

SACMEQ: An initiative that has come of age

On Sunday 28 September 2003, SACMEQ Ministers and their official representatives gathered at the IIEP, Paris, for their biennial meeting to review progress registered over the past two years, and to make decisions on SACMEQ's programme for 2004-2005. However, it was the presentation of cross-national results that won the day.

At its biennial meeting, the fifteen SACMEQ Ministries (*Botswana, Kenya, Lesotho, Malawi, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, Seychelles, South Africa, Swaziland, Tanzania (Mainland), Tanzania (Zanzibar), Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe*) re-affirmed their commitment to collaborative research and training and to meet the EFA goals of quality education for all. The Ministers now want to see SACMEQ's work fully institutionalized in their education systems.

The Policy Forum

The launch of draft national reports from 13 SACMEQ Ministries marked the outset of the policy forum. However, the most exciting part of the day was the presentation of cross-national results of the SACMEQ I and II studies. The news was both good and bad. Between 1995 and 2000, all countries had substantially increased the level of most of the learning resources in their schools, however learning achievement in all SACMEQ

countries, except one, seemed to have declined, most of them significantly. One hypothesis offered as a possible explanation for this was the impact of 'the silent emergency', HIV/AIDS. Nevertheless, the learning variables that were affected by this 'third factor' remained unclear.

As expected, the cross-national results created a charged atmosphere and inspired a heated debate that went well beyond the parochialism of political rhetoric, and covered epistemological, methodological and ethical issues. Ministers highlighted the importance in:

- exercising caution when interpreting results from such studies by taking into account the extremely diverse SACMEQ country contexts;
- generating more refined measures of EFA, such as the experimental 'SACMEQ EFA Index' generated from indicators based on key dimensions related to *access, quality and equity*;
- partitioning the variation in pupil

performance into 'between-school' and 'within-school' components, or by gender, geographical location, and socio-economic group in order to reflect equities and disparities; and

➤ accepting that 'a good education system' is a hypothetical notion. In reality, every SACMEQ education system has its strengths and weaknesses, and can therefore offer lessons to others. All the more reason to collaborate.

SACMEQ and the future

SACMEQ's work continues to re-shape Ministers' perceptions of their collective responsibility and obligations. Reflecting on the results, one Minister said: "*As a SACMEQ Minister, my concern is not just about the quality of education provided to the children in my country alone, but about the well-being of all children in the entire SACMEQ region, and in Africa as a whole...*"

The meeting concluded with a presentation of the long-awaited SACMEQ Data Archive to Ministers, and with the President of the Fifth Assembly of Ministers passing a motion of thanks to the Royal Netherlands Government for its generous support.

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IWGE - Donors discuss how to meet EFA gender parity goal

The International Working Group on Education (IWGE) met in Tuusula, Finland, in June 2003, bringing together 40 participants from six multilateral aid agencies, 20 bilateral agencies and two foundations.

The seminar focussed primarily on ways of increasing girls' participation in basic education. The participants examined how national EFA plans effectively set out to eliminate gender disparities and several projects to promote girls' education in different countries were reviewed. Four main issues were raised: 1) using knowledge to influence policy and accelerate action; 2) the interaction between women's and

girls' education; 3) the role of the community in girls' education; and 4) girls' enrolments and achievements in mathematics and science compared to boys. It emerged from the discussions that despite the fact that many lessons are not entirely new, it was surprising how little they have influenced government policy. For example, although a girl's education is strongly dependent on her mother's, the plans generally put little emphasis on adult female literacy.

The second main theme of discussion was education in emergency situations and the post-conflict reconstruction of education systems. The unique nature of each conflict or

emergency makes it hazardous to generalize and participants felt that more research was needed. Reconstruction should operate on two fronts: 1) to rebuild community ability to support their children's education and 2) to rehabilitate capacities at the centre to manage the education system as a whole.

Finally, the Working Group discussed the use of Sector Wide Approaches (SWAp), Poverty Reduction Strategies (PRS) and the Fast Track Initiative (FTI) to meet first EFA target by 2005, namely: gender parity at primary and secondary levels.

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