

SACMEQ Ministers meet in Paris



On Sunday 2 October 2005, SACMEQ's Governing Body – the SACMEQ Assembly of Ministers – held its fifth biennial meeting at the IIEP, Paris in order to discuss the Consortium's research and training programmes, and to develop plans for its third large-scale survey of the quality of education in 14 Southern and Eastern African countries.

THE discussions and debates held at the Ministers Meeting demonstrated clearly that the Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ) has evolved, from its modest beginnings in 1995, as a small IIEP experimental training initiative, into an important African inter-governmental agency that delivers highly respected research and training programmes, aimed at building the capacity of member countries to monitor and evaluate the quality of their education systems.

The Meeting was attended by nine ministers of education, two ambassadors, and four senior officials who represented their ministers. In addition, there were around 60 observers, including senior UNESCO officials, principal and permanent secretaries, senior educational research professors, education directors, and officials from UNESCO National Commissions.

Feedback on policy impact

The message that resonated among the Ministers at the Meeting was that SACMEQ is now a key driver of educational policy reforms in participating countries. One after another, the Ministers took turns to share with colleagues the manner in which SACMEQ research results had been used to inform national policy debates, guide education policy reforms, shape educational programmes, deal with quality-related challenges, and expand the technical skills of educational planners and researchers working within ministries.

Engaging debate on research

A major highlight was the very lively discussion generated via a policy forum that provided a showcase of some of the key findings emerging from SACMEQ research programmes. Three presentations were made by SACMEQ research teams. The first focussed on the negative impact of streaming (sometimes called 'ability grouping' or 'tracking') on equity, showing how SACMEQ research results had triggered major policy reforms and high level actions aimed at stopping this practice.

The second presentation compared the formal curriculum expectations of one country with the actual (and much lower) achievement levels of its students. It formulated some exciting challenges for more realistic approaches to curriculum design in school systems that are moving towards Education for All.

The final presentation took an overview of the policy messages contained within various SACMEQ national research reports and showed how these could be synthesized into a regional agenda for action in Southern and Eastern Africa.

Guided 'tour' of SACMEQ's web site

The Ministers were taken on a virtual tour of SACMEQ's web site (www.sacmeq.org), which is attracting hundreds of visitors each month from developed and developing countries. As part of the tour, they were shown valuable information

resources available to a rapidly growing number of registered users of the SACMEQ Data Archive (drawn from ministries, universities, agencies, and donors). These resources included downloadable files, background information on SACMEQ and its project activities and co-operating partners, and an extensive series of SACMEQ-related reports, articles, technical documents, and field manuals. The Ministers also examined the latest addition to the web site – a set of training modules on test development, instrument design, and research that were written and presented in an easy-to-understand style. These training materials have become extremely popular with professors and graduate students in many countries.

Towards SACMEQ's next project

In 2006, SACMEQ's attention will turn towards the implementation of its third large-scale cross-national educational policy research project. This integrated research and training programme will generate valuable trend data (covering 1995 to 2006) on the conditions of schooling and the quality of education in Africa. A special feature of the study will be the collection of data aimed at assessing the impact of HIV/AIDS on the functioning of schools. The Sixth SACMEQ Assembly of Ministers Meeting will take place at the IIEP in 2007.

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