Evaluation of the Asia-Pacific EFA Mid-Decade Assessment and Mid-Term Policy Review

20 December 2010

Final Report
Executive summary

1. The EFA Mid-Decade Assessment (MDA) and Mid-Term Policy Review (MTR) was designed to support an assessment against EFA goals and to enable participating countries:
   - to construct a comprehensive picture of their progress towards their own EFA goals over the period 2000 to 2005
   - to identify priorities and promising strategies for overcoming obstacles and accelerating progress particularly with respect to the unreached, underserved and marginalised groups, and
   - to revise their national EFA/education sector action plans accordingly.

2. As well as producing national assessments and facilitating midterm policy review, the EFA MDA and MTR also served as a major exercise in capacity-building, with UNESCO and UNICEF playing a leading role. Indeed, the strengthening of national capacities for regular EFA monitoring, evaluation and assessment was an important underlying objective of the EFA MDA. Therefore, while the generation of robust and comprehensive data on the education sector was an important immediate objective for the MDA, the development of sustainable capacity to support ongoing and regular EFA monitoring, evaluation and assessment was identified as being equally important.

3. In essence, the overarching focus for this work was to determine if and what progress had been made in relation to monitoring of EFA in the countries in the region and the role of (statistical) capacity-building initiatives in enabling (or hindering) that progress. The insights gained would identify lessons for future assessments and provide direction as to the nature and intensity of support needed to support countries in the region for future assessments.

Key achievements

4. The evaluation findings showed an overwhelming support for the EFA MDA process from countries in the region. National EFA coordinators and other country level stakeholders interviewed reported that the MDA process had placed EFA back on the agenda and enhanced its relevance within the country. Of the total number of countries in the region, 30 countries prepared national reports, 23 of which published the report and 7 countries did not publish their report. Despite not publishing a report these countries too benefited from carrying out the assessment as they learnt about the strengths and weaknesses of current monitoring systems and put in place initiatives to improve these.
The thematic focus on reaching the unreached led countries to ask questions about their marginalised groups and as expressed by a respondent, ‘it shifted the emphasis from pride on enrolment rate to concern for those not enrolled’. The theme also provided a framework for guiding data collection and analysis and as a result countries reviewed their educational statistics against this backdrop and revised their Education Strategic Plan (ESP) to reflect these goals.

The role of UIS-AIMS in facilitating implementation of EFA MDA at the country level was pivotal to its success and must be acknowledged. The involvement of a UN agency with high credibility and expertise ensured that the process was well crafted; there was a clear statement of purpose; the individuals involved were skilled and had strong technical capability to respond to emerging needs and problems; and most importantly, the teams possessed passion, drive and a spirit of collaboration. This contributed to strong relationships being forged within and between countries. There was also an acknowledgement of the support from education sector staff in UNESCO Bangkok and UNICEF which enabled the UIS–AIMS team to achieve the level of collaboration needed at the country level.

Interestingly, most countries visited as part of this evaluation did not view the EFA MDA and MTR as a one-off exercise and had initiated subsequent assessments in 2009-2010 to monitor progress towards EFA goals. This is a positive development and an endorsement of the perceived value of the monitoring and assessment triggered by the EFA MDA. Uzbekistan, India, China, Cambodia and Indonesia had undertaken similar assessments two years on from completing the MDA and published reports to capture key findings.

The MDA and MTR were designed as interrelated processes. While the MDA focused on supporting countries to assess progress towards the six goals, the results of the MDA were intended to feed into the MTR processes by providing the evidence base for countries to examine the impacts of education policies and reforms across various strata and groups in society. The MDA and MTR were inextricably linked in that the quality of analysis of options to reshape or refocus policies towards attainment of the EFA goals was dependent on the quality of inputs from the MDA.

From a discrete, national perspective, the process of undertaking the assessment and the findings of the MDA led to critical reflections about the policies and actions of countries. This was identified as a positive spin-off of the MDA during the interviews with key stakeholders as well as during the 11th Regional meeting of National EFA Coordinators held in November 2010. Country papers submitted at this meeting outlined the specific policies and actions countries have undertaken following the MDA and MTR policy conferences and the May 2009 meeting – in particular, which policies have they implemented among those listed in the Commitment for Action publication. A summary table of these actions can be found in Appendix 8.
Countries acknowledged that the entire MDA process had been a catalyst for increased focus and concerted action to reach the unreached and disadvantaged groups. National and subregional EFA MDA report were used for education planning purposes by government, and to a lesser extent, donors, UN Agencies and other EFA partners. However, this occurred in countries where there was political will and commitment or the policymakers engaged with the findings rather than through external intervention. In order to establish a clear and close link between the MDA and MTR, there is a need to invest more strongly in facilitating reflections on the findings and to undertake more systematic reviews of the implications at a political level.

Challenges

The implementation of EFA MDA was not without its set of challenges. The main challenge was political in nature, given sensitivities around defining the unreached or marginalised groups and the emphasis of the EFA MDA on using disaggregated data to analyse relevant indicators and identify disparities.

In addition to the political challenges, there were also significant data-related challenges faced by countries. The focus was on unreached groups both out-of-school as well as those in-school. In-school groups can be ‘excluded’ due to learning difficulties or marginalised due to gender, inability to speak the medium of instruction, or distance of school from their homes and therefore in danger of dropping out. Most countries did not have the data or had little experience in undertaking disaggregated analysis to identify disadvantaged groups in such detail.

Lack of inter-Ministry coordination was also a challenge for most countries as data was held by a number of different agencies who did not necessarily have a direct interest in EFA. Access to data on health status or nutritional status needed to be negotiated early on in the MDA process, but this did not always eventuate due to politics and patch protection by agencies, or else the sheer logistics associated with getting the different agencies involved.

Most countries also commented on the lack of involvement from the National Statistical Officers and lack of access to their data for the MDA. Effective ways to engage with, and include, other Ministries and the NSOs in EFA assessments were identified as a critical area of focus for the future by all countries.
Lessons learnt for the future

Process

15 Key elements of the EFA MDA process that contributed significantly to its success in this region included:

- clarity of vision and purpose – the vision and purpose were well articulated from the beginning and capacity-building efforts were designed to help achieve this purpose through regional, subregional and national initiatives
- investing time and effort in getting buy-in from countries and EFA partners in the region
- the group processes were designed to help translate intelligence about the region in ways that helped to maximise influence and traction
- the process that was designed reflected the political, social, cultural ecology in which the MDA AND MTR was expected to play out – there was an understanding of the people, relationships and cultural elements of the system and the interdependencies between them which was critical to mobilising interest and energy for assessment
- leveraging strategic connections with UNESCO Bangkok and UNICEF and other EFA partners to navigate this path.

16 Another key insight from this evaluation was that MDA cannot be viewed as a mere technical process – it was in fact a social process designed to be participatory and collaborative to help countries along a journey towards monitoring. This is a critical success factor and trying to design a technical process will undermine its ability and potential.

Theme

17 The evaluation highlighted that there was limited or no data regarding all or some of these groups in many countries and gathering and analysis of data by excluded groups tended to be politically fraught. Therefore, while there was goodwill and a definite desire to find out about the underserved groups, it was often not a straightforward task.

18 Making it work required attention to be paid to three core elements: garnering political will and commitment to focusing on excluded groups; systematic gathering and analysing of data to identify needs of these groups; and taking action to address the need of unreached groups in the context of MDA. These elements were interrelated, so focusing on any one of the three elements would necessarily lead the country to ask questions about other two parts.
Despite the sensitivities around these issues, the Asia-Pacific region was able to achieve great success in heightening awareness of the need to focus on underserved groups and in many instances countries responded by putting in place specific policies and programmes to meet the needs of these groups. There were two principal reasons for success in this regard:

- Positioning EFA MDA as a regional assessment provided a sense of safety and sense of unity and purpose – countries did not feel ‘picked on’ and viewed this as a collective exercise. It provided a platform for mobilising resources and development partners at a regional level.

- While there were suggestions about the types of groups that could be defined as unreached, the EFA MDA offered tremendous flexibility to countries to define the unreached in their own context. This flexibility was important particularly for countries where ethnic differences can be a source of tension and there is a reluctance to analyse data by ethnicity. The non-judgemental approach implicit in the MDA and MTR process acted as a strong motivator for countries to maintain engagement.

Lessons learnt for EFA 2015 assessment

The evaluation identified a number of lessons from the MDA and MTR process to inform planning towards the EFA 2015 assessment. These were:

- A number of countries identified the need to involve the national statistics office-agency or office early in the process. This would ensure more integrated analysis.
- Capacity-building activities and training modules developed for state, district and local/school level to lift quality and reliability of data.
- Tailoring training depending on the country’s capability and need. As noted earlier, some countries had strong internal capability whereas others had limited capability. Therefore, it was deemed important to take these aspects into consideration when planning the content of the regional workshops drawing on principles of differentiated learning.
- Developing the subregional synthesis was challenging as countries were working to different time frames. This needed to be addressed.
- While the focus on national ownership was appreciated and valued, there was a sense that occasionally the emphasis shifted to accuracy and quality of data and UIS need for internationally comparable data.
- Focus on message – not the final product; even in countries that did not publish a final report, there were lessons learnt which were integrated into their policy decision-making cycle, and this must be acknowledged.
Success at policy level required engagement at Ministerial level forums such as SEAMEO, the Pacific Leaders Forum, and others. Otherwise, the assessment did not feed into national decision-making and lost its potential. Engagement at Ministerial level also ensured better integration with country-specific education strategies, thus increasing its value for political stakeholders. International EFA partners could play a stronger role in supporting countries towards this end.

Any consideration of EFA 2015 assessment needed to start soon, particularly for countries that did not complete MDA. The time involved was significant and it was necessary to ensure that the structures were in place to support successful implementation. There were also lessons learnt from the Asia-Pacific experience that could be drawn upon by other regions.

Finally, there needs to be acknowledgement that EFA monitoring was only one of the many monitoring activities that were requested by UN agencies and over and above the everyday work for many government officials. Establishing greater alignment and synergies in resource mobilisation and funding is critical to support countries to undertake these tasks effectively. Otherwise, it became onerous and the pressures needed to be managed and supported by EFA partners.