

Session 5: Panel Discussion

From research findings to policy development: strategies for using research to improve education policies and programmes

The Chair of the panel discussion, Mr Dennis Sinyolo, introduced the panellists, Professor Michael Kelly, Ms Aida Joaquim Munhequete, teacher trainer from the National Teachers Organisation of Mozambique, Ms Helena Awurasa and Mr Richard Bourne. The Chair stressed the importance of the topic, stating that while the generation of research data was all very well, its purpose was to improve policy formulation and implementation. There were many instances in which the best research had been allowed to gather dust and agreed policies had not been implemented. Panellists were invited to give their views on ways in which research could be used to improve strategies for the development of education policy and programme implementation guided by those policies.

Ms Awurasa opened the discussion by addressing the need to accelerate the rate of education policy change and the role of teachers' trade unions in that process. Teachers' unions, she felt, needed to develop policies based on the requests of their members and to effect change in policies such as pupil-teacher ratios, as reduction in class size was one way of improving quality in education. The use of research data as a basis for advocacy by teachers' unions was another effective method. She said that advocacy that was based on sound data and research would obtain a more sympathetic response from stakeholders. She gave the example of the Kenya National Union of Teachers, which had used such a strategy to mobilise support for collective bargaining for teachers. She indicated that she was committed to carrying out a similar initiative in her own country, Ghana.

Professor Kelly proposed that in using research information to influence policy development, it should be appreciated that all stakeholders might wish to improve the education system for the betterment of the country. He considered that policy submissions should be 'FAD' — feasible, affordable and desirable. Research outputs should be well presented and easily digestible, as ministries of education had neither the time nor desire to address lengthy treatises of data and tables. However, a great deal of goodwill, trust and confidence must exist between the stakeholders, whether they were researchers or ministry of education officials.

Professor Kelly said that the involvement of ministries of education in the evolution of the policy meant that there must be a culture of partnership within ministries that was conducive to stakeholder participation in policy formulation. The planning unit in a ministry must be prepared to listen, and researchers, also, must be prepared to listen to the planning unit. 'We must not forget', he stressed, 'the importance of remembering that we are dealing with human beings'. Referring to Ms Awurasa's point on advocacy, he acknowledged its importance and stressed the value of presenting research data in a striking manner that had visual impact. The researchers must have the courage of their convictions, arising from their research, and be convinced that their findings would lead to change. It was also important to consult with ministries about the research findings prior to final presentation.

Ms Munhequete noted that she was a representative both of the Ministry and the Mozambique Teachers' Union. She said that she herself — as a ministry official and a teachers' union member — was an example of the partnership that was needed between

ministries and teachers' organisations. She proposed that research should be looked at in a more practical way so that its findings could be implemented. She identified critical areas where data was needed to improve education policy, including:

- ◆ Teacher training: This was sometimes not sufficiently broad—for example, in the training of teachers the materials and manuals were sometimes confined to the need and importance of HIV/AIDS education and did not go beyond this to deal with the wider social implications.
- ◆ In-service teacher training: The absence of in-service training could mean that teachers were not up-to-date with current developments in education practice. Some teachers needed a 'refresher mechanism'.
- ◆ Incentives: Teachers needed incentives such as salaries and food supplements.

She concluded by stressing the importance of partnerships between ministries, teachers' organisations and employers.

Mr Bourne argued that there was often a 'disconnect' between research and policy. He alluded to the research which informed the decision to develop the *Commonwealth Teacher Recruitment Protocol*. The research that influenced the decision to formulate the CTRP was generated by four commissioned studies. This was an example and model of how research and policy can influence each other.

He stressed that there needed to be a coalition between researchers and policy-makers. There were, of course, various players in the process, such as the media and the Ministry. A former British prime minister, Margaret Thatcher, had told him that a humble civil servant might have a week in which to study a document. However, by the time the document reached a minister, the minister might have only 30 minutes to reach a decision.

He noted that more than 50 governments were involved in the Commonwealth. He said that he would like to see the issues raised in the report of this symposium considered at

17CCEM in Malaysia in June 2009. The symposium had already flagged up the issues of domestic violence against women, child abuse, rape, incest and the impact of HIV/AIDS on education. He strongly felt that if these issues were put before the ministerial conference, they would be of interest to many of the ministers and officials present.

Inviting contributions from the floor, the Chair summarised the presentations by saying that all panellists agreed that the presentation of research findings must be:

- ◆ Simple and well presented in a form that is user friendly;
- ◆ Clear and concise, as policy-makers do not have the time to read a great deal;
- ◆ Available to the media;
- ◆ Directed at involving as many of the stakeholders as possible, such as teachers.

Discussion ensued in relation to the use of research done by the ministries themselves to drive the formulation of certain policies. The point was emphasised that researchers must ensure that they provide an honest and accurate picture and that thereafter the policy decisions should be left in the hands of ministries. Concerns were also expressed about the lack of implementation of policies. There have been a large number of agreements that have not been implemented. Mr Bourne spoke about the action plans that were often arrived at in Commonwealth meetings and encountered difficulties or slowness in their implementation. There was also discussion about the challenges of policy implementation when government ministers—and Commonwealth leaders—were replaced. This presents challenges of continuity.

Professor Kelly cautioned that policy-makers and the gate-keepers of policies were not always at top leadership level. He concluded that it was as important to persuade junior civil servants of the need for policy implementation so as to persuade senior officials at the highest levels of government and civil society.