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Partners in the Chair: UNESCO's Role in Capacity  
Development in Education

## Partners in the Chair: UNESCO's Role in Capacity Development in Education

*UNESCO establishes 'capacity-building of Member States' as one of the five functions that it performs to fulfil its mandate. Capacity development at all levels is fundamental to achieving Education for All (EFA) and the Millennium Development Goals (MDG)*

### Conceptual issues

Capacity development has become a buzz word in international development co-operation, including in the field of education. The term is used - and sometimes misused - to describe a variety of activities that range from a training workshop for a few individuals to a large-scale programme aiming to strengthen the institutional environment of a governmental institution. Although UNESCO establishes 'capacity-building' as one of its five core functions, the term is not defined in the Organization's medium term strategies (for 2002-2007 and 2008-2013).

OECD defines 'capacity' as 'the ability of people, organisations and society as a whole to manage their affairs fully' and 'capacity development' as 'the process whereby people, organisations and society as a whole unleash, strengthen, create, adapt and maintain capacity over time'<sup>1</sup>. In recent years, many international development partners prefer the term 'capacity development' because it connotes a more endogenous development process of the countries, whereas 'capacity building' suggests a step-by-step erection process of a new structure from 'zero'.

### Education Sector's review of its capacity development programmes

Following the IOS review of UNESCO's capacity-building function<sup>2</sup>, the UNESCO Education Sector undertook a review of its capacity development programmes, to take

stock of and draw lessons from the capacity development programmes in education policy formulation, planning and management of education systems, which are implemented or supported by UNESCO and its Institutes<sup>3</sup>. The review is mainly based on a survey addressed to HQ Divisions, Category I Institutes related to education, Regional Bureaux for Education and other Field Offices. The analysis of the survey results was enriched by a literature review of selected papers, documents and newsletters published by UNESCO as well as other multilateral and bilateral development agencies.

The questionnaire responses indicate that UNESCO

- employs diverse modalities to address different dimensions of capacity development within national education systems, such as training, policy advice, technical guidance, and the co-ordination of regional and inter-regional networks;
- plays a major and respected role in developing the capacities of education institutions and actors in the formal and non-formal sectors in such areas as education planning, data gathering and assessment, policy-related research, curriculum development and teacher education policy;
- can dialogue and work directly with governments and other education actors and stakeholders and bring them together with a view to raising political and social awareness of the importance of capacity development in the context of education sector reforms.

<sup>1</sup> OECD. (2006). The Challenge of Capacity Development: Working towards Good Practice. Paris: OECD

<sup>2</sup> Stiles Associates Inc. (2007). A Review of UNESCO's Capacity-building Function. UNESCO Internal Oversight Service. Available at: <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0014/001499/149993E.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> UNESCO Education Sector. (2008). Review of UNESCO's Capacity Development Programmes: Final Review Report (working document for internal use).

Furthermore, the Review pointed to the following as contributing elements for good practice:

- country ownership and leadership;
- high governmental commitment and strong political will to implement the programme;
- appointment of a qualified national coordinator to ensure day-to-day operations;
- participatory assessment and decision-making mechanisms with beneficiary groups;
- sound understanding of, and respect for, local customs and constraints, along with the physical presence of stakeholders from the start of the process;
- appropriate technology transfer;
- good teamwork and teambuilding, and drawing on different partners' experience in the design and implementation of programmes.

The Review also indicates that better results could be obtained from capacity development interventions if UNESCO acted as a facilitator of change management processes, rather than as an implementer of services. Moreover, UNESCO needs to: a) clarify what it means by capacity development; b) prioritise and consolidate the capacity development focus in its thematic strategies; c) develop a long-term action plan for institutionalizing UNESCO's focus and approach, including agreement on concepts, objectives, processes, strategic partners and more efficient monitoring mechanisms; and d) communicate this approach widely throughout its offices and Institutes so that all parts of the Organization will be perceived as **one**.

**More information :**

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## The way forward

The UNESCO Education Sector, through IIEP and Headquarters, is developing a policy paper on capacity development in education sector planning and management, based on a literature review, country case studies and the above-mentioned review of UNESCO's capacity development programmes. It will be widely disseminated to its staff as a guiding framework to ensure relevance and consistency of UNESCO's capacity development programmes. UNESCO will also engage in dialogue with EFA stakeholders and development partners at international and regional meetings related to EFA.

UNESCO's role in capacity development and its relations with Member States and different development partners are changing, given the movement toward joint programming among the UN agencies, donor harmonisation at country level under the common sector strategies and country ownership, and the active engagement of national authorities, civil society and the private sector. The UNESCO National Education Support Strategy (UNESS) allows UNESCO to define its response to Member States' needs and priorities for educational development, taking into account UNESCO's comparative advantage and the development community's contributions.

Strategic partnerships, efficient co-ordination and fluid access to expertise will be critical to UNESCO's performance. Opening up more opportunities for South-South co-operation and civil society/private sector involvement at the regional levels are a further cost-effective adjustment that UNESCO can make to its operating procedures. Above all, however, UNESCO must be seen to follow one conceptual framework for capacity development and apply its tenets consistently.