

Quality or quantity? Or both?



THE Dakar World Education Forum held in 2000 reaffirmed the world's determination to continue working towards the 1990 Jomtien World Conference goal of 'Education for All (EFA)'. However, one of the very important messages contained within the Dakar Declaration was that to achieve EFA by 2015 would require all nations not only to expand participation in education but also to strive "to improve all aspects of the quality of education and ensure excellence so that recognized and measurable learning outcomes are achieved by all, especially in literacy, numeracy, and life skills".

In order to work systematically towards achieving these goals, ministries of education will have to develop effective monitoring and evaluation systems that can be used to answer a very important question: *Can nations, especially those with limited resources, improve the **quality of education**, and in particular schooling conditions and student learning outcomes, at the same time as they are expanding **access to education** through increased participation?*

Most developed countries have already established well-designed mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating the quality of education. These have often been implemented under the auspices of international organizations such as the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

How can developing countries with limited resources both improve the quality of basic education and expand access in their efforts to attain the goals of the Dakar Forum.

Unfortunately, in many developing countries there are very few people with the advanced technical training that is needed in order to undertake large-scale scientific studies on the quality of education.

This problem cannot be addressed in developing countries by having 'external experts' step in to do the required work. Such an approach would not be sustainable, and it would probably result in expensive data collections designed to meet external agency objectives rather than national policy and planning purposes. Instead, there is a need for long-term capacity building in developing countries which fosters an 'information culture' within ministries of education whereby policy decisions on the quality of education are informed decisions, and not merely inspired guesswork derived from crisis management models.

In the 1990s, an extremely successful strategy for capacity building in the area of monitoring and evaluating educational quality was developed by the IIEP. This was based on the establishment of a consortium of ministries of education that encouraged research specialists from many countries to undertake large-scale scientific studies of the quality of their education systems by working in a co-operative manner that enabled them to share their experiences and to learn from each other.

The IIEP's role in this initiative has been to co-ordinate the delivery of intensive training programmes focussed on the requirements of the research, and also to facilitate unlimited access to relevant technical knowledge so that the consortium can draw on new and emerg-

ing world-class research methodologies.

The IIEP's efforts in this area over the past decade have been focussed on a capacity building partnership developed with the Southern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ). This Consortium of 15 ministries of education completed one major cross-national study of the quality of education in 1998 and is now nearing completion of a second study – with a third planned for 2005. Each of these studies has required a massive effort by large numbers of people in the SACMEQ countries – especially in terms of the logistics of collecting and processing vast amounts of data. For the SACMEQ II study alone, data were collected from 50,000 pupils and 5,000 teachers in 2,500 schools across 14 sub-Saharan countries.

The design of data collections for all three SACMEQ studies will ensure that the participating countries use exactly the same sampling and data collection procedures, and that they employ the world's most powerful measurement methodologies to construct and 'link' measures of student and teacher literacy and numeracy levels. This will permit valid comparisons to be made about the quality of education across countries at single points in time, and across time points for single countries. It is only by using data and methodologies of this kind that ministries of education will be able to respond scientifically to the question: can they only achieve either quality or quantity, or is it possible for them to achieve both?

Kenneth N. Ross
k.ross@iiep.unesco.org