EQUIP Videoconference: Education Decentralization in Africa

Several African countries are currently in the process of decentralizing their education systems, drawing on a broad range of experiences and applying various approaches. Some are selecting regions and allotting roles and responsibilities in the early stages of decentralization while others have substantial experience with fully implemented decentralization policies. Despite the fertile basis for programming and policymaking and the growing number of initiatives, however, countries continue to struggle with the question of how to implement and finance decentralization to bring about real, measurable improvement in the quality of education.

In November 2005, the Education Quality Improvement Program 2 (EQUIP2) hosted a United States Agency for International Development (USAID)-supported videoconference on Decentralization of Education in Africa. Approximately 30 participants from three countries—Ghana, Namibia, and Uganda—were invited to discuss key issues in the design and implementation of education decentralization with 20 NGO and university representatives in Washington, D.C. The event was moderated by Don Winkler and Jennifer Spratt of the Research Triangle Institute (RTI) and coordinated in conjunction with the Global Development Learning Network (GDLN) and EQUIP partner Howard University. Country participants included policymakers from the regional and national ministries of education, project staff, education advocates and practitioners, and representatives from the three USAID missions.

The videoconference's primary objectives were to identify common goals and challenges in the region, share best practices and lessons learned, promote development of effective strategies, and facilitate access to crucial resources. Based on moderated discussions held in each country prior to the videoconference, the groups wrote and shared overviews of the status of decentralization in Ghana, Namibia, and Uganda and determined that education finance, implementation, and quality were the most important topics around which to build an ongoing dialogue. The moderators presented a brief rationale for decentralizing education and introduced each topic with examples from decentralized systems around the world. They posed specific questions to the three countries, which grew into interesting and potentially fruitful conversations, particularly between Ghana and Uganda on the topic of implementation methods.

Immediately following the two-hour videoconference, EQUIP2 led an off-line discussion among its partners in attendance and other participants in Washington, D.C. on how to foster exchange on key education decentralization issues between policymakers at the national and sub-national levels in the Africa region. Topics included the formation of school management committees, teacher recruitment, balancing core funding and school fees, maximizing the impact of government intervention on implementation and quality, and building school and community capacity to enforce accountability.

Following the videoconference, each participating country was encouraged to continue the conversations locally and determine their next steps and the services that would be most useful moving forward. With the continued support of its Decentralization Steering Committee and the videoconference participants in Washington, D.C., EQUIP2 will work with country liaisons to maintain momentum and stimulate the creation of decentralization learning groups.

According to one participant in Uganda, the first EQUIP2 Decentralization Videoconference was “a great opportunity to share experiences, learn from peers throughout Africa, and disseminate lessons learned on a most important topic.”

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