

## Meeting of ministers outlines future directions for SACMEQ

*Since 1994, the Southern African Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality, widely known as SACMEQ, has undertaken cross-national educational policy research in order to generate sound data for decision-makers to plan the quality of education. At a meeting held in Paris during 1997, ministers from all member countries outlined the directions which they felt that SACMEQ should be taking in the near future.*

**T**he Southern African Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality, or SACMEQ, has worked in close partnership since 1994 with the IIEP in order to undertake co-operative cross-national educational policy research. The main aim of this work has been to generate scientifically sound information that can be used by decision-makers to plan the quality of education.

In January 1997, SACMEQ was officially registered as an international non-governmental organization by the Government of Zimbabwe. SACMEQ's Subregional Co-ordinating Centre is located within UNESCO's Office in Harare, Zimbabwe. The Centre is managed by a full-time Director and is guided by a Managing Committee chaired by Zimbabwe's Minister of Education and Culture. SACMEQ's general policy is set down by an Assembly of Ministers consisting of the Ministers of Education and Culture, or their appointed representatives, for all SACMEQ countries.

SACMEQ's programme of educational policy research has four features which have optimized its contributions to the field of educational planning in Africa: it provides research-based policy advice concerning high-priority educational quality issues that have been identified by key decision-makers, it functions as a co-operative venture based on a strong network of ministries of education, it combines research and training components that are linked with institutional capacity building,

and its future directions are defined by the participating ministries.

The first Assembly of SACMEQ Ministers was held on 20 October 1997 at the Paris Headquarters of the IIEP. This historic meeting symbolized the emergence of SACMEQ as an integral and essential part of the educational policy dialogue process in Southern Africa. Three main items of business were considered at this meeting: the formal approval and signing of the SACMEQ Constitution by Ministers, the presentation of a Policy Forum on the educational policy implications arising from SACMEQ's initial project, and the adoption of SACMEQ's *Plan of Action* for the period 1998-2000.

### Membership

The Assembly of SACMEQ Ministers meeting initially reviewed, and then approved, all facets of SACMEQ's draft Constitution with particular reference to issues of membership and funding arrangements for the Subregional Co-ordinating Centre. It was decided that the membership of SACMEQ should consist of those countries that were involved in designing and implementing SACMEQ's initial educational policy research project during 1994-1997, plus those countries that had recently decided to sign the SACMEQ Constitution. These 'founding members' of SACMEQ were the IIEP, Kenya, Malawi, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, Tanzania (Mainland and Zanzibar), Swaziland, Zambia, and

Zimbabwe. Several other countries, including South Africa, have also shown interest in joining SACMEQ in time for the commencement of its next educational policy research project during 1998. The SACMEQ Ministers examined and approved the financial arrangements that had been set in place in order to ensure the successful operation of SACMEQ's Sub-regional Co-ordinating Centre in Harare, and to support SACMEQ's research and training initiatives for 1998. A formal resolution on this matter expressed gratitude for the generous contributions made by the Governments of Italy and the Netherlands towards the establishment and future development of SACMEQ.

### Policy forum

One of the highlights of the Assembly of SACMEQ Ministers meeting was a Policy Forum presented by SACMEQ National Research Co-ordinators concerning the educational policy implications of SACMEQ's initial project. Papers were presented and discussed on *four* main topics: equity in the allocation of human and material resources among education regions, changes in basic literacy levels at the Grade 6 level during the 1990s, baseline measures of the conditions of schooling in primary schools, and techniques for ensuring the integration of educational policy research within the decision-making structures of ministries of education. The Minis-

ters expressed their thanks for the excellent work undertaken by the SACMEQ National Research Coordinators in implementing SACMEQ's initial project. It was also noted that the initial project had been completed in association with major training initiatives designed to build the capacity of educational planners in Southern Africa to apply modern research methods in the field of educational policy research.

### **Plan of action for 1998-2000**

The Assembly of SACMEQ Ministers meeting finally turned its attention to the programme of research and training to be undertaken by SACMEQ in the period 1998-2000. It was decided to give priority to three main tasks: the dissemination of SACMEQ data and research findings, the building of institutional capacity in policy report preparation and data analysis techniques, and the design and implementation of a second SACMEQ educational policy research project focussed on monitoring the quality of education with respect to basic literacy and

numeracy. Each of these tasks will be based upon the utilization of a computer-stored methodological procedures and research data that were developed and/or collected during SACMEQ's initial project.

The first SACMEQ activity planned for 1998 is an intensive training workshop during which educational planners from Southern Africa will be given training in the skills required to access, analyze, and report data contained in the SACMEQ data archive. During this workshop several educational policy reports will be prepared that will have relevance for senior decision-makers in ministries of education in Southern Africa.

### **Looking ahead**

The *SACMEQ Concept* first emerged in 1993 as part of a research proposal prepared by educational planners from Zimbabwe, Zanzibar, Swaziland, Zambia, and Malawi. The authors of the proposal subsequently approached the IIEP for assistance in establishing SACMEQ as a co-operative cross-national mechanism for extending educational policy research and

training initiatives in Southern Africa. The proposal emphasized the many capacity-building benefits that would flow from providing opportunities for educational planners from many different countries to be able to work together, to learn from each other, and to share their experience and expertise.

Over the past five years SACMEQ has gradually grown into an impressive organization with an established world-class record in delivering research and training programmes. In 1998 SACMEQ faces several major challenges as it moves towards the commencement of its second educational policy research project, and as it seeks to expand its training programmes to a wider range of African countries. It is to be hoped that these ambitious and important SACMEQ initiatives will be both encouraged and supported by relevant bilateral and international agencies so as to ensure that this African-devised and African-owned initiative continues to provide valuable input to key decisions related to planning the quality of education.

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