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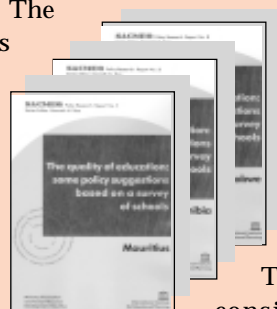
SACMEQ National Policy Reports launched at Ministers' meeting

Educational policy research was at the top of the agenda when national research coordinators from 12 countries involved in the Southern African Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ) held a major meeting in Durban, South Africa. The coordinators shared research findings generated by SACMEQ's initial project and commenced work on the design of a second major research initiative, known as *SACMEQ II*. This project, which is scheduled to run from late 1998 to 2001, aims to undertake cooperative cross-national research that can be used to guide government decisions aimed at improving the quality of education. The study will focus on an examination of reading literacy and mathematics achievement at Grade 6 level, and will also provide linkages to the first SACMEQ study so that changes in reading literacy levels can be monitored over a period of time. The research methodologies and cooperative working arrangements used for the second study will follow the already successful SACMEQ tradition of providing educational planners with advanced technical training by involving them as key partners in a high quality research programme that provides useful policy guidance.

During UNESCO's Conference for African Ministers of Education (MINEDAF) held in April 1998 in Durban, South Africa, a special "SACMEQ Policy Forum" was organized. This forum was attended by ministers of education, senior ministry officials, representatives from major agencies, and 20 educational planners from 12 countries in the Southern African sub-region. All were impressed by the substantial contributions that SACMEQ has been making in the field of educational policy research.

SACMEQ presents Five National Policy Research Reports

The SACMEQ national policy research reports have been designed to be accessible to a wide cross-section of readers and also to be used by decision-makers at all levels of ministries of education. The highlight of each report is the final chapter where some 40 policy suggestions based on the main research findings have been classified into five categories: consultations with staff, community, and experts; reviews of existing policies and procedures; new data collections for planning purposes; needed research studies; and investment in infrastructure.



The authors of the reports recognized the economic realities of SACMEQ countries by assigning a priority to each policy suggestion according to the time-frame and costs that would be involved in implementation. This key feature of the SACMEQ reports has placed them at the centre of realistic policy debates within ministries of education.

The reports are now considered to be essential documents by agencies seeking to facilitate productive educational reforms based on sound research evidence.

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At this meeting of SACMEQ national research co-ordinators, a trial version of a very large computer-stored data archive developed for SACMEQ's initial project was used to provide training in how to explore cross-national policy issues related to the conditions of schooling, equity in resource allocation, and reading literacy levels in primary schools. The participants accessed and analysed data from the archive in order to compare national and regional reading literacy levels across the SACMEQ countries, and to examine some of the impacts of various school resources on these levels. The final version of this data archive will be available on CD-ROM towards the end of 1998.

This first SACMEQ II meeting was held in Durban at the same time as UNESCO's MINEDAF Conference for African Ministers of Education. The SACMEQ national research co-ordinators were asked to prepare a formal presentation for this very important ministerial meeting in order to share their experiences concerning the launching of SACMEQ as an African-controlled international non-governmental organization based in Harare, Zimbabwe. A special SACMEQ Policy Forum for ministers of education from the ten Member Countries was also organized to discuss progress achieved by the initial project and to officially launch the first five National Policy Reports prepared in Mauritius, Namibia, Tanzania (Zanzibar), Zambia, and Zimbabwe (see box on page 1).

The SACMEQ Policy Forum was chaired by the Minister of Education, Zimbabwe, who is also Chairperson of the SACMEQ Assembly of Ministers. During the forum, the SACMEQ national research co-ordinators discussed their policy reports and provided information concerning the policy impact of their research programmes.

It was pointed out that the Zimbabwe report was currently being used as part of the deliberations of the Presidential Commission for Education, and that the Zanzibar report was being used by the Office of the Commissioner for Education to guide the implementation of reforms related to the conditions of schooling. It

was also noted that the Namibia report had been included as part of an on-going Ministry review of efficiency and effectiveness and plans had been made in Namibia for a large number of SACMEQ policy reports to be distributed to senior ministry officials and school heads. The initial draft of the Mauritius report had figured prominently in an earlier review of progress linked to their Education Master Plan

The ministers, senior ministry officials, and representatives from major agencies who attended the SACMEQ Policy Forum enjoyed and appreciated the frank and thoughtful manner in which SACMEQ national research co-ordinators presented their 'Agendas for Action' based on hard research evidence. Their presentations were strengthened by the SACMEQ approach of designing and implementing data collections that enable direct comparisons to be made across countries in terms of the conditions of schooling and the educational achievements of pupils.

SACMEQ represents a unique innovation in African education that has outgrown its 'experimental' stage and has started to integrate its general approach to high quality educational policy research into the daily operations of planning and research units in ministries of education in Southern Africa. In this sense, SACMEQ's contribution has moved beyond fostering excellence in research and training programmes that are aimed at improving the quality of education. SACMEQ's success has now formed an operational 'model' to be emulated for achieving sustained capacity building through genuine ownership.

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The IIEP would like to thank the Governments of Italy and the Netherlands for their generous support of the SACMEQ network over the past five years. For further information about the IIEP's programme of co-operation with SACMEQ, please contact Dr. Kenneth N. Ross at the IIEP (e-mail: k.ross@iiep.unesco.org).

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