

# Strengthening Linkages for Improved Education: Higher Education and Research working for EFA and MDGs

## ----- IAU project proposal

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### I. Introduction

The role that higher education institutions can play in achieving the Education For All targets and education-related aspects of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) have been of keen interest to the International Association of Universities (IAU) for various reasons:

- i. as an international association representing more than 600 higher education institutions from 130 countries, IAU includes Members from countries concerned by these movements in direct and immediate ways;
- ii. though higher education is not specifically named in the official documents outlining the policies and objectives related to the EFA or MDGs efforts, the higher education sector is involved both:
  - directly as higher education is often in charge of teacher training, pedagogical research is usually carried out at Faculties of Education, etc. and
  - indirectly as part of the whole interdependent educational system in which growing number of students reaching higher levels create demand for access to higher education; research on social policy, labour market demand, and related planning is often done at higher education institutions, etc.;
- iii. the IAU is convinced of the value of a holistic approach to education and of the important contribution that higher education institutions and research can make to ensure that these educational and developmental goals are met within the deadlines set by the UN;
- iv. actions undertaken by higher education institutions and research in EFA/education-related MDGs fields have been practically invisible;
- v. the IAU is certain of the importance of higher education for development and for the reduction of inequalities in all countries and deplores the pursuit

of policies that make higher education and research compete with other levels of education for funding and attention. This is anathema to a holistic approach;

- vi. finally, given the far reaching and comprehensive nature of the educational-aspects of MDGs and EFA and the possibility that several countries might not reach these objectives before the deadline, HEIs are needed to research and evaluate how to move the overall process forward.

## **II. IAU Pilot Project**

For these reasons, in 2005 the IAU launched a pilot project – which was in part funded by SAREC of the Swedish International Development Agency (Sida). The objectives of this pilot were to:

- Learn more about this intersection of educational levels by examining what has or is being done by higher education institutions in EFA-related topics;
- Assess the feasibility and the need for a larger project to investigate and promote the role of higher education and research in achieving the Education for All goals.

The Association also sought to test whether the topic was of interest and relevance, as other meetings had already taken place on the subject, though with few visible results.

In the pilot, IAU limited its focus to examining the extent to which, and how, North-South inter-university partnerships contributed to EFA goals. This was done deliberately in order to:

- i. interest IAU members in all regions of the world in the pilot project;
- ii. reflect the Association's fundamental values (cooperation and partnership);
- iii. be certain of the availability of data;
- iv. create a 'universe' with relatively homogenous results, thus ensuring that data collected was comparable;
- v. ensure that positive results in the pilot would likely lead to better success in a project with a broader scope while taking into consideration feasibility and given available resources.

The pilot project included two surveys, one targeting agencies/associations, the other aimed at institutions, to gather data and views. It also included a Seminar of experts in Maputo, Mozambique to compare data gathered from expertise, experiences and opinions of scholars and practitioners in the education sector and to assess the need for a broader project.

The pilot allowed IAU to identify some 20 organisations that are working or are interested in inter-university partnerships in EFA and more broadly in the higher education/EFA interaction. As well, information was gathered on several completed or on-going projects.

The surveys showed that very few agencies/associations were funding inter-university partnership in fields related to EFA. Even more surprisingly these agencies devoted on the whole very little money to EFA-related projects even though

EFA is a global priority with a deadline that is drawing close. At the same time, most agencies contacted showed keen interest in the subject.

Agencies' interest appears to lie primarily in training (teacher training, of course, but also the training of administrative staff), with pedagogy and education quality of some importance to them as well. Surprisingly, ICTs and distance education were not among the activities they currently fund while research that can be done by universities, such as evaluation of policies and programs, results achieved, impact on society etc., was neither deemed as important. Agencies felt they were funding EFA-areas in which university involvement was most appropriate though they did indicate that ICTs and distance education should have had higher priority. For most of the agencies, universities were insufficiently involved especially since they had the necessary knowledge and there was a demand from the institutions in developing countries. More dialogue was a key way towards improving the situation.

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) responses indicated that they too were also primarily focused on teacher training, as well as on pedagogy and quality of education. Topics such as the impact of EFA on society, ICTs and distance learning were also of importance. Lack of financial support for these initiatives was practically the only problem encountered by those who had been involved in projects, although, in some cases, the lack of support from local authorities was mentioned. Even more than agencies, HEIs believed that their involvement in EFA was insufficient. They confirmed that demand from universities in the South was not being met and that research in the field was clearly inadequate. Institutional representatives blamed this reality on the lack of recognition for this kind of engagement, lack of support for it and lack of opportunities. Government policy needed to change in their view.

The Experts' Seminar highlighted the gap between EFA terminology and the language of academe and researchers. The need to 'translate' EFA for HEIs and researchers in order to increase their interest and understanding is essential and would go a long way to overcoming missed opportunities for greater engagement by universities. Poor articulation between different levels of education as well as poor communications between different stakeholders was also a major obstacle to increased and improved involvement of HEIs in EFA. Formative research and research training on and for EFA implementation was highlighted as greatly necessary. Topics where research is needed are numerous and not limited to teacher training, students could be used, ranging from research to community services to implement EFA.

All experts agreed upon the necessity for an enlarged second phase of the pilot project for the following reasons:

- i. to raise awareness of the interconnections within the educational system;
- ii. to collect more information on what is being done;
- iii. to stimulate more research and facilitate access to research results to support the development of evidence-based education policies;
- iv. to broaden the focus of the HE community on EFA and to expand the focus to include educational aspects of MDGs.

### III. Strengthening Linkages for Improved Education

Building on the pilot and focusing on some of the recommendations<sup>1</sup> of the experts, IAU has elaborated the following project proposal to pursue its work on the linkages between higher education and research activities as they contribute to the efforts underway to meet the EFA targets and education-related MDGs.

#### Two-pronged approach

The findings and outcomes of the pilot and most especially the recommendations of the experts have led the IAU to focus on two types of activities.

- A. Improved and increased information sharing and awareness raising campaign
- better information for HEIs on EFA/education-related MDGs;
  - more visibility for research done at the higher education level as it pertains to the implementation of EFA/education-related MDGs;
  - promoting better inclusion of the higher education sector in EFA/education-related MDGs policies and implementation programmes.
- B. Capacity building
- providing a forum for sharing of best practices in education
  - promoting and facilitating inter-sectoral and multi stakeholder dialogue;
  - providing collaborative tools for academic and administrative staff to better serve EFA/education-related MDGs;
  - fostering increased South-South and North-South-South cooperation.

#### A – Raising Awareness: Information tools

Access to organised data has always been and continues to be indispensable for development, perhaps more so with the advent of information and communication technologies. This is equally true for the inter-section between higher education and research and the objectives of such efforts as EFA or the fulfilling of targets such as those couched in the MDGs related to education. According to the results of the IAU surveys, there are two problems that could be addressed and solved by improved and wider use of information tools:

- lack of knowledge or understanding of what EFA and MDGs encompass. Often academics and researchers at many HEIs are working on areas essential to meeting these targets without drawing the links between their work and these global initiatives; others would be more than happy to contribute as well but do not know how their work may fit into the overall effort;
- poor dissemination of EFA and education-related MDGs academic research results. This leads to the impression that HEIs are inactive and disinterested in areas related to EFA and MDGs. It leads to the waste of invaluable research results for policy makers and prevents HEIs from being considered as full and key partners.

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<sup>1</sup> See Annex 1 for complete list of recommendations issued by the Experts' Seminar which was organized as part of IAU's pilot project.

As an international network of HEIs, known for its role as a clearinghouse of authoritative and accurate information, IAU is well-placed to develop information tools on higher education research and provides access to such a resource to scholars, researchers, policy makers, NGOs and interested individuals around the world.

Three types of information tools will be developed to address the challenges mentioned above: a simple leaflet/brochure to raise awareness; a portal to disseminate the information available; a newsletter to strengthen a community.

#### → **Leaflet/Brochure**

EFA, education-related MDGs and acronyms, such as the GMR, have meaning for the initiated. For the researcher or faculty member, their importance is often lost among the multitude of other acronyms, slogans and programs. Moreover, the breadth of areas that each of these UN programs cover is wide and their various sub-topics are interconnected in complex ways. The terminology to describe academic programmes or research does not always overlap with these topics. The proposed leaflet or brochure would 'translate' or decode the themes of EFA and education-related MDGs in ways that academics and researchers can see the fit with their research and teaching. By showcasing examples, it would also highlight the role that HEIs play or could play in these various efforts.

The leaflet will be disseminated widely to improve understanding of the issues and to raise awareness in the higher education community that they too are actors in these global efforts and help them to intervene and develop research in niche areas needed to attain these educational goals.

Even though ICTs and the web are ubiquitous, creating an attractive paper leaflet/brochure remains essential especially in those countries where the EFA targets and education-related MDGs are least likely to be met. HEIs and researchers in these countries often lack inexpensive and trouble-free connection to electronic supports.

It will also serve to make the other information tools more visible.

#### → **An information portal**

The overall goal for the development of the portal is to create a single and comprehensive entry point for information and news on the work done in higher education and research communities on EFA and MDGs-related topics. It will provide a resource where to find ready-to-use information on the topic as well as offering an interface to disseminate higher education research results and to link to agencies and organizations active in this area. Thus, it will benefit the HE and research community as a whole, but will also be useful to the policy and decision makers in EFA, NGOs and many other stakeholders concerned with education development.

In concrete terms, the portal will be bi-focused so as to provide information on the EFA and education-related MDG efforts and on higher education research projects. It will be built incrementally, starting initially with the information already collected in the IAU pilot project. Further information will be added gradually, eventually leading to an interactive site where project leaders will have an opportunity to provide

information on their projects directly online. Hence, from the outset, the portal will be a rich and unique source of information on a topic that is tackled nowhere else in such a format. Details concerning the portal are given in Annex 2.

#### **→ A newsletter**

Together with the portal, a regularly disseminated newsletter could serve as an instrument to build a community among all persons interested in the subject and a first step towards the creation of an interactive community of researchers and those who may use the results of their work. It will report on the latest updates of the portal, circulate the latest news on the EFA movement, comment on recent trends and include information from registered users. It too will serve to raise public awareness on the importance and achievements of higher education and research in pursuing the EFA targets and the educational objectives of the MDGs.

### **B – Capacity-building: Increasing HE engagement in EFA/education-related MDGs**

There is no point in providing and disseminating information if it is not used. This is why the second broad line of activities proposed by IAU concerns capacity-building.

It is vital to the overall success and sustainability of the EFA efforts and the attainment of the educational aspects of the MDGs that the higher education sector becomes more involved in areas where it has unique expertise, such as in teacher training, learning assessment, programme evaluation, pedagogical research and educational planning.

It is also essential that researchers and higher education leaders become involved in these efforts because, as the base of the educational system of any country, EFA success has an impact on the entire education system, i.e. increasing demand for secondary, vocational and higher education in due course. Too little attention to this domino effect still seems to prevail, yet developing capacity to effectively monitor, evaluate and manage this growing demand takes time, careful planning and an early investment.

Policy makers and educational planners require support to develop more evidence-based policies through research conducted by the HE community.

Stimulating research through the following activities is of vital importance. It would facilitate better representation of HEIs and researchers in all aspects of policy making related to EFA/MDGs.

#### **→ Creating a reference group**

The participants in the Experts' Seminar that formed part of the pilot project have all accepted to be part of a reference group for the follow-up that IAU may develop. Because of the diversity of their profile, origin (both professional and geographic) and objectives, if stimulated and encouraged, this group can immediately evolve to

become a think tank, even if several other knowledgeable individuals would need to be added. If needed, the group could be divided into smaller thematic sub-groups to address each of the objectives being pursued by this proposal.

Coordinated by IAU, and working online, the reference group would help define a priority agenda for activities. Its members would serve as experts when specific knowledge would be needed, and act as the liaison to a broader network of experts in various parts of the world.

#### → **Experts' database**

Education sciences experts are easy to identify, but the same is not true for those who, among them, are interested in, knowledgeable about and working more specifically on EFA and MDG education-related issues. Research on these topics is also not limited to the faculties and institutes of educational sciences; but rather may include scholars in fields such as development, public policy, economics, management studies, sociology, anthropology, gender studies, languages, mathematics and sciences, ICTs or even medicine, among others. This is why a database could be useful for researchers to highlight their specific knowledge to be used both inside and outside the academic sector (Ministries, national, regional and international organisations).

The database will be available on the portal, searchable by name, field, country/region of expertise, country of location, and other aspects if necessary. The expert will be able to complete an online form for their résumé to be included in the database. The process of inclusion itself (automated or moderated, by whom and how) will be defined by the reference group.

#### → **Enhancing research and dialogue**

Collecting data and information on what already exists and enhancing their visibility and usefulness is important. However, it is not enough and to mobilise more interest within the HE community for these movements. Given the framework of development efforts as ambitious as EFA and the MDGs, it is indispensable to foster dialogue.

Building on the information products (which will include best practices and guidelines) and the expert human resources in the reference group and database, this aspect of the project will focus on the ways and means to promote collaborative capacity-building activities. Some of these activities would be specifically centred on the HE community and others more focused on other stakeholders: teachers/school officials, governmental bodies, local, regional and international NGOs, development agencies and international organizations. Both aim at reducing the gap between the actors and actions focused on EFA and education-related MDGs and the higher education community. They would be supported by the international network of academics of the International Association of Universities and other experts and respect, as it is usually the case at IAU, a model of South-South-North collaboration. The networking activities could focus on the capacity development needs to lead to national or regional brainstorming sessions and/or policy meetings to reflect on what could/should be the role of the higher education sector with regards to specific local/regional issues and define the priority research areas accordingly.

### **International Meeting - Assessing achievement**

Assessing what was achieved and what remains to be done at the end of the project is the best way forward, enabling all to reinforce successes and reflect on how to avoid or redress failures in the future. In this project, the most productive way to evaluate the achievements and especially to map out the future would be by bringing together a variety of international participants representing all stakeholders in the collaboration between higher education and research and those focused on EFA and education-related MDGs, including policy makers and representatives from Ministries. Such an international and multi stakeholder meeting would not only evaluate the outcomes of the project but also lay the groundwork for even more progress to be made towards a better inclusion and visibility of higher education and research efforts in EFA/education-related MDGs.

### **Sustainability**

MDGs and the EFA effort are both examples of strategies for mobilizing governments and communities to pursue aims in a concerted and structured manner. Investing in education is sustainable in itself for it is proven that it participates in poverty reduction everywhere. This IAU project aims to reinforce education by mobilizing and stimulating the higher education community to get more involved and to make its involvement and contribution more visible.

Apart from the costs related to the resources (human and technical) needed for the creation and maintenance of the portal, the costs of printing, translating and disseminating the brochure/leaflet and the costs of organizing the international multi-stakeholder meeting, the project is relatively inexpensive. Costs could also be reduced by having some of the data entered directly by the people wanting to share information on their projects and some services could be designed on a fee-for-service basis (registration fees applied to certain categories of meeting participants, for example).

Yet, for this initiative to gain in credibility, visibility and usefulness – to be well launched - funding will be needed. IAU hopes to raise funds from a variety of funding sources, allowing each donor agency or partner to identify the specific area in which they wish to contribute. We are also proposing to potential partners (university organizations or specialized groups) to be directly involved in the activities (or one type of activity) in return for a fee (see chapter VI).

### **Partnerships and collaboration**

During the pilot project, IAU became aware of the keen interest of many organizations and donor agencies in this initiative. The importance given to EFA and MDGs at the international level and by many governments, coupled with the general recognition that education is central to overall development have served to increase the attention paid to the ways that can be used to achieve positive results. IAU has involved many other organizations and has presented its work in several international and regional conferences and seminars and will continue to do so. Partnerships will be explored for a variety of reasons – for collaboration, - for real ownership of the project by all, - for expertise, - for funding, - for increased visibility and presence in the field and to build on all related initiatives.