



International Problem Solving through Distance Learning: Innovations Using Videoconferencing

Although embraced by many African countries, there is little evidence to suggest that decentralization has led to significant improvements in education quality and learning outcomes. Yet, work conducted by the USAID-funded Educational Quality Improvement Program 2 (EQUIP2), and its partners at the World Bank Institute and the British Council in Sub-Saharan Africa suggested that African policymakers and practitioners were gaining insight and experience from their decentralization efforts. They also knew that this information was not being shared.

To support improved communication of knowledge, EQUIP2 and its partners designed and delivered a distance learning course bringing together over 200 participants from schools, governments, civil society, NGOs, and the donor community through country teams in Cameroon, Ethiopia, the Gambia, Ghana, Kenya, Liberia, Malawi, Uganda, and Zambia. To date, the course has been held twice.

The five-month course exposed participants to current international research, and offered participants the opportunity to apply that knowledge, share experiences with counterparts across Africa, and conduct their own research and analysis. Each month in-country facilitators led country team discussions augmented by CDs containing current research. Following the in-country discussions, a monthly videoconference allowed countries to share and discuss their experiences with each other. Finally, a capstone event gave participants the opportunity to meet and share approaches, tools, and country case studies identified during the course.

By engaging participants in collaborative problem solving around decentralization's relationship to education quality, participants were able to share their experiences navigating political relationships and discuss how decentralization helps and hinders progress towards achievement targets. Participants agreed that cross-country sharing of experiences was an effective way to gain insights about how certain decentralization policies and approaches affect education quality. As stated by one participant from Uganda, "The conversations that have started and the discussions that have started are going to continue."

The course has greatly impacted how decentralization is perceived and applied in the participating countries. Participants from Kenya applied knowledge gained from the course to develop modules key to Kenya's decentralization process. In Ghana, participants promoted country-wide dialogue on decentralization and education quality through forums, radio shows, and newspapers. Participants in Cameroon and Ghana led decentralization courses based on the distance learning course for others within their countries.

While this distance learning course focused on decentralization and education quality, the approach could be applied to other areas of education sector reform. For donors interested in funding effective and low-cost courses, this course clearly demonstrates the possibility of doing so while bringing together a diverse group of participants around a series of activities dealing with the participants' real-life challenges.

For more information, contact Tom Lent at tlent@aed.org.