

## The International Working Group on Education: Supporting Global Education Initiatives

### *Preface*

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The [International Working Group on Education \(IWGE\)](#) is an informal group of aid agencies and foundations created in 1972 to facilitate the exchange of information and innovative ideas and practices among donor agencies working on education. Since 1982 the IWGE has focussed on promoting basic education and has served as a catalyst for preparing and following up on the 1990 [Jomtien Education for All Conference](#). After the [World Education Forum in Dakar in 2000](#), the Working Group continued to exchange information on issues of basic education, but it broadened the scope of its discussions to look into such current challenges in the development of education as preparing young people and adults for work and entry into the labour market, coping with the growing demand for post-primary and secondary education after EFA, mitigating the impact of HIV/AIDS on education, and organizing education in countries in situations of crisis and reconstruction. The standing exchange of views and experiences on how to move to a sector-wide approach (SWAp) has broadened to include the progress made on the poverty reduction strategies (PRSs) and the [Fast Track Initiative](#) (FTI).

The Working Group has essentially three objectives:

- To exchange information among donors concerning education aid policies and practices in an open and informal way.
- To strengthen co-operation among agencies and facilitate a convergence of approaches and operational modalities.
- To advocate for bringing major education policy issues to the forefront.

All agencies involved in work concerning education or development, whether multilateral or bilateral, governmental or non-governmental, can join the IWGE, which is managed by a planning Committee<sup>1</sup> and assisted by a Secretariat. The meetings are attended regularly by 40 to 50 participants representing some 25 to 30 multilateral and bilateral development agencies,

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<sup>1</sup> This group was previously known as the Bellagio group. Planning committee members include the Aga Khan Foundation, the World Bank, the Swedish Co-operation Agency, UNICEF, UNESCO, USAID, and DFID. The Secretariat is provided by the UNESCO International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP).

as well as foundations. Several publications have been prepared on the basis of debates that have taken place during the meetings.

The 2004 meeting, which took place in Washington and was organized jointly with the World Bank, focused on how to improve governance in education. A presentation of the EFA monitoring report reminded participants that 43 countries are in danger of failing to achieve one of the EFA goals, while 28 countries are likely not to meet any of them. More efforts have to be made to increase access as well as to emphasize the quality of learning. Without improved governance however, it will not be possible to reach the EFA goals and educational objectives in general. The meeting considered three sub-themes of the general theme on governance: corruption in education, decentralization, and increased participation in decision-making.

Several studies have clearly emphasized the negative impact of corruption on the economic, social and political development of countries. They reduce the resources that reach the grass-roots level where action is taking place; they increase inequalities, as the poor are the most severely affected by leakages in resources; they reduce the efficiency of public service, distort the decision-making process and undermine social values. Overall presentations on the extent of corruption and the correlation between corruption and poverty were made. In education, specific corrupt practices are noted, which prevent the development of education. The higher the level of corruption in general, the lower the enrolment ratios. Several strategies to fight corruption have been presented, which emerge from the International Institute for Educational Planning's project: these were illustrated in case studies on tracking funds in Papua New Guinea and controlling corruption in the distribution of school improvement grants in Indonesia. The key to fighting corruption appears to be to develop a regulatory framework, monitor the implementation of the rules, apply sanctions when necessary – which itself requires strong political will, enhanced management capacities and ownership of the management process.

Decentralization is another way of improving the efficiency of education provision, which similarly requires management capacities and ownership of the process. Decentralization may take different forms (increased power given to schools, to lower levels of government or to elected bodies), concern different aspects (from curriculum to management of human and financial resources) and be introduced for different reasons (to improve the efficiency of public services in general; to increase the relevance of education and accountability; to pass the financial burden to lower levels). Generally speaking, decentralization has been introduced on fairly ideological grounds and not on the basis of scientific evidence showing that it works. Research is, however, required to monitor the impact of such policies and correct the negative aspects when they are identified. Decentralization is not an end in itself but a means to an end, and it needs to be implemented carefully, transferring the necessary resources, setting accountability mechanisms, and building capacities at local level. Experiences from Africa, Latin America and Central Europe were discussed. They show that financial resources at the local level are often not sufficient; data are scarce and local capacity to use such data weak. In several cases decentralization has led to increased inequalities where no effort had been made to strengthen the poorest and weakest districts and regions. Another trend is to give more power to school boards, but headmasters and members of such boards have to be trained.

The potential of increasing the participation of civil society in educational change was also presented, with examples from central Europe. Another potentially useful approach is the human-rights approach, which emphasizes the children as those who hold the rights to education; and the communities, the teachers and the state as those who have educational duties. This leads to a new chain of accountability.

Three of the papers presented during the meeting are available in this issue. Others can be found on the [IWGE web page](#). Another important theme of governance was not dealt with in this meeting: that of capacity-building. What does capacity building entail in reality? What are the best strategies to enhance it? This will be the topic of the next IWGE meeting.

Françoise Caillods  
Deputy Director  
International Institute for Educational Planning  
Secretary of IWGE  
f.caillods@iiep.unesco.org