

SACMEQ¹ Education Ministers review progress and future plans

Meeting at IIEP's Headquarters in Paris, 14 October 2001

At their third biennial meeting, Ministers and their Representatives from SACMEQ countries in Eastern and Southern Africa took stock of the progress achieved so far and charted future directions for their training programmes.

FOR the past eight years, the SACMEQ Ministries have participated in joint educational research and training initiatives aimed at building strong and sustainable policy mechanisms for planning the quality of education in Eastern and Southern Africa. Over this period the membership of the consortium has grown from five to fifteen Ministries of Education (*Botswana, Kenya, Lesotho, Malawi, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, Seychelles, South Africa, Swaziland, Tanzania (Mainland), Tanzania (Zanzibar), Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe*).

SACMEQ's main mission continues to centre on the expansion of 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. As an integral part of achieving this important objective, SACMEQ also generates educational policy reports that can be used by decision-makers to plan the quality of education.

Implications of SACMEQ research

During the Assembly of Ministers at the IIEP, the Ministers congratulated their National Research Co-ordinators for the high quality and extensive impact of the educational policy reports that had emerged from SACMEQ's first project. They were delighted to announce that the seven *SACMEQ I Project* reports had featured in presidential and national commissions on

education (*Kenya, Namibia, and Zimbabwe*), a prime ministerial and cabinet review of educational policy (*Zanzibar*), national education sector studies (*Malawi and Zambia*), and a review of a national education master plan (*Mauritius*). They also noted that these reports had been recognized for their quality by major universities (such as Harvard and Melbourne) and by prestigious organizations (such as the International Academy of Education).

A major highlight of the Paris meeting was a 'Policy Forum' at which Ministers were able to debate the policy implications of initial research results from SACMEQ's second large-scale educational policy research project. The *SACMEQ II Project* is scheduled for completion in late 2002, and it includes an assessment of the literacy and numeracy levels of around 50,000 students in 2,500 schools.

Major presentations were made at the forum by the SACMEQ research teams from Botswana, Kenya, Namibia, and the Seychelles. These revealed a number of issues requiring policy attention: grade repetition, ability streaming within schools, the equal allocation of human and material resources among schools, and the design of curricula and schooling arrangements, more sensitive to the special needs of different communities.

A session of the forum was set aside to show case developments in the *SACMEQ II Project* with respect to the reporting of student literacy and numeracy performance. The new SACMEQ approach seeks to focus on the establishment of descrip-

tive accounts of different levels of student competence – rather than the traditional approach of reporting only the average number of correct responses made by students to test questions.

2002-2003 Plan of Action approved by Ministers

At the meeting, the SACMEQ Ministers approved an ambitious Plan of Action for the next two years. This Plan endorsed training activities associated with a new *SACMEQ III Project* that would deepen the knowledge of National Research Coordinators and their Deputies in survey sampling, the development of valid data collection instruments, computer-based data processing, and the writing of effective policy reports.

The plan also proposed a *Research Fellowship Scheme* designed to provide talented African scholars with an opportunity to use SACMEQ data archives for applied policy research and the preparation of postgraduate dissertations.

At the conclusion of the meeting, a formal motion of thanks was passed in order to recognize the generosity of the Netherlands Government in providing long-term support for the Consortium's cross-national training programmes. This valuable and continuing assistance had allowed SACMEQ to expand its impact to more countries and reach more educational planners and researchers within each participating country.

Saul Murimba, Director,
SACMEQ Co-ordinating Centre
smurimba@unesco.co.zw

¹ Southern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ).