

What makes SACMEQ so successful?

There has been a worldwide growth of interest in the application of large-scale scientific survey research techniques to the study of issues related to improving the quality of education. The IIEP has been working to address capacity building needs in this area in association with the 15 Ministries of Education that form the Southern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ): Botswana, Kenya, Lesotho, Malawi, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, Seychelles, South Africa, Swaziland, Tanzania (Mainland), Tanzania (Zanzibar), Uganda, Zambia, and Zimbabwe.

SACMEQ's main mission is to undertake integrated research and training activities that will: a) expand opportunities for educational planners to gain the technical skills required to monitor, evaluate, and compare the general conditions of schooling and the quality of basic education; and b) generate information that can be used by decision-makers to plan the quality of education.

The first five SACMEQ educational policy reports were published in 1998 and they have already featured in major commissions on education (Zimbabwe and Namibia), cabinet reviews of educational policy (Zanzibar), national education sector studies (Zambia), and reviews of national education master plans (Mauritius). The rapid rise to prominence of SACMEQ's policy research programmes within Ministries of Education poses the question "What makes SACMEQ so successful?" The answer to this question can be found in the following three key features of the design and implementation of SACMEQ's research and training programmes.

- *A co-operative working style.* SACMEQ has a co-operative working style in which its National Research Co-ordinators are able to work together, to share expertise, and to learn from each other. An important

result of this co-operation has been that SACMEQ projects have employed the same technical procedures across participating countries with respect to research objectives, target populations, sample designs, data collection instruments, field work, basic data analyses, and policy report formats. These common technical procedures have ensured that SACMEQ's reports offer meaningful policy advice that can be applied within and across countries.

- *A clear focus on high-priority policy concerns.* SACMEQ's educational policy research projects commence by undertaking consultations within ministries of education in order to define high-priority policy concerns that are then used to guide research design. The SACMEQ Ministries of Education prefer this approach (in comparison with the traditional curiosity-driven research that is often carried out in universities) because it permits the policy issues raised by decision-makers to govern the whole of the research process – which, in turn, increases the likelihood that research results will actually be used to make informed decisions about planning the quality of education.

- *A determination to employ the best research methodologies.* When SACMEQ was initially launched in 1995, the National Research Co-ordinators decided to make every effort to identify and use the world's best

computer-based methodologies (rather than to make do with low quality substitutes). There are three important areas where SACMEQ has employed these state-of-the-art techniques: data preparation, sample design, and test construction.

On 25 October 1999 the biennial meeting of the SACMEQ Assembly of Ministers of Education was held in Paris at the IIEP. At this meeting it was agreed that the Consortium had set world-class standards with respect to the excellence of its training programmes, the high scientific quality of its policy research products, and the ownership of its future directions by participating Ministries of Education. This Assembly of Ministers set down an agenda for action which will lead SACMEQ towards many exciting educational policy research initiatives for the next millennium.

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