

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

*Whether or not expanded educational opportunities will translate in to meaningful development, depends ultimately on whether people actually learn as a result of these opportunities. It is therefore necessary to define acceptable levels of learning acquisition for educational programmes and to improve and apply systems of assessing learning achievement.*

[World Declaration of Education for All [Article 4]]

*The development of endogenous capacities to meet the basic learning needs of al/requires significant improvement in the managerial methodological and analytical capacities of many developing countries.*

[Chinapah, 1992:1].

**Some 50,000 pupils, their parents, teachers and schools are surveyed in 1999 to examine Jomtien's goal — Towards Quality Education for All in Africa — A unique and historical event!**

## EDUCATION FOR ALL

In 1990, representatives of more than one hundred and fifty governments gathered in Jomtien, Thailand. Their purpose was to attend the World Conference on Education for All which had been organised in response to widespread recognition of deterioration in education systems in the 1980s. It is important to recognise that millions of children and adults have remained illiterate, have been wrongly and/or inadequately educated and have been poorly prepared for life in their own societies.

The conference served as an important milestone in the international mobilisation of human energies towards achieving the goal of ensuring access to basic education for all. In addition to the problem of educational access, the quality of educational programmes was seriously questioned at the conference. The "World Declaration on Education for All" [EFA] which was adopted at the conference served as the foundation document for interventions by policy makers in governments, international and bilateral development agencies and non-governmental organisations.

The majority of developing nations responded to EFA by: evaluating their education systems, formulating policies aimed at improving basic education, strengthening management capacity of people and institutions, creating a more supportive environment for policy, broadening partnerships, diversifying resource bases and exploring ways of improving delivery of basic education.

## A FRAMEWORK FOR ACTION

The ultimate goal affirmed by the World Declaration on Education for All, was to meet the basic learning needs of all children, youth and adults. A Framework for Action to Meet Basic Learning Needs was developed and proposed as a reference and guide for national governments, international organisations, aid agencies and non-governmental organisations [NGOs] working in the field. This Framework could be used by countries to develop their own specific plans of action and programmes in line with support and mandates

from their respective constituencies. The framework recognised that even though countries might share common concerns in meeting the basic learning needs of their citizens, the actual needs would vary in nature and intensity depending on contextual factors such as the levels of basic education available and the socio-economic conditions prevailing.

## GOALS AND TARGETS

The objectives of the “Declaration” and the “Framework” documents recognised the need for decisive action on a large scale with clear goals and targets. It was hoped that goal setting would assist in conveying a sense of urgency and in sustaining the attention and focus of planners, evaluators and practitioners on meeting the needs of the targeted clients. In addition, observable and measurable targets would assist in the objective assessment of educational progress. The six fundamental objectives identified for EFA were:

- expansion of early childhood care and development;
- universal access to and completion of primary education by the year 2000;
- improvement in learning achievement such that an agreed percentage of an appropriate age cohort] attains or surpasses a defined level of necessary learning achievement;
- reduction of the adult illiteracy rate to half of its 1990 level by the year 2000, and the reduction of the disparity between male and female illiteracy rates;
- expansion of basic education and training in essential skills required by youth and adults;
- increased acquisition by individuals and families of the knowledge, skills, and values required for better living and for sustainable development through all educational channels.

## MONITORING LEARNING ACHIEVEMENT

At Jomtien in 1990, it was recognised that appropriate systems for monitoring progress in meeting EFA goals have to be developed. Based on the main objectives identified for EFA above, a set of eighteen ‘indicators’ of progress towards achieving these objectives were specified in the EFA 2000 Assessment guidelines. Indicator 15 in this set was given as: “The percentage of learners having reached at least Grade 4 of primary schooling who master a set of nationally defined basic learning competencies.”

A Joint UNESCO-UNICEF Monitoring Learning Achievement [MLA] project was initiated in 1992 to obtain information on the ‘effectiveness of basic education provision in terms of actual learning achievement’. The aim of this project was therefore to develop instruments for measuring the learning achievement of learners [Grade 4 learners, in particular] in respect to the minimum basic knowledge, competencies and analytical skills expected in the following learning areas: Life Skills, Literacy and Numeracy. An equally important objective of the MLA project was to provide a thorough overview of the learning environment of the learners, at home, in the community, at school and in the classroom. To this end, information was gathered through questionnaires administered with the learners surveyed and with their respective teachers, school heads and parents. The target defined by the Jomtien EFA Declaration, namely that 80% of a cohort should attain or surpass a defined level of necessary learning achievement, was assessed in most MLA surveys in the areas of Literacy, Numeracy and Life Skills since 1992.

This joint UNESCO/UNICEF MLA project contributes therefore to the Education for All 2000 Assessment which aims to construct a comprehensive picture of the progress of participating countries towards their own Education for All goals since the 1990 Jomtien World Conference

## FEEDBACK FOR IMPROVING EDUCATION QUALITY

The rationale for developing relevant systems of assessing learning achievement is “not only to measure what was actually being learned, but also how well the [education] system is working” [Chinapah, 1997:7]. Assessment of children’s educational outcomes is not only an integral part of the educational process, but it is also crucial for monitoring the implementation of educational programmes and the evaluation of their impacts. Educational achievement data obtained during the course of on-going intervention provides important feedback and essential information for formative evaluation and continuous improvement of educational programmes.

It is recognised that for a type of assessment to be of any use in improving educational quality, it has to be oriented towards inducing a response from practitioners in their roles as teachers, managers or policy makers. For this to be possible, the MLA instruments had to be flexible and adaptable to the unique contexts of classrooms, schools and communities so as to uncover information that could be used by the actors concerned. In other words, the assessment type chosen should ‘not only be able to provide feedback but also [be able] to help bring about changes based on it’ [Chinapah, 1997:7].

## PROJECT OBJECTIVES

The major aim of the MLA project was to reinforce countries’ national capacity to monitor the quality of their basic educational programmes. More specifically, this aim was to be achieved as follows:

- to establish a mechanism for periodic monitoring of the quality of basic educational programmes,
- to undertake assessment of learning outcomes on a regular basis in order to provide an information base for policy interventions for reducing observed disparities in learning outcomes [e.g. regional, gender, socio-economic],
- to establish common levels of learning outcomes, and,
- to develop methods and indicators for long-term monitoring in order to formulate policies aimed at improving basic education.

Monitoring the quality of basic educational programmes is a continuous and long-term process rather than a one-off activity. It has to develop and strengthen national monitoring capacities. As a built-in continuous evaluation process, the design should make adequate and relevant information available to decision-makers in order to allow them to formulate policies and programmes for qualitative improvement of basic education.

It is required that schools’ and learners needs are to be regularly analysed and understood in a contextual manner, while bearing in mind the different operational settings in which they are located. In essence, the main research challenge is: “to identify and delineate factors influencing learner achievement in different schools functioning in different external environments and internal conditions ”[UNESCO - UNICEF, 1993:1].



## KEY PROJECT CHARACTERISTICS

The overall MLA Project approach has a number of key characteristics.

- *Capacity Building* An integral part of this process involves the implementation of capacity building programmes in order to mobilise expertise in each national context. It is essential to generate a critical mass of core trainers at the national level and also of appropriate persons at the sub-national level so that the MLA cycle can be sustained over time. The multiplier effect or cascade effect where trainers in turn train others is to be put into practice.
- *Participation.* At the national level, it is imperative that the involvement of representatives of ministries, research institutions and educational practitioners is activated. Only through generating adequate participation from all stakeholders can a viable monitoring culture be established.
- *Multidisciplinary.* Cross-disciplinary interaction of practitioners in education, health, nutrition and civics must be encouraged.
- *Co-operation.* The process of managing the project should maximise partnerships and utilisation of endogenous human resource capacities [e.g. South — South exchange] as well as bilateral and international co-operation. Utilising economies of scale and leveraging advantage from the expertise shared between participating countries can only accrue collaborative and cost-effective benefits.
- *Country specific approaches.* The MLA approach requires the development of a country specific approach to the monitoring processes in order to suit the unique conditions pertaining to that context. This would entail the appointment of national and sub-national task forces and the construction of country specific instruments. These should reflect the country's unique needs and priorities in the realms of formal, non-formal, and early childhood education.
- *Dissemination.* The widespread dissemination of the results from the MLA project at national and sub-national education levels is essential to drive internal improvements towards education quality. In order to make information and analysis accessible and useable, data reporting and analysis must be undertaken at all levels, i.e., from the national, to regional, district, and school levels. The availability of this data makes the cycle of school quality improvement systematic, holistic and possible.
- *Learner-centred orientation.* The MLA approach is explicitly a learner-centred monitoring system with the intention to promote the development of learner centred curricula, textbooks, assessment techniques, and teaching—learning processes. The MLA approach aims at strengthening teaching—learning relationships that affirm the active participation of the learners in their own learning and development.

## EXPECTED OUTCOMES - BUT ALREADY REALISED

The MLA Project was expected to achieve the following outcomes:

- the development of a set of measurable indicators geared to the improvement of the quality of basic education;
- the provision of up-to-date information to decision-makers at the national/sub-national level to monitor progress towards the improvement of the quality of basic educational programmes;
- building national/sub-national capacity in monitoring the quality of basic educational programmes by providing necessary skills and technical experience through training and capacity building workshops, seminars and actual implementation of the project activities; and

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- strengthening information exchange and extension of networks in the field of basic education.

In order for the project to succeed, the design comprised:

- a simple, workable and sustainable
- survey methodology;
- appropriate flows of information and linkages for actions at different levels of policy-making, and implementation of measures to improve the quality of basic educational programmes; and
- the mechanisms and modalities for promoting national capacity building, using a holistic approach to ensure national ownership and wider participation in the project as a whole.



The approach was viewed as a strategy leading not only to a better understanding of the factors impeding and/or improving the quality of basic educational services, but also to the development of feasible alternate strategies for improving the quality of basic education and for monitoring its effectiveness.

## IMPLEMENTATION

Based on the framework contained in the document, “Joint UNESCO — UNICEF Project on Monitoring Education for All Goals: Focusing on Learning Achievement”, the MLA project began in 1992 with an initial set of five participating countries. The project objectives were refined through a series of in-country identification missions and workshops including an International Workshop on Survey Methodology at UNESCO in 1993. A second group of countries joined the project in 1994, and benefited from the experience of the five pilot countries, namely China, Jordan, Mali, Mauritius and Morocco [see Chinapah, 1997].

Since then, the MLA project has annually brought on board several countries from all regions of the world. Today there are around 50 countries at different phases of implementing the MLA surveys. Some 20 additional countries have requested to join this MLA project and to carryout the surveys during the period 2000-2002.

The experience of the MLA project has been continuously reviewed at international and regional workshops where participants have examined follow-up mechanisms for national capacity building as well as the sustainability of their monitoring systems. Several national reports, training modules, batteries of tests and questionnaires and a Handbook “Monitoring Learning Achievement - Towards capacity building” [Chinapah, 1997] are now available to all those countries that have expressed their interest in joining this international project. The flexibility of the monitoring methodology developed by the MLA project has constantly encouraged countries to conduct their national surveys for different grades, levels and types of education and learning. In the years to come, the out-of-school household-survey for 14-year olds and above developed by the MLA project partners will be launched in several countries.

Monitoring the quality of education and learning, in particular, on a regular basis has become a necessity in a number of countries after having experienced the results of the MLA project. The project has been turned into a movement within and between the participating countries since 1992. This African Regional Report is a demonstration of such a movement towards improving the quality of education in Africa. The MLA project can be a vital instrument for the post DAKAR Declaration and Framework as it has been for Jomtien.

