

An Agenda for Educational Action in Southern and Eastern Africa Based on a Meta-Analysis of Policy Suggestions Presented in the SACMEQ I and SACMEQ II Projects

by

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Abstract

The educational policy research projects implemented by the 15 SACMEQ ministries of education between 1995 and 2002 addressed priority concerns articulated by policy makers on the quality of education. The converging nature of the different countries' policy concerns enabled the ministries to undertake a common research agenda. This paper is a meta-analysis of the independent but overlapping national policy agendas presented in different SACMEQ I and SACMEQ II reports. From this meta-analysis, it emerged that the national policy suggestions could be synthesized into a regional education policy agenda. This agenda revolves around (a) the mobilization of school communities and other partners for collective action; (b) review and revision of existing policies and planning procedures for greater effectiveness; (c) the collection of data on essential resources to schools to ensure their availability and equitable distribution; (d) conducting policy research; (e) the provision of educational infrastructure, materials and equipment; and (f) training and re-training teachers. This policy agenda can form the basis for collaborative action by subsets of countries or by all countries, with national contexts and priorities taken into account. This way, the two aspects that are central to EFA goals – quality and equity – should be achieved.

Introduction

Motivated by the desire to meet their commitment to the expanded vision of Education for All (EFA) as articulated at the 1990 Jomtien Conference and re-affirmed in Dakar in 2000, many countries have participated in initiatives that can improve the quality of the education they offer. For most Sub Saharan countries, the quality goal has been balanced by the need to protect and further expand quantitative achievements already made. Over the last decade or two, education systems in Africa have operated within contexts characterized by resources constraints. This situation has given impetus to a phenomenal growth of interest in research studies that informs judgements about the quality of education and the policy interventions that can optimize benefits for the education systems.

The two policy research projects SACMEQ has completed in fifteen ministries of education between 1995 and 2002, popularly known as “SACMEQ I” and “SACMEQ II” Projects, have generated a massive amount of information for policy makers. In each of the projects, sets of national policy agendas for action have been presented for implementation by each of the ministries of education. While common policy concerns prepared a firm basis for a highly successful, collaborative research effort by ministries

around a common research agenda, no effort has been made so far to explore the possibilities for these same ministries to implement a common regional agenda for action. This is not surprising, given that the messages that the policy suggestions conveyed to the SACMEQ ministries as a regional bloc have, up to this stage, not been articulated. In this paper, a re-examination and analysis of all the national policy suggestions generated by SACMEQ I and SACMEQ II Projects has been made and the key messages they convey have been identified. Following from this analysis, a synthesis of the national agendas for action into a regional agenda for consideration by SACMEQ ministries within the context of EFA goals has been prepared and presented.

From Jomtien to Dakar: an overview

The ideal that education is everyone's right was articulated in the Declaration of Human Rights more than four decades ago. However, a real turning point in the development of education came about in 1990 when, for the first time in history, the Jomtien Conference demonstrated that education for all could be transformed from a vision into a reality by the beginning of the new millennium. It was recognized, though, that achieving this goal was not going to be easy for those nations that faced the many intractable challenges of under-development, particularly those countries in Sub-Saharan Africa. Whereas the world's nations re-affirmed their commitment to EFA in 2000 in Dakar, the expanded EFA vision articulated in Jomtien has remained the basis of all national and international action.

Two of the three most important EFA goals prioritized by Jomtien are contained in Article 3 of the Declaration, namely, "universalizing *access* and promoting *equity*" (emphasis mine) (Inter-Agency Commission, WCEFA, 1990: pp.44-5). The third goal articulated in paragraph 1 of the same article, was the need to provide "education services of *quality*" and to "achieve and maintain an acceptable level of learning" (paragraph 2). The same article stresses that measures must be taken "to *reduce* disparities" (paragraph 1) with the ultimate goal of "*removing* educational disparities" (paragraph 4). The inextricable link between *access*, *equity* and *quality* is summarised in paragraph 3 which prioritises the objective to "ensure access to, and improve the quality of, education for girls and women, and remove every article that hampers their active participation". This goal was re-iterated as the Dakar Goals 6, namely, "improving all aspects of the quality of education and ensuring excellence of all so that recognized and measurable learning outcomes are achieved by all, especially in literacy, numeracy and life skills". UNESCO, 2000:17.

So far, SACMEQ's research activities have focused on quality and equity but not on access. The decision to place emphasis on these two elements was in keeping with the spirit of the expanded vision of EFA, which categorically states that "The focus of basic education must therefore be on actual learning acquisition and outcomes, rather than exclusively upon enrolment, continued participation in organized programmes and completion of certification requirements" (Article 4, Inter-Agency Commission, WCEFA, p.45). The Declaration also recognized that quality can only be achieved by "enhancing the environment for learning" (Article 6, p.46). The scope and focus of

SACMEQ's research has therefore been guided by the vision expressed in the Jomtien Declaration as re-affirmed at the Dakar World Education Forum of 2000. The serious challenges that remain in the provision of quality of education on the basis of equity has been the central theme of the 2005 Global EFA Monitoring Report (UNESCO, 2004).

Two elements underpin SACMEQ's collaborative working style. The first element is the spirit of regional collaboration which was recommended in Article 7 of the Jomtien Declaration. This article asserts that the EFA goals are more likely to be achieved if countries worked in partnerships, particularly in "planning, implementing, managing and evaluating of basic education programmes" (p.47). This approach provides justification for the development of a regional agenda for action out of the national agendas. The second element is its focus on policy issues considered to be of high priority by the respective ministries' decision makers. Article 8 of the Jomtien Declaration, for instance, calls upon countries to have political commitment and political will that is "reinforced by educational policy reforms and institutional strengthening". The two-fold strategy remains consistent with that recommended by the Dakar Conference (UNESCO 2000:17-22). SACMEQ's research programme has striven to facilitate countries' achievement of these goals by expanding regional capacity for educational the generation of research-based national policy agendas for implementation by ministries of education as they continuously try to improve educational quality as well as equity in the provision of education.

Elements of SACMEQ's research cycle and national policy suggestions

Because SACMEQ's research work aims at contributing to quality and equity through educational policy reform, a key element of its research agenda is that it is primarily driven by the policy concerns articulated by the respective ministries of education. It has thus resisted the temptation to merely respond to the curiosity of researchers. As can be expected, the total number of questions from different SACMEQ ministries is initially very large, but further analysis of these enables the researchers to merge them into a much smaller final list. The broad policy concern in which the broad range of policy concerns expressed by the 15 SACMEQ member ministries were summarized is: 'Why do young people in the Southern Africa sub-region appear not to be learning the basic skills at school in general, and why do they seem to display low levels of literacy and numeracy?'

All the subsequent data collection activities are guided by this question, and built into them is a continuous dialogue with the decision makers of each of the ministries in order to ensure continued responsiveness of the researchers to the policy maker's needs. The policy dialogue also ensures that the policy suggestions take into account the broader context within which the education system operates, the challenges it faces, and the opportunities available. The continuous dialogue with policy makers ensures a sense of ownership and commitment, raising the chance of policy implementation. The model SACMEQ's policy development cycle follows has been described in greater detail by Saito (1999), and will not be reproduced here.

The other key element of SACMEQ's research activities is collaboration among member ministries. Although each country's technical team works closely with its policy makers, it also works closely with research teams from other countries, and this involves joint training which builds capacity for monitoring quality.¹ From time to time, ministers receive feedback on the research findings, but they also have an opportunity to attend policy forums to receive feedback on such findings. However, such findings have tended to focus on national level analyses.

In each of the SACMEQ national reports, the policy suggestions generated and presented in each of the chapters (usually Chapters 3 to 7 or 8) are summarized and presented in the last chapter in the form of an "agenda for action" by each ministry. The presentation format has several distinctive features which are worth noting. The first feature to note is that the policy suggestions are ordinarily clustered into five groups or classes depending on the nature of the action required on the part of the ministry of education. The description of the five groups has been presented below.

- (a) Policy suggestions falling in "Group 1" consist of those that require the ministry to hold consultations with various stakeholders operating at different levels, and these included staff within the ministry of education, members of the local school community and their structures (e.g. schools' governing boards), and education experts.
- (b) "Group 2" policy suggestions require the ministry to conduct reviews of existing planning and policy procedures or practices. In some cases, the recommendations suggest a departure from current policy and the institution of new policies. In others, policy suggestions merely call for changes, to a greater or lesser degree, of existing policies.
- (c) All the policy suggestions requiring the ministry to collect data for planning processes fall under "Group 3". The collection of such data can take a variety of forms such as a mere count or census and audits of specific resource provisions (such as toilets, or unqualified teachers) in a specific administrative or geographic area or in targeted schools, or activities or practices (for example, number of school visits by inspectors, by purpose and by school). In other cases, data collection may be more systematic, more or less taking rudimentary forms of research studies.
- (d) Policy suggestions falling under "Group 4" are those that identify systematic and well structured education policy research projects to be conducted by the ministry. Such research could take the form of national or regional surveys, case studies, or investigations that meet basic criteria and acceptable standards.
- (e) Lastly, all those policy suggestions requiring the ministry to make major investment in infrastructure and human as well as material resources are under "Group 5". These include large-scale training of personnel, the construction of physical facilities such as classrooms, toilets, libraries, and teachers' houses, as well as the purchase of teaching and learning materials and equipment of substantial value.

¹ For further details on the policy dialogue process, the reader is referred to an article by Murimba in *Prospects*, vol. XXXV, no. 1, March 2005.

The descriptions provided above have been used as the framework for the meta-analysis of SACMEQ I and SACMEQ II policy suggestions.

The meta-analysis: methodological considerations

In SACMEQ I (1995-2000), the research teams in all seven participating ministries except one used the framework described above to group their policy suggestions, and this made comparisons across countries easy. Nevertheless, countries interpreted the classification criteria differently, with Group 3 and 4 frequently showing considerable overlaps. Namibia, for example, collapsed these two groups into one. In other cases, there were differences in the interpretation of criteria used to classify the policy suggestions. Every policy suggestion was therefore examined and its conformity with the criteria set assessed. In all cases where the writer felt the classification did not satisfy the criteria set, the policy suggestions were re-classified to ensure that they strictly adhered to the framework described above. This way, subsequent analyses would then make sense. The country with the largest number of re-classifications of policy suggestions in SACMEQ I was Zimbabwe (Machingaidze, Pfukani & Shumba, 1998). For example, policy suggestions 3.17, 5.1 and 7.1 were classified as “Educational policy research projects” but they essentially were “Reviews of existing planning procedures”. Policy suggestions 3.1, 4.3 and 7.3 fell under Group 5 but they strictly belonged to Group 2. In the rest of the countries, re-classifications were far fewer. Some examples were Zambia’s policy suggestion 4.1 (Nkamba & Kanyika 1998:75) and Namibia’s policy suggestion 28 (Voigts 1998:72).

In SACMEQ II (2000-2005)², the re-classifications were very many. In some cases, new classification criteria were used, and in others new groups were suggested. In extreme cases, policy suggestions were not classified at all, as was the case with Namibia and Uganda. Others such as South Africa used slightly modified descriptions of policy groups, making a distinction between the *implementation of existing policies* and the *review of existing policies and practices or procedures*. In SACMEQ II, South Africa had the largest number of re-classifications. For instance, most of the policy suggestions under “Educational policy research projects” were not research activities as such. The last six suggestions in this category were actually “Investment in infrastructure and resources”. Kenya used six groups instead of five. Policy suggestions in the sixth group (which it labeled “*Professional training and development*”) were re-classified into Group 5 because they represented investment in human resources.

As was the case with SACMEQ I, the distinction between “data collection for planning purposes” and “educational policy research” also frequently overlapped. This probably explains why Swaziland collapsed these into one group. In some cases, policy suggestions were double or multi-barreled, and required several kinds of policy

² This analysis was based on the final reports published on the SACMEQ Website in July 2005. However, in some cases the reports were still in their draft form, and it is possible that they might have changed, in which case this analysis may not reflect the new reality. It should also be noted that, at the time of writing, policy agendas for Mozambique and Zambia were not available.

responses. Namibia's SACMEQ II policy suggestion 34, reproduced below, illustrates this more clearly.

Policy suggestion 34. The phasing out of unqualified teachers who have not responded to the Ministry's directive to upgrade themselves should go hand in hand with the recruitment and appointment of new graduate teachers. Regional Education authorities should see to it that new graduate teachers are allocated to schools where their services are needed most, and that such schools should be given priority in the construction of teacher houses. (Makuwa, 2005).

Such a policy suggestion required the ministry to (a) review the implementation procedures for the policy regarding phasing out under-qualified teachers; (b) collect data on the current patterns of teacher allocation before implementing the policy on the deployment of new graduate teachers in order to achieve greater equity; and (c) invest in the construction of teachers' houses. It would make sense to take them as three different policy suggestions, but it was assumed that the key statement expressed by the researchers subsumes the subsequent statements, that is, the collection of data and the investment in teachers' houses was meant to address the problem of under-qualified teachers.

In order to reduce the occurrence of implementation deficits, SACMEQ's policy agenda for action also specifies the department or section (and in some cases the exact office) that should take primary responsibility for initiating or taking policy action. Furthermore, policy implementation requires time and resources. As a result, when ministries make decisions regarding the implementation of policy decisions, they want to know the time frame and cost involved. This is why, in their proposed policy agenda, SACMEQ reports specify the time frame and the estimated cost. A "short" time frame is deemed to be under one year; a "medium" time frame is one to two years; and a "long" time frame is over two years but under five years. With regard to costs, "low" costs refer to those that can be absorbed within the recurrent budget of the ministry; "moderate" costs are those that can be managed within existing budgets but with minimal additional funds; and "high" costs require a separate budget, with the possibility of external assistance.

An analysis of national policy agendas: common policy concerns across the SACMEQ region

By reviewing and (where applicable) re-classifying the policy suggestions, the writer was able to discern the pattern of national policy agendas that emerged. This pattern provided indications on (a) the issues that appeared to be of greater policy concern to more countries and (b) the areas where policy interventions appeared to be most needed by most ministries. It also facilitated the reconstitution of national policy agendas into a regional policy agenda.

The pattern of policy suggestions that emerged after the review and re-classification has been presented in Tables 1(a) and 1(b).

[Place Table 1(a) about here]

[Place Table 1 (b) about here]

At this stage, the concern is: what are the patterns that emerged from the national policy agendas, and what messages for policy makers in the SACMEQ region seem to be recurring most often in most ministries? In the analysis below, the specific policy issues articulated within each group of policy suggestions have been explored in further to extract the core issues of concern to most ministries.

Consultation with staff, community and experts

In SACMEQ I, 45 policy suggestions (or 17% of the total) fell in this category. A closer analysis of the policy suggestions revealed that in four of the seven Ministries, the contentious practice of private or extra-tuition – particularly that which was paid for – was an issue that needed policy intervention. The practice was viewed as reflecting a conflict of interest and, notwithstanding its real or perceived benefits. The moral questions it raised were whether teachers actually made maximum use of the learning time and opportunities provided for on the official timetable, and whether teachers did not, in subtle but well-calculated ways, create a ready market for extra-tuition in which they were the main beneficiaries. On one extreme, there were suggestions that this practice could be linked to poor remuneration while on the other extra tuition was viewed as a result of conscientiousness on the part of some teachers. Another issue was whether it did not put some learners – either those who failed to access it for one reason or another, or those who paid more money and sacrificed additional time in order to attend – at a disadvantage. Whichever way one looked at it, the issue of extra-tuition called for consultations with a variety of stakeholders so that it did not have a damaging effect on either the pupils, and so that there was a common understanding on issues such as its desirability, the costs involved, the form it should take (that is, how it should be provided and who should provide it), and its intensity in terms of time and effort.

The other issue of equally widespread concern was that of the promotion of teacher-parent interaction through a variety of forums that included meetings and parental visits to school. This was linked to the frequently expressed need for the clarification of parents' and teachers' respective and complementary roles in promoting and facilitating the children's learning. The sentiment expressed was that such meetings could help reduce pupil absenteeism and promote girls' participation in education. Through these meetings, parents could also get a deeper appreciation of their responsibility to support their children's learning through, for instance, giving them time and learning resources, and helping them with homework, and generally giving them encouragement.

Of direct concern in four of the ministries, and also of indirect concern to the other three, was the need to set up structures and mechanisms for monitoring standards of teaching and learning as well as the quality of the learning environment. This policy recommendation called for collaboration among various stakeholders in addressing issues that were directly related to the quality of education, and for the provision of support to players at different levels of the education system so that they can forge a common

understanding of issues related to the quality of education. In several cases, the idea of setting up a multi-stakeholder task force to spearhead this was mentioned. These structures could also monitor resource provisions using clear benchmarks that were considered to be “reasonable for the proper functioning of primary schools”. The composition of these task forces differed from ministry to ministry, but frequently included teachers, parents, and members of the local community.

In SACMEQ II, the pattern was very similar. The proportion of policy suggestions in this category was just over 13 percent. In all ministries, the need for massive campaigns, community or social mobilisation and consultative meetings to encourage parents to participate more fully in their children’s education was highlighted. More specifically, securing parents’ meaningful involvement in the provision of material resources to schools, in strengthening school management structures and processes, and in providing a conducive home environment for children, were considered important. Also featuring prominently was parents’ role in ensuring children’s participation – especially girls’ – in education, especially in raising children’s levels of attendance, and in sending them to school at the right age. Given the opportunity, parents were seen as playing an important role in addressing problems of absence, lateness and tardiness among teachers. They could also provide incentives to motivate teachers, and could put in place a package of strategies to attract and retain good teachers in their schools. More frequent and more regular meetings between parents and teachers were frequently suggested and these, it was suggested, could also serve as platforms for massive sensitisation programmes and for mutual consultations on the respective roles parents, teachers and school heads could play in the education of children, as well as finding common approaches to the problems and challenges schools faced.

The second message was that of ensuring that forums were created for the sharing and promotion of good practices among professionals at different levels of the education system. One such practice was the popularization of assessment, particularly continuous assessment, as a way of monitoring children’s mastery of essential literacy and numeracy skills. Related to this was the suggestion to create opportunities for consultations among reading and mathematics experts on good teaching practices. Experts were also expected to meet frequently and regularly to examine the curriculum and its goals, and thereby contribute to curriculum renewal.

Other policy suggestions that came up less frequently were the strengthening of non-formal education programmes targeting parents (since more educated parents were more likely to offer better support to their children’s learning); the need to regularly review benchmarks on school inputs, reviewing learning goals and outcomes; broadening the range of school activities; and the promotion of pupils’ access to books.

Overall, the major benefits of the policy suggestions in this category were largely in the creation of a more conducive *learning environment*. What stood out was that most of the policy suggestions made touched on issues that could be considered to be of intuitive value. However, the fact that they were stressed in most national reports suggested that even these basic elements of good practice were not receiving sufficient

emphasis or support. Put differently, the view was that most schools did not have in place those basic elements that constituted the minimum standards of a proper learning environment. Policy reforms were needed to address this.

Review of existing policies and planning procedures

The policy suggestions under this group accounted for 30.8 percent of all policy suggestions for SACMEQ I, and 33.3 percent of all SACMEQ II policy suggestions. They constituted by far the largest number of policy suggestions, and this may be interpreted in three ways. Firstly, it is possible that many policies and planning procedures were viewed as inherently deficient or flawed, and needed to be reviewed or reformed. Secondly, this might be a signal to the existence of policy and planning gaps or deficits. Lastly, this might mean that the good policies that existed had not been implemented at all, had not been implemented sufficiently, or had been poorly or even maliciously implemented.

The key message in this group of policy suggestions was that there was need to review the procedures used for the allocation of material and human resources to schools. This cluster of policy suggestions emerged from the observation that, in most countries, inequities in the provision of the most basic resources was inequitable. These inequities in inputs, in turn, led to inequities in learning achievement. The policy suggestions appear to have been based on the firm conviction that the key resource in any education system was the teacher, and yet in *every* country, existing policies and practices on the allocation of teachers did not sufficiently take into account teacher characteristics such as academic and professional qualifications, experience, gender and age, to name some. In general, policies that governed the allocation of resources frequently seemed to have disregarded the peculiar needs of some schools and regions which were disadvantaged in one way or another. Where policies that ensured the equitable allocation of resources existed, difficulties were experienced in implementing them. As a result, serious inequities in the allocation of key resources to schools, to districts, and to regions were prevalent, and stubbornly persisted.

The second policy message in this category was the need to define standards or benchmarks on provisions so that environments that enabled schools to function or operate properly could be created and sustained. Some of these provisions were teaching and learning resources, toilets, classrooms and libraries. Benchmarks were also needed on class size, frequency of homework, access to library books, and teacher/pupil ratios. The absence of clearly defined or known benchmarks was an issue that was viewed as requiring policy intervention in all the seven SACMEQ I ministries. In ten of the 12 SACMEQ II ministries, the concern was that, where benchmarks for some inputs existed, insufficient efforts had been made to ensure that these benchmarks were widely known, met and adhered to by all those responsible for ensuring their application. By extension, it was also stressed that the goal of ensuring that *all* pupils got access to learning resources (where they have been supplied) had largely not been achieved. This was particularly the case with access to textbooks and library books. Another important set of benchmarks suggested was that relating to teacher qualifications and continuous in-service education

and training (INSET). Understandably, since the teacher was seen as a critical element in achieving quality, it was considered desirable to ensure that all teachers attained certain minimum qualifications, and that they attended a given minimum number of INSET sessions to ensure continuous professional growth and development as well as good performance. Such in-service training programmes needed to be carefully packaged for, in several cases, the training provided did not appear to address teachers' professional growth needs. Five ministries also highlighted the need for specific in-service training for school heads and supervisors or inspectors.

The issue of homework was mentioned as one that also required policy intervention. The policy should ideally provide a regulatory mechanism for the provision of the right amounts of homework by the teacher, the correction of such homework, and the provision of the necessary support or assistance with homework by parents, guardians or other designated persons.

Other issues that required policy intervention were the persistent problems of absenteeism, repetition and over-aged pupils. Here, what was often expressed was the need firmer enforcement of existing regulations. Policy suggestions providing for the promotion of girls' participation, the regulation of private tuition, the promoting interaction between parents and teachers, and monitoring teacher/pupil ratios were also brought up in several countries, but were not of very broad concern.

On the whole, most of the policy suggestions under this category could be implemented within a short time frame, and involved low costs, or no costs at all. They, therefore, were within the means of most ministries to implement.

Data collection for planning purposes

The policy suggestions in this category constituted 18.8 percent and 12.0 percent of all SACMEQ I and SACMEQ II suggestions respectively. The most frequent "data collection" mechanism suggested under this group of policy suggestions was an "audit" which involved the simple collection of data on a specific aspect of the education system (such as human and material resources, infrastructure, essential teaching and learning activities, and other performance indicators) and using it to make assessments of levels of provision against benchmarks set. The collection of such data was seen as helping decision makers to obtain a clearer *national* picture on school provisions. The policy suggestion "The Ministry should undertake a national audit concerning the availability of basic teaching materials and classroom furniture, and then prepare a set of strategies involving partnerships with donor agencies, community 'self-help' groups, etc. to address the problem" illustrates this (Nkamba & Kanyika, 1998: 76). In other cases, the audits were highly targeted. Mauritius's suggestion that "The Planning Unit should undertake an audit of teacher academic qualifications in Rodrigues and teacher professional qualifications in Black River and should then establish a strategy for improving the qualifications of teachers in these two districts" falls in this category (Kulpoo, 1998:90). The policy suggestions in this group were of short to medium time duration, and involved low costs.

The focus of audits suggested in the policy suggestions for both SACMEQ I and SACMEQ II was on the availability and quality (or condition) of school buildings (classrooms, toilets, teachers' houses) and teaching/learning materials or equipment (books, furniture, equipment). In addition to these, they also focused on the availability of teachers and their characteristics (age, sex, and qualifications). The message in the policies was that while the general scarcity of resources, their inequitable allocation and their state of disrepair or limited usability needed to be addressed, sufficient information should be available to provide a picture of the magnitude of the problem as well as the patterns of its prevalence in the different regions or provinces. In the case of human resources, it was deemed important to address the scarcity of teachers with the right qualifications, of both sexes, and of the right mix of ages, using policy levers. In three quarters of the ministries, sufficiently trained teachers were required in larger numbers.

Equity concerns loomed large in the policy suggestions in this category. The messages coming through in the policy suggestions were that (a) the situation with regards the provision of essential resources in many cases remained unknown, and it therefore was difficult to make informed decisions regarding the inputs that should be made available; (b) global figures that showed adequate provision of resources often masked the pronounced inequities in their allocation, giving the false impression that all was well; and (c) where global national figures revealed gaps in resource provision, prioritization and targeting were not easy because it was not clear which resources were most critically in short supply, and which schools, districts or regions were worst affected and therefore required priority attention. The value of policy suggestions in this category was in the fact that, frequently, the kind of audits they proposed provided a sufficient basis for resolving all the three concerns.

Other issues emerging from the policy suggestions in this group dealt with the need to collect data to monitor the system's performance in terms of pupil attendance, pupil enrolment, grade repetition, learning achievement, teacher/pupil ratios and class sizes. All these could be addressed through simple but effective audits or stock-taking exercises.

Educational policy research projects

Policy suggestions in this category accounted for 15.8% of all SACMEQ I suggestions (the lowest percentage for all five groups) and 21% of all SACMEQ II suggestions (the second largest for all groups). The importance of research in ensuring informed policy development, therefore, needs no emphasis. All the policy suggestions were of short- to medium-time duration and of low to medium cost. They therefore fell within the means of most ministries of education.

The research studies recommended by the policy suggestions focused on three clusters of issues, namely (a) pupil participation in education; (b) pupils' learning achievement; and (c) and resource allocation. In some cases, the research studies

suggested were national surveys designed to provide decision makers with a broad but clear national picture of each of the three issues.. In others, the suggestions sought to deepen decision makers' understanding of specific or complex problems or issues, and in-depth case studies or investigations were normally recommended.

Pupil participation issues that ministries were encouraged to research on were grade repetition, girls' enrolment, and absenteeism, in that order of importance. These were perennial issues which most ministries were fully aware of, and whose magnitude and impacts were, perhaps, fairly well known. However, the complexity of their causal factors as well as the dynamics with other issues were little understood. As such, they had stubbornly persisted despite the implementation of 'traditional' interventions.

On achievement, every SACMEQ country was encouraged to carry out a follow-up to SACMEQ I and SACMEQ II as part of a process of monitoring trends in the different aspects of educational quality. Following the implementation of policy suggestions made in SACMEQ I and SACMEQ II, it was also considered necessary to measure the impacts and changes, if any, taking place in the education system as a result of these policy reforms. Monitoring of the quality of educational quality needed not be restricted to a repeat of SACMEQ in its current or modified form, but could assume a dimension that established new systems or strengthened any existing systems of continuous assessment. Such systems could systematically generate additional monitoring data. The policy suggestions stressed the need to monitor changes in the patterns of achievement by gender, socio-economic status, and geographical location (by education region, rural/urban location). Lastly, research that helped identify effective teaching strategies was also suggested. A particularly innovative research study that was suggested by eight of the SACMEQ II ministries was the careful analysis of pupil performance on each of the test items in order to identify areas of teaching that needed improvement.

Investment in infrastructure and resources

The last group of policy suggestions dealt with investment in infrastructure and resources, and these constituted 17.7 percent and 18.2 percent of SACMEQ I and SACMEQ II policy suggestions respectively. In all countries and for both SACMEQ I and SACMEQ II, investment in teaching and learning materials and equipment was highlighted as a policy issue requiring priority attention. Even in ministries where the situation appeared to be good overall, the need to ensure greater equity in the allocation of such resources was underlined. With the exception of Mauritius (and to some extent Seychelles), the shortage of school infrastructure was highlighted as an issue for policy intervention. This policy challenge manifested itself in the form of overcrowding, double sessioning, unsafe, dilapidated, poorly maintained or uncomfortable classrooms, or the absence of formal building structures. In Mauritius, the issue was more of ensuring that school buildings were well maintained (Kulpoo, 1998:92), while in Seychelles the only need expressed was that of "further improvement" to existing facilities (Policy suggestions 5.8 and 5.9).

Similarly, the need to invest in the development of key teaching skills among teachers was highlighted in SACMEQ I and SACMEQ II policy suggestions for *all* countries. Virtually all countries have demonstrated a commitment to achieving the EFA goals by embarking on a massive recruitment of teachers in order to meet the vastly expanded enrolments precipitated by the declaration of Free Primary Education (FPE). Apart from the strain that the sudden expansion of enrolment put on limited infrastructure and material resources, one of the inevitable consequences was that teachers with limited skills found their way into the system. The teacher was, perhaps, the most critical factor that influenced quality. Without doubt, the outstanding challenge that the policy suggestions for all countries highlighted was that of equipping teachers, both trained and untrained, with skills required to teach effectively. The form of investment most frequently suggested was that of continuous teacher in-service training that took into account their identified needs.

There was recognition by all national reports that there was a need to improve the learning environment both at school and at home, but that in order to impact on, for instance, the socio-economic status of children, interventions of a broader nature fell outside the sole responsibility of the education sector. Nevertheless, it was recognized that some linkages between school and non-school variables could be indirectly tackled through education-based policy interventions. There was a strong positive correlation between the parent's education and the child's achievement. Strengthening adult and non-formal adult education programmes could be of direct benefit to parents but also an indirect benefit to children. The link between nutrition and learning achievement is well documented (Pollitt, 1990). Suggestions made by six of the 12 SACMEQ II ministries to invest in school feeding programmes, and in the provision of water and other amenities such as electricity were therefore important. In all the countries that proposed the improvement of the learning environment, emphasis was placed on the creation of sustainable partnerships that brought together parents, donors, development agencies, and government in major investment efforts.

Towards a regional policy agenda

Researchers have the tendency to view cross-national studies on the quality of education as a good basis for comparisons of national performance on the major educational variables measured. The pitfalls of this approach, and the power alternative approaches, have been demonstrated by Ross and Zuze (2004). SACMEQ's approach has been different in that it subordinates this traditional view in favor of the major benefit that collaborative research brings about through the sharing of expertise and experiences, and through learning from each other.

SACMEQ's common research agenda has been made possible by the convergence of the different ministries' policy concerns. Such convergence was not purely coincidental. It reflected of the reality: the education systems of the East and Southern Africa region share common characteristics and face similar challenges. However, the data collected addressed country-specific issues, and was interpreted within the broader context of each country. The national policy agendas that were formulated reflected each

country's priorities and concerns. But since the participating countries shared a common research agenda, common elements in the national policy agendas naturally emerged. The common elements have been reproduced below in the form of a regional agenda for action for consideration by SACMEQ ministries.

The regional agenda for action that has been proposed below adopted the same rationale and framework as the one used in the formulation of national agendas. However, it must be stressed that a "regional policy agenda" in this context does not solely suggest that policy action should be taken by regional level structures. Rather, it is based on the recognition of the following:

- (a) Some policy challenges were common to all countries, but that could not be resolved outside their country contexts. As such, the "regional policy agenda" required countries to address the problems using specific strategies that took into account their unique contexts and priorities. As was observed by Dolata, Ikeda & Murimba (2004), there was a sense in which each country has to take its own unique path towards EFA. These policy suggestions were 1.1, 1.2, 1.4, 2.1, 2.3, 2.4, 3.2, 3.3, 4.5, 5.2 and 5.3.
- (b) There were other problems that affected only a subset of countries, but that offer scope for the affected countries to team up and develop a common approach in addressing them, possibly benefiting from the sharing of successful experiences in the region and elsewhere. This way, countries could tap into their wealth of experience, benefit from their collective capacity, and build upon their associative strength. These policy suggestions were 2.2, 3.1, and 4.2.
- (c) Some of the challenges affected all countries, and a single, collaborative approach was necessary for their resolution. In this case, action could be taken at the regional level, probably under the auspices of the SACMEQ Coordinating Centre or any other body it might designate. These policy suggestions were 1.3, 4.1, 4.3, 4.4 and 5.1.

The exact mechanisms for the implementation of the regional policy agenda was a matter that certainly needed further reflection. Furthermore, it required that decisions be made by the relevant governing board of SACMEQ, particularly in respect of the actions that required several or all SACMEQ countries to work together. If successful, this expanded form of regional collaboration could be promoted through the support and participation of external partners. Nevertheless, most of the activities did not require substantial resources but simply a clear framework for collaboration.

The summary of the policy suggestions for consideration at the regional level has been presented in Table 2.

[Place Table 2 about here]

While it might appear as though the policy suggestions proposed are “a tall order”, cognizance must be taken of the fact that quality education requires massive initial investment, but the long-term benefits to the education system (in terms of savings accruing from greater internal efficiency) and to the communities and the country as a whole (direct and indirect benefits to individuals and to society) are immense. The other way to view this is to examine the cost of poor quality education. The wastage consequent upon high rates of repetition, absenteeism, dropout, under-achievement and others far outweighs the benefits of an efficient, effective education system. On average, the average proportion of children in SACMEQ countries who have repeated at least one grade by the time they reach Grade 6 or Standard 6 is 43.9, and in three of the countries the figure exceeds 60 percent (Ross et al., 2004). Translated into the real costs involved (additional teachers, teaching /learning resources, equipment, infrastructural facilities, individuals’ time etc), the costs could be staggering.

SACMEQ has already initiated a sustainable form of regional collaboration in the field of educational policy research and training. The regional agenda presented above deliberately proposes to have relatively few cross-national activities at the moment. However, as countries gather more confidence in working together in a variety of activities, the scope for cross-national collaboration could be expanded.

Conclusion

One positive post-Jomtien development is the emergence of a new world order characterized by greater cooperation among nations in the field of education as well as a renewed commitment to EFA.³ As was pointed out by the Director-General of UNESCO at the 1990 Jomtien Conference,

Education for all needs the contribution to education from all ... If we combine vision with pragmatism, political will with economic resourcefulness, international solidarity with national commitment, the expertise of educators with the fresh contributions of the media, science and technology, the business community, voluntary organizations and many others – then, and probably only then, the struggle to bring education to all can be won. – Federico Mayor, Director-General, UNESCO. Inter-Agency Commission, WCEFA (1990). p.7.

The call for greater cooperation by former Director-General has been translated into a great force that has gathered momentum over the years. A “regional message” for all key stakeholders in education – politicians, researchers, civil society groups and other advocacy groups and donors – would greatly assist in effectively coordinating, correctly prioritizing and appropriately re-focusing future interventions by the broad variety of players in education. Our vision should remain guided by Jomtien and Dakar, but we should now measure the worth of our efforts by their likely impact on the attainment of the Millennium Development Goals.

³ For example, the introduction of World Bank’s Fast Track Initiative (FTI) and debt relief for Highly Indebted Poor countries (HIPC) in exchange for more investment in the social service sectors such as education.

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Table 1(a): Policy suggestions by group by country, SACMEQ I⁴

Ministry (Country)	Lass description for policy suggestion					
	Consultations with staff, community and experts	Reviews of existing planning procedures	Data collection for planning purposes	Educational research projects	Investment in infrastructure & resources	Total
Kenya	4	12	13	6	5	40
Malawi	10	7	12	6	3	38
Mauritius	10	21	7	4	9	50
Namibia	4	12	0	6	8	31
Zambia	5	8	8	6	9	36
Zanzibar	4	10	6	10	7	37
Zimbabwe	8	11	4	4	7	34
Total	45	82	50	42	47	266

Table 1(a): Policy suggestions by group by country, SACMEQ II⁵

Ministry (Country)*	Lass description for policy suggestion					
	Consultations with staff, community and experts	Reviews of existing planning procedures	Data collection for planning purposes	Educational research projects	Investment in infrastructure & resources	Total
Botswana	6	8	7	5	5	31

⁴ Only seven ministries were active members in SACMEQ I.

⁵ Of the fifteen SACMEQ ministries, only Zimbabwe did not participate in SACMEQ II, and therefore did not produce a national policy report. At the time of writing this article, Mozambique and Zambia had not finalized its policy suggestions.

Kenya	7	8	6	14	31	66
Lesotho*	7	10	6	4	7	34
Malawi*	4	23	4	10	11	52
Mauritius	9	14	8	7	1	39
Namibia	2	18	5	16	5	46
Seychelles	6	6	6	5	7	30
South Africa	4	13	6	8	6	37
Swaziland	6	12	3	8	1	30
Tanzania*	4	24	5	15	10	58
Uganda*	1	14	3	4	1	23
Zanzibar*	10	16	1	9	17	53
Total	66	166	60	105	91	499

Notes: National policy reports for the ministries marked (*) were still in their draft form at the time of writing this article.

Table 2: A Regional policy agenda for action

POLICY SUGGESTIONS	RESPONSIBLE	TIME	COST
Group 1: Consultation with staff, community, and experts			
Policy suggestion 1.1 SACMEQ ministries of education must make a more concerted effort to strengthen the link between home and school by setting minimum expectations regarding the frequency of parent-teacher meetings. Such meetings should be used as effective forums for the clarification of roles and mutual expectations on the education of children, and on responsibilities for school support. In order to facilitate this, deliberate measures must be put in place to strengthen parent-teacher bodies.	Planning Divisions	Medium	Low
Policy suggestion 1.2 SACMEQ ministries must develop their own programmes for the enhancement of learning environments. Each SACMEQ ministry could, in the first instance, consider setting up structures and mechanisms for monitoring the standards of teaching and learning, and then systematically improve them through the enhancement of key elements of the learning environments.	Planning Division	Medium	Low
Policy suggestion 1.3 SACMEQ ministries should organise regional and international workshops, seminars or conferences where the key findings of SACMEQ I and II can be shared by experts who include teachers, supervisors, researchers, curriculum developers, test specialists from national assessment boards, planners and policy makers. The key messages noted in this meeting should be noted, and a dissemination strategy for these messages should be developed in the form of an action plan. Within these meetings, panels of specialists could work under the guidance of experienced, world-renowned experts in developing these messages.	Ministries of education, examination boards, specialist institutions, researchers, development agencies and funding agencies	Medium	Moderate to high
Policy suggestion 1.4 In order make efforts towards the achievement of the expanded EFA goals	Planning Sections with support from	Medium	Moderate

POLICY SUGGESTIONS	RESPONSIBLE	TIME	COST
sustainable, SACMEQ ministries must prioritise the mobilisation of communities for the provision of various kinds of support, both material and non-material, of their schools. Incentives (e.g. in the form of partnerships) could be put in place in order to encourage communities to initially secure their “buy in” for such support programmes.	local authority and local community structures		
Group 2: Reviews of existing planning and policy procedures			
Policy suggestion 2.1 Noting that there are many concerns regarding the effectiveness of existing planning procedures and mechanisms for policy implementation, SACMEQ ministries must (a) from time to time conduct reviews of planning procedures and, if necessary, educational policies; (b) ensure that their teams of planners are equipped with the requisite, specialised skills through formal training in planning at reputable institutions; and (c) carry out exchange visits in order to capitalise on successful experiences.	Planning Divisions	Medium to long	High
Policy suggestion 2.2 There must be a more concerted effort by those countries that exhibit serious inequities in the allocation of resources, particularly of well qualified teachers and books, at adopting and implementing allocation formulae that will gradually reduce and ultimately eliminate inequities in the allocation of key resources.	Planning Divisions	Medium	Low
Policy suggestion 2.3 Every SACMEQ Ministry must ensure that it publishes (or updates) a consolidated list of benchmarks on the provision of key teaching and learning resources. Thereafter, school visits by inspectors should report on those schools that are farthest from meeting these benchmarks so that interventions can be put in place.	Planning Divisions	Short	Low
Policy suggestion 2.4 SACMEQ ministries must consider putting in place national policies on the minimum standards of homework provision, and ensure that all teachers adhere to them.	Inspectorate Division and Planning Division	Short	Low
Group 3: Data Collection for planning purposes			
Policy suggestion 3.1 SACMEQ ministries must find out why such a large proportion of pupils across the region fails to reach minimum levels of mastery, and why they only master low level skills in literacy and numeracy. Such an investigation might need to focus on a wide variety of factors such as curriculum expectations, teaching strategies, language issues, and others. Thereafter, key drivers of quality must be systematically addressed. Existing literature on learning achievement in SACMEQ countries could form part of this data collection exercise.	Planning Divisions, Curriculum Development Units	Medium	Low
Policy suggestion 3.2 SACMEQ ministries must work closely with their national assessment systems in the development and popularisation of continuous	Curriculum Development Units, Examination Boards	Medium	Moderate

POLICY SUGGESTIONS	RESPONSIBLE	TIME	COST
assessment systems. Once developed, teachers must receive in-service training on the use of this system. In the long term, there will be need to institutionalise continuous assessment as a compulsory component of pre-service training programmes.			
Policy Suggestion 3.3 SACMEQ ministries must institutionalise the regular collection of information on the availability of key inputs in every schools, and use this information to target the provision of additional resources that it might have mobilised. The main focus should be on the reduction of disparities through regular monitoring and reporting.	Planning Divisions	Short	Low
Group 4: Educational policy research programme			
Policy suggestion 4.1 SACMEQ ministries must conduct a collaborative, follow-up study (SACMEQ III Project) that is a repeat of SACMEQ II in order to gather data for monitoring trends in the quality of education, and to monitor the impact of policies they have implemented since SACMEQ II.	Ministries of education's Planning Divisions in collaboration with other sections	Medium	Moderate
Policy suggestion 4.2 SACMEQ ministries, through their SACMEQ Co-ordinating Centre, must conduct multiple case studies that will deepen their understanding of the causal factors and dynamics of grade repetition and absenteeism. These studies should cover as many countries as are willing to participate, but with a focus on those where the problems are most serious. The study should come up with clear strategies for the reduction of the severity of the problems.	Ministries of education	Short	Moderate
Policy suggestion 4.3 SACMEQ ministries should conduct a regional study on the factors responsible for gender-based differences in achievement in reading and mathematics, and recommend ways in which the differences can be reduced.	Research units of ministries of education	Medium	Moderate
Policy suggestion 4.4 SACMEQ should conduct a desk study on the country policies governing the allocation of teachers, and recommend policy reforms that will ensure greater equity in the allocation of this critical resource. The study must also document good practices that have produced positive results in terms of achieving equity.	Research units of ministries of education	Short	Low
Policy suggestion 4.5 SACMEQ ministries must analyse the data they have already collected from SACMEQ I and SACMEQ II projects on pupil's performance on each of the Reading and Mathematics test items. On the basis of the emerging pattern of responses, they must identify weaknesses in the teaching of the two subjects. This information generated should then serve as input to in-service training programmes for teachers, school heads and supervisors at country level.	Planning divisions in collaboration with	Medium	Moderate
Group 5: Investment in human and material resources			

POLICY SUGGESTIONS	RESPONSIBLE	TIME	COST
Policy suggestion 5.1 Taking note of the fact that few SACMEQ ministries will have large amount of resources to put up school infrastructures, there will be need to ensure that every school has an effective “preventive maintenance” programme. SACMEQ Ministries could jointly develop a common handbook on school maintenance, or adapt existing handbooks if they exist. Preventive maintenance should be made one of the essential components on school heads’ in-service courses.	Building sections of ministries of education	Medium	Low
Policy suggestion 5.2 The teacher is the most critical resource in any education system. SACMEQ ministries must therefore place priority on the recruitment and training of teachers in order to improve the quality of education. Investment in teachers must also include mandatory, regular and continuous in-service training programmes for all teachers in the service.	Planning Divisions in collaboration with relevant ministry(ies)	Long	High
Policy suggestion 5.3 In most SACMEQ countries, the provision of essential teaching and learning resources, particularly books, was problematic. Ministries must work closely with communities so that their, in partnership, ensure that minimum levels of provisions are reached by every school. Ministries can thereafter provide targeted support to schools in communities that are poor.	Planning Divisions	Medium	High