in this context are:

- The government;
- The ministry of education;
- The ministry of labour;
- Any other ministry interested in making competencies visible;

- An inter-ministerial body interested in education, training, human resources and/or the development and use of competencies;
- Employers, and employer organisations;
- Trade unions;
- Teachers;
- Assessors;
- Families;
- Learners and RPL applicants;
- NGOs;
- RPL providers;
- The private sector;
- Student associations; and
- Training and/or qualifications authority.

The early involvement of stakeholders helps in creating a sense of ownership that is conducive to using the RPL system and to recognise its value and the currency of the RPL awards, whether credits, partial, or full qualification.

While workers' organisations are generally supportive of RPL, employers' organisations give mixed signals. While some have led RPL implementation drives, others are apprehensive. The role of employers is central to the RPL process, since they may, at the same time, engineer the process and be end-users and beneficiaries of RPL. They have the potential authority to send their employees to an RPL process, and/or to demand a qualified labour force. Naturally then, they should be involved at every stage of the RPL process, from designing the system, elaborating the standards, assessing the applicants, to hiring the successful ones. Key factors influencing the likelihood of employers encouraging their employees to pursue RPL are:

- Is employing qualified workers a regulatory requirement or a condition for obtaining international quality assurance certification?
- Are employers concerned about employees' qualifications?
- What are its costs and benefits?
- Will RPL decrease absenteeism or encourage demands for promotions and higher wages?
- Is there an established link between qualifications and productivity?
- Are they fully aware of RPL and do they trust the quality of RPL system?

This is a "chicken or egg?" situation. Should employers trust the RPL system before deciding to participate, or vice versa? It is crucial to ensure active participation of all stakeholders, especially employers and workers in the planning, implementation and

evaluation of RPL, so that they not only ensure its quality, but also recognise its benefits.

#### **Box 8-4: Examples of concrete mechanisms for fostering stakeholders' engagement**

- Identifying and involving stakeholders from the beginning of the process and through all stages to ensure a sense of ownership and acceptance. (design of the RPL process, elaboration of assessment standards, participation in the actual assessment, hiring of RPL-successful applicants).
- Building capacity of stakeholders to ensure understanding of the concept and relevance of RPL.
- Collectively defining the roles of stakeholders in RPL process; and
- Incorporating agreeable stakeholders' suggestion in the process.

#### **8.4 Having an effective institutional framework for RPL**

Like any other new system, RPL requires a clearly defined institutional framework for planning and management. Some countries decided to entrust the responsibility for RPL to existing institutions without analysing their existing capacity constraints or awarding additional resources. RPL was, thus, viewed as leading to a similar form of assessment that many institutions implement for formal education and training systems, and allocated the responsibility for RPL to them. As a result, both public and private education and training institutions became RPL providers, mistakenly believing that the existing assessment of formal learning outcomes systems would cover RPL. In addition, many of these institutions lacked the additional resources and incentives to promote RPL as well as the capacity to implement RPL. As a result, the implementation of RPL was ineffective.

Therefore, when planning effective RPL implementation, a member state should comprehensively analyse the capacity of the existing institutional framework(s) for education and training. If setting up new institutions for RPL is not possible or essential, the capacity of existing institutions will need to be strengthened. This can be achieved by setting up exclusive RPL units within these institutions, employing additional professionals, and using information and communications technology (ICT) to implement and monitor RPL systems.

#### **Box 8-5: Three possible approaches to setting up RPL units in practice**

In determining the proper institutional framework, three possible approaches could be considered:

- Organising RPL in existing education and/or training institutes;
- Establishing independent RPL assessment centres; or

- Opting for a mixed approach with dedicated RPL centres, and accredited RPL units within the existing education and training institutes.

Whatever the chosen option, a coordination body/mechanism(s) will be necessary to guarantee equity of treatment of the RPL applicants.

As discussed in the previous section, effectively involving social partners and other stakeholders in the institutions chosen for implementing RPL could be conducive to establishing an effective institutional framework. Resource institutions for developing tools and building the capacity of RPL providers and professionals are also required. Again, this can be achieved by strengthening existing institutions or establishing new ones.

#### **Box 8-6: Some key initial steps for establishing an effective institutional framework for RPL**

- Analyse the capacity of the existing institutional framework(s) for education and training for RPL to be implemented effectively (cost, transparency, accessibility and effectiveness).
- Determine the approaches and institutional set up of RPL, depending on the context.
- Align the institutional frameworks to policy and legal framework.
- Put in place quality assurance standards, procedures and principles for RPL.
- Establish funding mechanisms.
- Determine the spread of RPL centres.
- Put in place a monitoring and evaluation framework for RPL.

### **8.5 Ensuring the availability of sufficient numbers of competent RPL practitioners**

The panel of assessors could be composed of teachers, professionals and/or RPL practitioners. These three actors could bring a variety of value addition to the assessment. The RPL practitioners, in particular, are key to the assessment process, since they guarantee the spirit of RPL is maintained. For instance, teachers have a tendency to assess against the curriculum they teach, whereas RPL is about what applicants know and are capable of doing.

In most countries, having an inadequate number of competent RPL practitioners acts as a barrier to implementing and scaling up of RPL. The system needs practitioners to perform key functions such as the development of assessment tools, counselling and facilitation, assessment and certification, quality assurance, audit and appeals, and RPL system and processes management. It is likely that different functions within the RPL system require different competencies and, therefore, different sort of practitioners -- from guidance to assessment.

Most shortages are in areas of tools development and assessment. As a solution, the RPL system should develop and implement training programmes to build practitioners' capacity, and develop tools, case studies and guides to assist them with carrying out their tasks effectively. Member states should also have a mechanism for accrediting and/or registering RPL practitioners, whether they are guidance advisers, or assessors.

The vocational preparation and qualification of RPL practitioners is necessary, even if the economic sector professionals are involved in the RPL process. The latter are often able to directly assess the practical skills, and/or sector-specific knowledge, but they have little or no experience about RPL, which is about assessing competencies through the way they are mobilised during the assessment process. Sector professionals and RPL practitioners are the two essential components of assessment. They bring different expertise to the RPL assessment and should work hand-in-hand.

### **Box 8-7: Some key steps for ensuring the availability of competent and qualified RPL practitioners**

- Establish a database of potential RPL practitioners, with information about their field of expertise (guidance, assessment) and their level of competence/experience.
- Determine the criteria for selection of RPL practitioners at different RPL practice levels.
- Identify RPL practitioners meeting the criteria.
- Conduct training needs assessment on potential RPL practitioners.
- Design training programmes for potential RPL practitioners according to training needs.
- Train practitioners on RPL processes.
- Identify strategic occupational sectors for piloting RPL.
- Accredite the RPL practitioners.
- Develop database for qualified and accredited RPL practitioners.

### **8.6 Ensuring close matching of occupational standards and qualification standards, at least for the achievement of partial, if not full, qualifications**

Occupational standards refer to tasks related to the practice of a job. Qualification standards refer to the rules for the achievement of a qualification. Qualification standards may include elements about the assessment (identification of the learning outcomes to be assessed, and the corresponding level), or assessment standards could be provided separately. In any case, qualifications standards describe the competencies attested by the qualification, and are, therefore, the link between the world of learning and work.

Assessment for the recognition of prior learning outcomes is carried out against pre-established standards that have been developed and agreed upon by a recognised group/team or body that has an interest in the qualification. Some RPL candidates

applying for a Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET qualification), for instance, have acquired a significant portion of their learning at the workplace. In these instances, the RPL process is made easier when assessors recognise occupational elements in the qualification standards. Failing to match occupational standards with qualifications standards may result in a mismatch between what a qualification holder is supposed to do, and what he is able to do.

This occurs due to many reasons. One, these two categories of standards are controlled and designed by different institutions, and if there is no strong partnership between the two, mismatching will often result. Two, each has a different set of objectives. Occupational standards, which are decided by the labour market, define the standards of performance (competencies) individuals must achieve when carrying out the functions of an occupation (plumber, driver, and so on), while qualification standards, designed by educational institutions, focus on how and what people need to learn, as well as how it will be assessed. Whilst occupational standards influence the latter, the organisation of learning in the formal education and training system is based on pedagogic principles, and on building a strong foundation for lifelong learning. A third difficulty in matching the two is that the competencies required for an occupation may vary in urban and rural areas, as well as between the formal and the informal sector. In addition, these competencies frequently change due to a number of factors, such as technological advancements.

In short, occupational qualifications are generally broad-based and, in many countries, the TVET programmes provide multi-skill training. It would, therefore, be difficult, even for a highly-skilled worker to acquire every competency for a full qualification through experiential learning and successfully acquire full qualification through RPL alone. Top-up training may, therefore, be necessary. Another consequence of this is that it is more the ability to take up the job and progress toward full mastery while on the job that the assessment process should reveal in the context of RPL, rather than the full mastery of each and every competence needed in the description of the expected competences. To support this point, one may refer to the strong evidence that exists showing that at workplace, workers do not use all the competencies that are included in the description of their qualification.

RPL is further complicated by the challenges associated with the recognition of foreign qualifications and experience. Here, consistency between national qualifications and mutual recognition can be promoted by aligning national and regional qualifications frameworks.

Given the above, qualifications should be modular and competence-based, with clearly-defined standards or a clear description of expected learning outcomes. The standards for full or modular-type qualifications (against which RPL applicants are assessed) should closely match the occupational standards used in the labour market. If the full qualification covers a broad range of skills, the modules may be designed in a manner to serve three distinct purposes:

- A module (or a combination thereof) must match the standards of the associated occupation;

- There must be horizontal and vertical linkages between modules; and
- Overall, the modules should come together to cover the standards of the full qualification.

Sometimes it requires innovative thinking to achieve these three objectives. However, designing such qualifications system allows workers to see their skills assessed and certified against a module or partial qualification, and ensures parity with formal education and training. If desired, workers can opt for additional modules, furthering their competencies, spending less time and money, and thus fulfilling the objective of lifelong learning. This methodology has the potential to strengthen the countries' NQF.

### **8.7 Developing effective and efficient assessment tools and methodologies appropriate for the context of target groups**

A tried and tested assessment method is critical for the successful implementation of any RPL system. Credibility and confidence in an RPL system, to a great extent, depends on the use of quality-assured means of assessment. In order to ensure parity of esteem between a RPL route and a formal route, assessment tools and methods should be premised on learning outcomes of a particular qualification, which can be used for formal as well as non-formal and informal learning. However, the differences in learning contexts and learners' characteristics make this difficult. In essence, the assessment process in the context of RPL is different from the assessment in the context of the formal education and training system. In the RPL context, assessment is individual and applicants bring their learning outcomes from their entire existence to the assessment, whereas assessment may be collective and mostly against a curriculum in the formal education and training system.

A possible solution for this is to impose that the assessment standards are the same in both systems, and to allow for flexibility when it comes to the assessment procedures. Assessment standards are about the learning outcomes, and they should be the same to guarantee parity of qualifications. On the other hand, the procedures could be flexible to accommodate the specificity of RPL in comparison to the formal education and training system.

#### **Box 8-8: Ideal characteristic of any assessment method**

- It is valid (competencies are identified, and pre-established widely agreed assessment standards are used).
- It is reliable (two different applicants with same competencies obtain the same award; and two different assessors assessing the same applicant come to the same decision).
- It is transparent (the assessment process is known to all actors of the assessment process, and all of them have the same information).

- It is manageable (the assessment process may be carried out on time, and within the existing budget).
- It is cost contended (in the case of RPL, the level of formalisation of the assessment process is adapted to the objectives of the applicant).

Quality assurance is another key component of the assessment process. While quality assurance in a formal system is carried out at all stages (Input, learning process and outcome), the RPL system cannot do this for the first two stages, since the system has no control over them.

To resolve this, a rigorous assessment method is used to ensure that only competent applicants are awarded qualifications, partial qualifications or credits. However, this results in a complex and time-consuming method that may act as a barrier for accessing RPL. It should also be noted that assessment in the context of RPL has no reason to be more thorough than in the formal education and training system, where it is almost always based on the assessment of a random selection of topics. A solution, for any RPL system, is to adapt the level of formalisation of the assessment process -- and therefore its cost -- to the qualification aimed and towards the objectives of the applicant. For instance, an assistant nurse aiming at becoming a nurse will have to be thoroughly assessed, with a quality-assured process and the formal delivery of a qualification.

In practice, one of the most widely-used approaches for RPL, namely the portfolio method, could be extremely demanding in relation to collecting evidence and completing documentation, particularly for individuals in the informal sector of the economy, or for those having limited formal education. Some applicants may lack the necessary writing skills for written examinations. In essence, the portfolio method presents challenges to RPL, especially in developing countries with a large informal economy, since producing creditable evidence and testimonials is difficult. Recognising this, countries are adopting various means to ensure a fair assessment of competencies of people without making the process too complex (**See Box 8-9**).

RPL is, in essence, a standalone process and it is important to ensure that candidates are at the centre this process. Nevertheless, this should not be at the expense of quality. Member states should, therefore, continue developing innovative assessment methods for RPL that:

- Are less time-consuming, more cost-effective and simple but credible; and
- Take into account the context in which each candidate's learning has been acquired and his individual characteristics.

#### **Box 8-9: Possible assessment approaches**

- Interview (with a panel of assessors). The panel could comprise of a trade expert, RPL expert and training expert.

- Observation for trade testing (assessors visit the applicant at the workplace). Employers may be reluctant since it disturbs the work process.
- Simulation for trade testing (a workplace environment is simulated, typically in a training centre). Agreement may be found with local training centres for assessment when the training facilities are not used (evening and weekends, for instance).
- Portfolio of competencies (collection of evidence aiming at proving the learning outcomes). It has the merit to guarantee that the applicant has mobilised literacy skills. The portfolio could be an e-portfolio, too.
- Combining the portfolio method with a trade test. Here, the portfolio and other criteria are used to screen potential applicants undergoing a trade test or examination, thus reducing exclusive reliance on the portfolio method.
- Combining the portfolio method with a panel interview.
- Group assessment is still to be developed. However, it should not replace individual assessment, which forms the essence of RPL. It could be used partly in the assessment process; and could bring cost effectiveness to RPL.

### **8.7 Promoting cost sharing and a sustainable, equitable funding mechanism for RPL**

Obtaining qualifications through RPL is economical compared to the costs of formal education and training. The cost of RPL depends on the method a country adopts, the level and type of qualification, and the extent of the support needed by candidates. It also depends on the availability of pre-existing competency standards and assessment tools in the country, and the institutions, if any, are responsible for RPL. The costs will be lower if existing institutions share the responsibility of RPL. Most countries follow this approach, but some have underestimated the cost implications and the complexity, and thus faced constraints in implementing and expanding RPL.

The economies are direct (The cost of preparing students for assessment in the formal system is higher than the cost of experiential learning in the RPL system, which is basically borne by the learners through non-formal and informal learning) and indirect (Forgone earning and all sort of opportunity costs are higher in the formal education and training system, where learners are mostly full-time students).

Countries should have clear guidelines on cost sharing of RPL between government, employers, applicants and other potential stakeholders to ensure its sustainability and the up-scaling. Having to bear the cost of RPL may be detrimental to potential applicants' motivation to enrol. Nevertheless, a good communication policy should be able to explain that the newly-achieved qualification through RPL may have returns on investment. Achieving a qualification in the formal education and training system is also costly in any case, and the situation should not be totally inequitable. However, discounts may be proposed to potential RPL applicants during promotional campaigns, to initiate the process and create positive word-of-mouth, for instance. It may also be the case that RPL is part of a wider policy of social promotion and fighting social

exclusion, or to help workers in the informal sector of the economy. Adapted fees may also be considered under such circumstances.

Employers may feel similarly reluctant, unless RPL is linked to a company's human resource management strategy. Initially, costs may be subsidised by governments, as is the case for education and formal training systems. Such subsidies may vary from target group to target group, that is, whether RPL is being delivered to those working in the formal or the informal sector of the economy; the employed or unemployed; the nature of qualification (elementary or higher education, TVET, and/or the country policy). However, employers could bear the opportunity cost, for instance, by giving paid leave, as well as the cost of skill-gaps training and of collecting evidence. Many countries have education/training or skills development levies, a part of which could be assigned to RPL.

To promote the use of RPL, governments may grant tax incentives to employers and individuals. In the case of SADC member states, international donors could also be asked to contribute to implementing the RPL strategy.

Since funding is a critical issue for sustainability of RPL, the governments should ensure a policy environment that ensures sustainable and equitable funding for RPL.

### **Box 8-10: Communicating about the cost and financing – Some guidelines**

#### **General**

- The cost of RPL depends on the approach selected by the country, the level and type of qualification, and the extent of support needed by applicants. Careful attention should be given to cost in the overall design of the system.
- RPL funding should not be divorced from funding of lifelong learning, and individuals should be able to choose how they want to use available lifelong learning money -- for studying or for having their prior learning outcomes assessed.
- Countries should estimate the cost of the RPL process broken down by educational sectors (TVET, secondary education, tertiary education), and industrial sector (assessment is more expensive when heavy-duty machinery is needed).
- As a rule, and whenever possible, the cost should be shared. Member states should have clear guidelines on cost sharing of RPL between the government, employers, applicants and other potential donors. For cost-sharing initiatives to be effective, they must be promoted by way of convincing, encouraging and promoting awareness amongst potential contributors. Public private partnerships (PPP) could be a possible strategy for cost sharing, as well as a levy system.
- While deciding to share the cost, attention should be given to the distinction between initial investment (infrastructure development, system development, promotion and capacity building, and so on) and operational costs (wage of RPL practitioners, assessment, monitoring and evaluation, and so on).
- Identify all potential sponsors (for instance, donors, international donors, employers, individuals, state, and trade unions).

- Money should be spent wisely. Resources should be devoted to essential elements of the RPL system even if they are not directly about assessment or validation, such as guidance for individual applicants or data collection for monitoring and research purposes. Proper guidance will help contain the costs, and evaluation will help improve the RPL system.

### **Applicants**

- Inform the applicants about the cost (direct and indirect, including forgone earnings or opportunity costs).
- Involve applicants in the financing -- even symbolically -- for motivation purposes.
- Organise cost-efficient pre-assessment to accept only relevant applicants.
- Waiting for the certified qualification (from the official authority) may be costly for RPL graduates: ensure it is delivered to them in due course. This may mean extra cost, unless a regular certification channel is used.

### **Government, practitioners**

- Careful targeting of groups most likely to benefit from recognition processes would help to contain the costs.
- Sustainability of funding is critical; therefore, the choice of funding sources should be long-term.
- Equitable funding mechanisms.
- Setting up the fund for disadvantaged groups, provided RPL is a credible option for them (that is, they have competencies to be assessed and certified).

### **Employers**

- Involve employers in the financing. Communicate about the benefits of a qualified workforce
- If there is a right to study leave system, extend it to RPL.

### **Guidance**

- One-stop centres for adult learning (top-up modular training); RPL and labour market opportunities are cost-effective. In particular, a coordinated approach for guidance in top-up training and RPL will lead to economies of scale in terms of paperwork and time.
- Anticipate a cost for initial guidance (validation vs education or training; level aimed vs qualification aimed, and so on) a cost for guidance throughout the RPL process, and a probable cost for guidance after the RPL graduation process.

### **Training providers**

- Incentivise training providers to break down their offer into modules, so only the top-up training is provided to RPL applicants who failed or who know they are not fully competent before enrolling in an RPL process.

### **Cost efficiency**

- Select the most cost-efficient assessment method(s). Adapt the level of formalisation to the objective of the applicant and the level aimed. Self-assessment is low-cost, but difficult to quality assure. Simulation is costly. Observation is less costly, but employers are reluctant.
- Select professionals from the neighbourhood for interviews in the assessment process.
- Consider every single opportunity for group assessment (literacy, some basic technical skills, and so on) and peer assessment (which is beneficial/revealing for the assessed peer and peer assessor).
- Evaluate whether the resources are used efficiently.
- The certification process (rubber stamping from the official authority) may be costly if it is organised separately). Ensure there is no loss of efficiency in the certification process (For instance, by using the formal education and training system certification authority)

## **8.9 Providing skills upgrading opportunities to RPL candidates**

There is strong evidence that typical RPL applicants have learning outcomes from experience that do not always match expected assessment standards. The gap between non-formal and informal learning outcomes and assessment standards requires some form of additional learning for most RPL applicants aiming at a full qualification. For applicants, this means upgrading their existing competences or acquiring new types of competences, or both, to meet prescribed standards. This presents a key challenge to RPL applicants, since education and training systems lack sufficient flexibility to deliver customised programmes to meet their training needs. Most of the provision is organised over a year or a longer period of time, and is not organised to only provide modules. In addition, the capacity of education and training institutions in developing countries is already stretched and usually unable to admit and provide education and training to all students seeking admission to formal, full-time education and training. Accordingly, they are not very keen to develop and deliver such customised short-term programmes.

The RPL system should promote competency upgrading opportunities for RPL applicants that can be delivered with flexibility. Bottlenecks in education and training infrastructure can be overcome if education and training institutes offer RPL programmes at weekends and in the evenings, thereby optimising the use of the existing infrastructure, which would reduce the cost of education and training. This type of arrangement could (and does) help the employed RPL applicants, as well as the education and training institutes.

As stated above, a modular system would also be cost-efficient since RPL applicants lacking some of the competencies to meet the standards would only receive the education and training they need to meet the standards, rather than the entire (expensive) package. A communication policy should be set in motion so that education and training providers realise they would benefit from delivering only part of the curricula, because they would enlarge their pool of potential “customers”.

Countries could explore partnership agreements with professional bodies, industry bodies, training boards, and so on to support up-skilling and gap-training for RPL candidates who need top-up training of up-skilling to meet the requirements and achieve the rest of the qualification or part-qualification

### **8.10 Building confidence in a quality-assured RPL system**

Scepticism is the most heard comment about RPL, especially among educationalists. As noted above, this is largely since the learning and input process is largely unknown, not only to the RPL assessors but also to the wider public. Until there is a major paradigm shift regarding RPL, having a traditional mind set may remain an issue. Some education providers and assessment bodies have little faith in an assessment-only approach for awarding qualifications. Some higher education institutions are also apprehensive about accepting RPL qualifications as the equivalent of qualifications delivered in and by the formal education and training system. Yet to be convinced of RPL, many students prefer learning in a formal setting, and interacting with their peers.

European guidelines for the recognition of non-formal and informal learning likewise observe there is a high level of trust in formal learning and hostility towards qualifications achieved after a non-traditional learning process (CEDEFOP, 2009). Though the word “hostility” may be too strong, some do consider the RPL route as inferior to the formal learning pathway. Such bias can be overcome, to a great extent, by emphasising the stringent adherence to quality in the RPL process; creating awareness among stakeholders about its high quality processes; ensuring stakeholders’ participation in the RPL process; and collecting and disseminating evidence about its impact, especially success stories of people who have benefited from RPL.

#### **Box 8-11: Possible actions for improving quality assurance**

- Quality assurance could be guaranteed by way of sub-contracting entities specialised in specific areas of competences.
- Their role would be to assess and mark learning outcomes in terms in quality and quantity.
- A legal framework could be created for monitoring and evaluating quality.
- Any RPL system should be quality assured and there should be a strategy for raising awareness about this quality.

## **8.11 Establishing and implementing an effective monitoring, evaluation and reporting system for RPL**

An effective monitoring, evaluation and reporting system should be in place for tracking the implementation, outcomes and impacts of RPL processes. Furthermore, the system should be able to take corrective measures for improving performance thereafter. Information about RPL outcomes and impacts should be communicated to all stakeholders to ensure their participation and allocation of resources for RPL. The data to be collected is mentioned in the box below

### **Box 8-12: Data to collect about RPL**

An M&E system should produce the following categories of information, disaggregated by gender, age, qualification type, partial or full qualification, and whether the worker was employed in the informal or formal sector:

- Figures on the numbers of applicants who enrolled, passed the eligibility condition(s), dropped-out (and at which stage), appeared in the assessment and passed the RPL;
- Applicants' views about RPL processes such as facilitation and guidance, the assessment method, and the provision and effectiveness of competences gap-training;
- Views of successful applicants about career progression, improvements in performance, self-esteem, and remunerations and ease of access to further education, and so on;
- Employers' views as to improvements in performance at work;
- Views from higher education institutions about the performance of students entering through the RPL route, compared to those who took the formal pathway; and
- Stakeholders who are interested or disinterested in RPL, and why.

## **8.12 Promoting knowledge management and sharing**

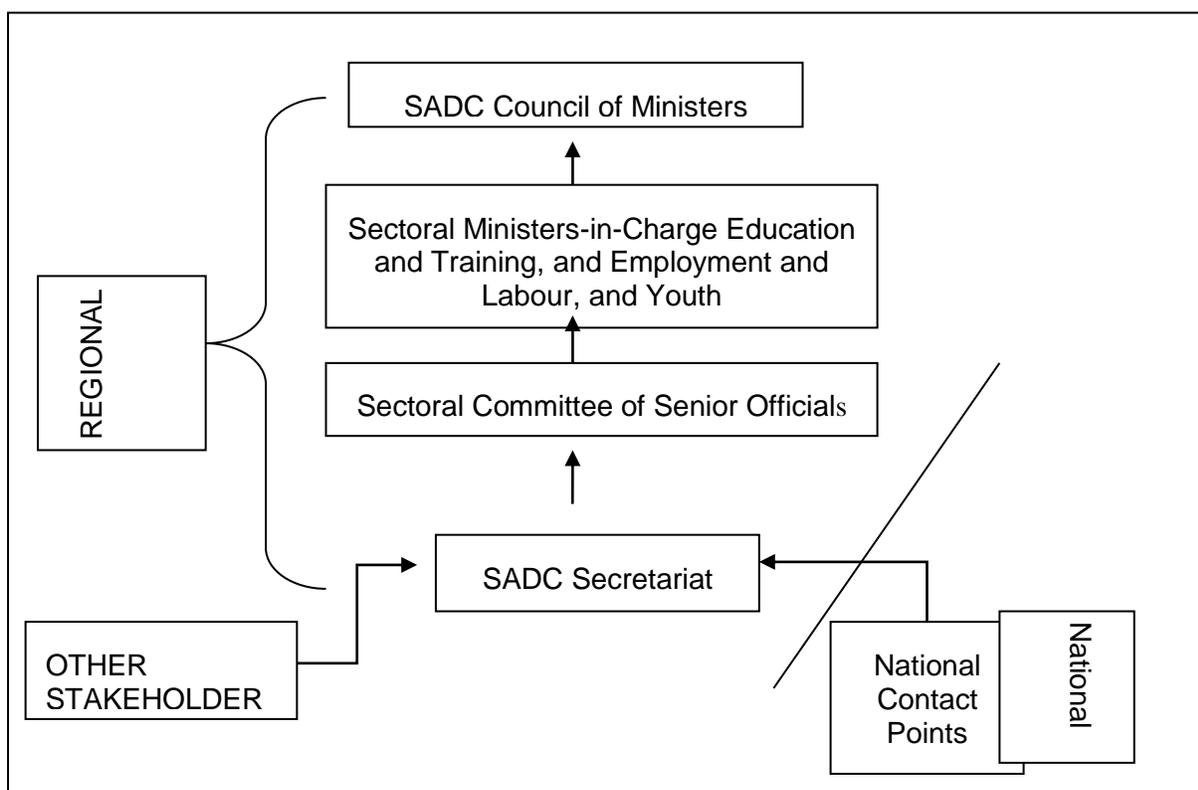
Since RPL in most countries is in the development phase, or at an early stage of implementation, these countries need to learn from others' experiences and share effective tools and practices. After all, there is no need for every country to reinvent the wheel. Management and sharing requires building effective interactive partnerships, as well as partnerships with international development agencies. The focus of cooperation should be on developing tools, building capacity, benchmarking and sharing those practices that did or did not work.

The SADC region can benefit from other regional bodies and international organisations that have carried out studies on country practices on RPL such as OECD, CEDEFOP, ILO, and UNESCO.

## 9. Implementation Mechanisms and Responsibilities

### 9.1 Stakeholders' roles and responsibilities

In line with the SADC Treaty, as amended, the key stakeholders that are critical to the effective implementation of the guidelines are depicted in the diagram below, followed by a description of their roles and responsibilities.



#### Council of Ministers:

- Approves SADC policies and oversees the implementation of those policies by the SADC sector and cluster ministers.
- Provides resources for the successful implementation of RPL.

#### Sectoral Committee of Ministers-in-charge of Education and Training, Labour and Employment, and Youth:

- Ministers of education and training provides leadership and oversees the implementation of the SADC RPL guidelines;

- Reports progress to the SADC council of ministers on the implementation of the SADC RPL guidelines.
- Other relevant sectoral ministers should support policy formulation and implementation, (referral, awareness and mobilising of resources) of RPL in their sector, in collaboration with ministries responsible for education and training.

### **Sectoral Committee of Senior Officials**

- To review reports on RPL in the region and advice ministers for approval and areas requiring improvement.

### **The SADC Secretariat:**

The SADC Secretariat will play a facilitative role to ensure that member states domesticate and implement the provisions of SADC RPL guidelines. More specifically, in line with member states' regulations, the SADC Secretariat will:

- Provide overall leadership and technical oversight in the implementation of the guidelines;
- Facilitate implementation of the guidelines at member state level through capacity-building of relevant office bearers, networking and sharing of lessons;
- Coordinate, monitor and evaluate implementation of the guidelines at member states level;
- Mobilise port resource mobilisation by member states for effective implementation of the guidelines, in collaboration with relevant SADC technical committees; and
- Report on the progress on the implementation of guidelines to the committee of ministers of education and training.

### **Member states, including private sector and employers' and workers' organisations:**

- Spearhead the implementation of the SADC RPL guidelines by domesticating and adapting them to their national context. The domestication and implementation should be through broad-based participation.
- Coordinate capacity building of relevant structures for implementation of the guidelines;
- Mobilise resources for effective implementation of the guidelines; and
- Report progress to the SADC secretariat through periodic reports.

**Other Stakeholders, including SADC Technical Committee on Certification and Accreditation (TCCA), Technical Committee on Technical Vocational Education, and Development Partners:**

- Conduct or host professional development activities in collaboration with local and international institutions to ensure provision of quality and gender-sensitive RPL programmes in the region;
- Share experiences and expertise to implementing RPL;
- Undertake periodic assessments thorough mechanisms such as peer reviews using members of the technical committee;
- Review and update the SADC RPL guidelines periodically based on emerging trends; and
- Provide technical and financial resources to implement the SADC RPL guidelines.

**9.2. Financing mechanisms**

Each member state will make the necessary budgetary allocation for RPL as part of implementing its national policy and strategic frameworks where RPL features.

**10 Monitoring, Evaluation (M&E), and Reporting**

The objectives of the M&E and Reporting mechanism of the SADC RPL Guidelines are to:

- 1) Ensure that the expected outcomes are being achieved; and
- 2) Provide regular information to all stakeholders on progress that would, among others, inform the basis for any reviews.

In line with the SADC Policy on Strategy Development, Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation (SPME), and guided by the data collection system described in section 7.11 of the Guidelines, M&E and reporting relating to the SADC RPL Guidelines will be organised as follows:

**Member states will:**

- Integrate RPL as part of the monitoring and evaluation frameworks of ministries responsible for education and training, and employment and labour;
- Strengthen and create databases for the systematic collection of required data relating to skills development, including RPL; and
- Submit requisite information on skills development, including RPL, to the SADC Secretariat.

## National Contact Points

- Coordinate communication between sectors on the implementation of RPL activities; and
- Coordination of different sectors to report on RPL to SADC structures through the SADC Secretariat.

## The SADC Secretariat will:

- Facilitate the development of a results framework to guide member states in the implementation of the SADC RPL guidelines;
- Develop relevant M&E tools that will guide the collection, analysis, dissemination, and utilisation of data on key indicators;
- Coordinate periodic review meetings with relevant stakeholders to assess progress;
- Produce standard progress reports annually ; and
- Conduct internal and external evaluation on the implementation of the SADC RPL Guidelines.

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