

CHAPTER 6:

AGENDA FOR ACTION

A nation's capacity to provide an education of quality to all its citizens will depend more than ever upon its success in guaranteeing a defined and acceptable minimum level of learning experience for all irrespective of their gender, regional, socio-economic and cultural differences or disparities. Human rights to a minimum quality of basic education for all in Africa remain the main concern of the MLA project.

Providing universal access to basic education opportunities and at the same time ensuring that the basic learning competencies of all learners are met, still remain distant targets for most African educational systems. These ever-lasting challenges are not always studied empirically. From the Jomtien perspective, an assessment of learner performance across gender, regional and school environments is more of a necessity than simply a need for stocktaking. Therefore, Africa has a unique and historical opportunity to raise its voice at the dawn of the 21st century with an assessment of the quality of education for all.

To date, there is not a single comparative study of basic education in Africa. The 1999 MLA African Surveys simultaneously assess learner performance from the viewpoint of what is taught and learnt in and out of schools. The MLA surveys were intended to complement other assessment methods, but not to replace them. For this very reason, basic learning competency levels were established for the three learning areas of Literacy, Numeracy and Life Skills. This regional survey has therefore opened up the terrain of learner performance' for analysis by providing the mechanism for the assessment of a minimum mastery level of knowledge, skills and competencies of learners [MML] as compared to the desirable mastery level [DML] to be reached by all, using a criterion-referenced testing approach.

Despite tremendous efforts made since the 1960s, the inherited educational backlog of the majority of African countries has neither been adequately redressed, nor sufficiently improved in qualitative terms. These countries have not conceived of policies that emphasise the provision of equal educational opportunities for all, as equity-quality trade-offs have not yielded optimal results in most African educational systems. Success in striking the optimal balance between equity and quality education for all is often obscured by the quantitative number game agenda that overlooks educational inequalities.

An attempt has been made in the MLA Surveys to provide some empirical evidence that point towards country-specific educational policies and strategies so as to meet the needs of African learners. In doing so the MLA surveys move a step further towards identifying the probable reasons of good or poor quality of education for all. The MLA movement is based upon the conviction that the comparisons of learner performance across the African countries surveyed in 1999 will lead to a better understanding of how each country fared in improving learners' knowledge, skills and competencies.



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The results indicate that the most salient feature of any single or composite indicator of African education development is the marked between- and within- country differences. This aspect is underestimated in most regional or comparative educational surveys and research studies. In order to ensure that both aspects of equity and quality of educational opportunities are assessed, the MLA project has explored the patterns of learner performance profiles across the region. For the majority of African children, many structural and personal factors work against an equal quality of learning for all. At the same time, the analysis of the conditions of teaching and learning indicate that there are clear indicative trends of African educational success. Since learners differ in many ways as individuals, at home, at school and at community level, the main tasks of the educational system and sub-systems should be to adapt teaching and learning in order to meet the different needs and opportunities of all learners.

The main policy themes arising from the surveys are reflected in the following set of recommendations towards an agenda for action. It should be noted that the data analysis and report-writing phases of all the African MLA 1999 country surveys are not yet completed and could not be included in this report.

QUALITY OF EDUCATION FOR ALL CAN BE ATTAINED

African education systems have so far unsuccessfully attempted to maintain a balance in the trade-off between equality of educational opportunities and quality learning. The tendency of African education has been to contribute to elite formation rather than to reach the marginalised masses of learners. To aggravate matters, frequent borrowing of 'standard' models of education do as much harm as good to learners if measures are not designed to address country-specific issues. Within the generic framework of quality education for all, mastery learning can serve the purpose of steering a path that safely avoids the pitfalls identified here.

"Mastery learning" as such, is neither a new concept nor a revolutionary one. However, it needs to be optimally used in order to guide intervention in areas such as: assessment, curriculum reforms and improvement in teaching and learning, just to mention a few. Mastery learning can ensure quality learning through continuous monitoring and application of appropriate corrective measures and can assist in reaching the often-marginalised mass of learners who become forced 'failures' and 'dropouts' of African education systems. Ensuring the minimum mastery level of learning [MML]



for all should be the first step towards excellence and the attainment of desired mastery level of learning for all [DML]. Therefore, one major policy observation can be drawn from the above-mentioned findings. Quality of education for all in Africa is no longer a dream. It is an attainable reality, provided that genuine efforts can be made to address the problems of educational access and minimal educational treatment as well [e.g. provision of an adequate qualified and stable teaching-force; maintenance of minimal health, food, and library services; and improvement of basic school facilities]. It is in the light of the above that between - and within - country differences in learning can be successfully eliminated or reduced.

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The DMLs' of the respective countries generated in this study may provide us an indirect measure of how achievable this target can be - if all the external and pedagogical conditions are optimally met. With the few exceptions 9 out of 10 learners surveyed in the participating countries have not yet reached the desired levels of mastery learning. However, the path to achieving improvements in quality teaching and learning is implicit in the mastery learning approach of the MLA surveys. The results of the surveys may serve as root sources of policy relevant information that will contribute to progressive gains in learner performance. In this way also, gains in educational quality can be understood and treated with reference to performance in other pertinent areas such as politics, history, economy, culture and demography.

IMPROVING AND SUSTAINING MINIMUM LEVELS OF MASTERY LEARNING

The experience from earlier MLA surveys in some fifteen developing and developed countries during the period 1992-1998 showed one major consistent pattern of learner performance across the three different learning areas, namely that learners' performance in Life Skills was much higher than their corresponding performance in Literacy and in Numeracy despite continuous historical, socio-economic, cultural and educational development. The findings from the 1999 MLA surveys in Africa show a similar pattern to the ones observed previously.

In the Numeracy learning area, not a single country has reached the Jomtien target, while more improvement will be needed in both Literacy and Life Skills. It must be stated that in spite of these findings, reaching an acceptable quality of education for all - the Jomtien 80% target - is not an impossible task in Africa. The evidence does show that some countries in this study have even gone beyond that target, others are coming closer, while a few still have a long way to go. The primary aim should be improving and sustaining a minimum level of mastery learning in all learning areas and at all Grades.

RECOGNISING SPECIFICITY IN LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

In terms of the analytical approach adopted in the MLA framework, it was expected that some common as well as specific patterns would be observed across the different learning areas of the 11 participating African countries. Through a focus on the unique and complementary patterns in the findings for the three different learning areas, the information obtained has the potential to support improvements in assessment practices, teaching-learning processes and curriculum development.

The results of the current study show clearly that all countries have a high between-learner performance difference in Numeracy and Literacy, while nearly half of them have much lower differences in Life Skills. In the latter case, the results of the previous MLA surveys are again confirmed. There are smaller differences between learners from the different countries in terms of their performance in the Life Skills learning area than in the Numeracy and Literacy learning areas. These salient features from the regional analysis further support reservations expressed about many rigid across-the-board applications of education policy "solutions" in Africa. Unfortunately, this policy rigidity continues to persist through support from both external and internal educational role players.

The inconsistent patterns of learner performance observed across the countries and between the three different learning areas point at one constant. More attention should be given to curriculum planning,

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teacher education and training, and textbook development to identify selected areas for intervention. Teaching and learning outcomes are not only influenced by the specificity of a particular country, its teachers and learners, but equally by the specific characteristics of each and every learning area.

UNDERSTANDING THE DYNAMICS OF TEACHING AND LEARNING

The empirical evidence obtained from this regional 1999 MLA survey offers serious challenges to contemporary pedagogy, learning and education as a whole. It addresses serious concerns about the state of comparative educational research and studies. For the sake of learners, systematic and continuous learning assessment schemes are needed in most educational systems at all educational levels and in all the learning areas and domains in order to capture - and meet - their varying needs and difficulties. Failing or passing learners does not justify what is learnt and what is not learnt. There is a need to understand the dynamics in teaching and learning so as to establish what must be taught and how each learner must be better prepared to optimise her/his learning potential and attributes.



Quality education for all can only be ensured on the condition that all educational role-players fully understand the dynamics of the teaching-processes where learners remain at the centre as targets for any intervention, be it at the curriculum, teaching, and learning environment level. In a similar vein, enormous efforts are needed to have a stable, qualified, better-rewarded and less mobile teaching-force. Critical problems such as scarcity of teaching and learning resources, multiple school shifts, large class size, long distances to school and so on must be seriously re-addressed. Most of the 1999 African MLA countries surveyed suffer from a lack of such basic and fundamental needs that must be met to attain a reasonable quality of education for all in the 21st century.

CHALLENGE OF ACHIEVING GENDER PARITY

Pointers and recommendations for gender parity in quality basic education for all in Africa are many as evidenced through the 1999 MLA African survey results. Gender parity in learner performance at the lower grades of basic education is an achievable goal. Gender differences are statistically non-significant in the majority of the reported observations across countries and by learning areas. One of the greatest challenges for girls and women education in the 21st century Africa, is the necessity to replace the vision of gender parity for all types and forms of education with the reality. As shown from the results of the 1999 MLA surveys in Africa, there is a great need to have more women in educational administration, planning, and managerial positions. All these may represent an ever-lasting value added to African education and to humankind as a whole.

REDRESSING URBAN AND RURAL DISPARITIES

Urban-rural parity in learner performance must remain a top-priority policy intervention in all countries surveyed. It would not only enhance parity, but would also create the value that is added in order to success-

fully reduce, among other things, the existing gender and socio-economic inequalities of Africa's present children, future youth and parents. A striking finding from Chapter 6 [providing detailed analyses of the factors that influence learner performance] was the consistent results concerning the strong impact of school location and type on learner performance, and the important role this predictor plays as a mediator for other predictors in the conceptual model. Revitalising Africa's educational hopes must go hand in hand with appropriate corrective measures for redressing urban-rural disparities in learner performance, while simultaneously boosting education growth in both quantitative and qualitative terms.

ADAPTATION OF SCHOOLS TO THE NEEDS OF CHILDREN

The adaptation of schools to children instead of the adaptation of children to schools, is an indisputable challenge of quality education for all. This must be re-addressed and further emphasised by educational planners and front-line educational agents of change and innovation. School effectiveness may not always need as many additional economic resources as compared to the different soft resources - such as discipline, working in a reinforcing collective milieu, partnership and commitment to guarantee excellence, and conducive managerial leadership — which can enhance learning. Private schools often have the advantage of having both the additional economic and soft resources. Learning from what makes schools more effective may serve to reduce differences in performance observed between learners attending public schools and learners attending private schools.

A critical example of how learners are forced to adapt to the school — rather than vice-versa - can be found in school language policy. Where the home language is the same as the language of instruction, learning is reinforced directly. The learner can freely communicate what she/he has learned at school in the home environment and her/his learning is more likely to be directly reinforced through interaction with all members of the family. Yet, for all the countries participating in the 1999 MLA study, the overwhelming majority of learners - between 75% and 90% - have to learn in a language other than their home language.

DECISIVE ROLE OF THE HOME LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

Evidence from the 1999 regional survey in the 11 African countries consistently shows the decisive role that the home learning environment can play in determining the level of learner performance. The various home factors that influence learner performance are those which are tightly related to the educational levels of parents, which in turn, affect the kinds and types of learning processes the learner is exposed to at home. For example, the access to basic learning needs and facilities such as having regular meals, basic reading resources; family support with homework assignments; and family involvement in school-related activities.

A reinforcing literate home environment can enhance learner performance and quality of education for all. It is not enough to assume that learning takes place only within the four walls of the classroom. The march for quality education for all can only be achieved if parents and communities are empowered to play the role they can and should in this process. Therefore providing life-long learning opportunities, especially to those parents who are relatively uneducated or hardly educated, is a precondition for the attainment of quality education for all in Africa. Without these opportunities, the nature and scope of existing generation gaps in educational access and educational quality will just perpetuate across African families and the future generations.

LIMITATIONS

This report is evidence of the success with which the MLA concept has been adopted and implemented in 11 African countries in 1999. The accomplishments achieved by the MLA participants and the contribution of the project to improving education in the Africa Region will be important landmarks into the future. Notwithstanding the successes, it is important to reflect on possible limitations in order to understand the broader context of the project and also to strategize around possible ways of improving it from the standpoint of conceptualisation, design, methodology and implementation. The following issues are raised in this spirit:

- The primary aim of the report was to provide a regional picture of the performance of learners and the factors that impact on this process. Therefore, detailed analysis of the specific features of the country data sets could not be completed in a comprehensive way. However, it is expected that more in-depth studies that follow-up on, or supplement the findings in this report will form the basis of sub-regional and national reports. This potentially rewarding challenge rests primarily with the various national task teams.
- The methodology applied in this project was primarily quantitative. Thus aspects of this project for which qualitative methods such as observing learner-teacher interactions could not be addressed. The results of the 1999 MLA national surveys, however, provide indications that can serve as possible starting points for national task teams to design and carry out qualitative-oriented research that may illuminate the quantitative MLA findings.
- Most of the instruments in the MLA surveys were administered in English or French. It must be acknowledged that these languages are for many learners their second or even third language. The fact that the majority of learners were not tested in their mother tongue could have major impact on the learner performance scores.
- All the information in this survey was collected through the paper and paper modality. It is, however, possible that the use of an oral modality could have yielded different results, especially in the context of African society which has such a rich history of oral tradition.

The 1999 MLA project must be viewed as a first step towards the systematic evaluation of the Education For All goals set in Jomtien in 1990. As such, it may represent the strategic launching point that participating countries should utilise for strengthening and improving their education assessment systems for the future.

GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS

The MLA is an ongoing project and has a strong developmental imperative in terms of its focus on assessing the goals of Jomtien. A project with the size and potential scope of the MLA is in itself in a process of development. Therefore, the following recommendations are made towards strengthening of the project and increasing its impact and success rate in the African continent.

- Bearing in mind that the 1999 MLA project is a step in a continuous and evolving process, the emphasis should be on looking forward to the main challenges of the next decade. It is recommended that the two main areas for emphasis should be: [a] to advocate for the MLA to be conducted in all African countries by the end of the next decade and [b] to work at improving on the current 1999 study in terms of continuously improving the methodology right through the project cycle and maximising the practical utilisation of the findings.

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- The possibility of co-ordinating the MLA study with other initiatives at the national, sub-regional, regional and international levels should be pursued. For example, the synergies between MLA and SACMEQ, PASEQ, and IEA initiatives must be exploited so as to maximise the potential collective and individual contribution of the various projects.
- The continued development of the already extensive networks established to date under the MLA banner is essential with special emphasis on closer co-operation among the different countries in the region. This can be achieved primarily through the following two mechanisms. Firstly through further expansion of capacity building initiatives, and secondly through formalising and giving structure to current networks. This could be taken up by establishing a standing MLA Technical Assistance Group for the Africa region.
- Maximising resource access is a critically important function to the progress of the MLA project. This can be given considerable support through establishing and building an Africa-based 'regional resource centre' that is accessible and available to all African national education authorities. The main purpose of this centre should be to provide technical assistance in all areas relating to the provision of quality education.
- An important function underlying the future success of the MLA project will undoubtedly be the dissemination of information. To this end, there are two elements that are essential. First, to assist national task teams in using and disseminating the information nationally and regionally. Second, to make data available to the broader African and international research community focusing on promoting greater use of the MLA data by African scholars and researchers. One means of achieving this aim is to establish a journal on "Quality Education for Africa". This journal can be used as a mechanism to promote the development of quality education systems in Africa as well as the development of further capacity.

CONCLUSION

The national ownership of the MLA project has become an important element of further capacity building, strengthening and sharing. It has also developed into a "think-tank" mechanism for national, regional and international networking. The optimal mobilisation of available human resource is *sine qua non* for the movement to remain sustainable. As an illustration, the present Africa regional MLA report is entirely prepared by a pool of African resource persons under the guidance and support of UNESCO and UNICEF. This Africa regional report is a direct outcome of the efforts and processes followed at regional, sub-regional, national and sub-national levels which, through intensive capacity-building mechanism moves towards the Jomtien imperatives for African learners and for African education as a whole.

"With Africa For Africa" is not only the title of an interesting story to be told and heard, but it is also a reality that all MLA teams have lived with, are living with, and will definitely live with in the future. The MLA movement can only expand because of its evident strengths. It includes among other things: an emphasis on building, strengthening, sharing and sustaining national capacities of a "critical mass" of expertise, and to address the quality of learning for all within a learner-centred approach by identifying necessary interventions in the areas of curriculum, teaching, learning and assessment. Finally, the MLA movement ensures broad-based partnerships at local, national, regional and international levels respectively.

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