

ERI SEE and CEP regional conference: Policy development and monitoring for quality and equity in education

6-7 December 2011

GENERAL REPORT

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Introduction

The Centre for Education Policy, acting as the interim secretariat of ERI SEE organised 6-7 December 2011 a regional conference “Policy development and monitoring for quality and equity in education”.

The topic of the conference corresponds strongly to the overall aim of ERI SEE – facilitating regional exchange of policies and practices, in particular on issues of equity and quality. The conference also aimed at promoting a holistic view of education policy development, beyond fragmentation into separate policies for each education stage, given that challenges in both equity and quality emerge and are most visible in transitions *between* different stages. A further underlying rationale for the conference was the idea that processes of policy development, implementation, monitoring and evaluation have to be founded on evidence.

The conference was attended by approx. 70 participants from Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Macedonia, Montenegro, Moldova and Serbia. A particular feature of the conference was the diverse background of participants, since it included:

- representatives of the ministries responsible for education,
- representatives from the state institutions in charge of education development, assessments and statistics,
- representatives from the teacher associations and teacher/education faculties,
- representatives of the education research community, and
- representatives of international organizations and non-governmental organizations, including the Delegation of the European Union to the Republic of Serbia, European Training Foundation – ETF, KulturKontakt Austria, World Bank, Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, Fund for an Open Society.

Although, as indicated earlier, the aim of the conference was to facilitate a more holistic approach to policy making, there was a notable lack of higher education policy makers.

The General Report provides an overview of discussions on several topics that were highlighted by participants through key note speeches, expert panels, working groups and related discussions. These include:

- the relationship between equity and quality,
- an analysis of who are the disadvantaged and what are the implications for education policies,
- the relationship from data and evidence and how to promote usage of evidence in policy development,
- reflections on the policy process, including all stages from development through implementation to evaluation and expectations and experiences of participants.

Each of these sections includes some ideas for further regional cooperation, including those developed in the working group discussions.

Equity and quality in education – a false dichotomy

It is often stated, more or less explicitly, that equity and quality in education are two contradictory features of an education system, especially in processes of significant expansion of capacities. In recent times, this view was most evident with respect to higher education and its massification. Claims that “not everyone is fit for studying” and “we can not provide good education to high numbers of students” reflect the deeply engrained understanding of education quality as excellence and to a lesser extent as value for money, as opposed to quality as transformation, or fitness for purpose, or exceptionalism (see Harvey and Green for more information (1993)).

Similar statements can often be heard about earlier stages of education, in particular when it comes to special measures targeting populations that are seen to be somehow socially disadvantaged. In these instances it is often stated that education is and should be background neutral and that the only true way towards quality is the meritocracy way.

Becoming the focus of media and general public frenzy whenever they are published, reactions to PISA results are the most convenient opportunity to see such views in their clearest. The media and the general public, as well as policy makers often focus only on the average results and where they stand in the rankings, especially with respect to neighbours. Some researchers attempt to use PISA results for a more fine grained analysis of the inequity in their education system as well as to monitor the developments over time and perhaps evaluate policy on the basis of such outcomes¹, but these attempts are rather rare.

Such views on quality and equity as a dichotomy stand in stark opposition to extensive research in various disciplines that testify to persistent inequalities in education systems (e.g. see Raftery and Hout (1993), Lucas (2001), Morrow and Torres (1994), Thomas et al. (1999)) and the view that education systems are in essence designed to maintain inequality (Bourdieu and Passeron (1990)). Thus, the meritocratic idea in essence is shown

¹ A good example of this is a study recently done in Serbia, under the auspices of the (then) Poverty Reduction Strategy Team, by Aleksandar Baucal and Dragica Pavlović-Babić. The study is available at <http://www.inkluzija.gov.rs/wp-content/uploads/2010/03/Quality-and-Equity-of-Education-in-Serbia-PISA-Assessment-2003-and-2006.pdf> (page accessed 18 December 2011)

to be an unattainable ideal, and specific educational policy measures become necessary in order to redress the negative side effects of the practice of the supposedly neutral processes of assessment and selection.

With this in mind, the conference participants from the very beginning stated that equity and quality should be seen as two pillars of education policy and that one can not go without the other. There were also those who came close to Harvey and Green (1993) notion of quality as transformation and advocated focusing on added value of education² as well as the view that equity should be seen as the necessary condition of quality³, i.e. that an education system that is not equitable can not be considered to be of good quality.

Who are the disadvantaged?

However, the conference participants also acknowledged that equity in education is a rather new policy focus in the countries in the region, a focus which is also closely tied to the external pressures, in the form of conditions for EU accession and/or incentives from various public or private donors. That said, it should be noted that ERI SEE countries have indeed made progress in terms of education measures targeting some disadvantaged groups. However, lack of stronger intrinsic interest and motivation of different actors in education policy making to foster equity in education seems to have led to a too narrow and rigid understanding of who are the disadvantaged in terms of education opportunity, i.e. specific education measures mostly target the Roma population or children with special needs.

The education policy at the moment seems to neglect those who experience multiple disadvantage, an issue that has been gaining prominence also in research terms (see e.g. Crosnoe et al. (2002) or Whitty (2001)). Examples from the ERI SEE countries that advocate a more pluralistic approach to inequity have been rare⁴ and it has also been noted that education policy tends to focus on problems that are made visible by the data and remain largely blind to forms of inequity that remain invisible, in particular in terms of quality of learning outcomes. This is also evident in continuous focus on access to education, while the issues of progress and completion remain in the background.

Another important point that was highlighted by the conference participants is the relative lack of flexibility in implementation of some of the education measures targeting the disadvantaged, possible collisions between them as well as the relative lack of support and capacity on various levels to facilitate implementation and

² This was done in particular with respect to interpretation of education data, see the presentation by one of the keynote speakers – Péter Radó – available at http://www.erisee.org/downloads/2011/12/6_Peter%20Rado.ppt (page accessed 18 December 2011).

³ See presentation by Karin Doolan, available at http://www.erisee.org/downloads/2011/12/9_Karin%20Doolan.ppt (page accessed 18 December 2011).

⁴ See “Teachers for the future” report prepared by Nataša Pantić, Alison Closs and Vanja Ivošević and published by the European Training Foundation, available at http://www.etf.europa.eu/web.nsf/pages/Teachers_for_the_Future_New_publication_EN (page accessed 18 December 2011)

monitoring of these measures. Finally, the fragmentation of such measures is actually two fold: not only are measures targeting very specific groups (and perhaps unintendedly leading to some segregation) but they are also isolated in terms of education levels, demonstrating a more general isolation of different education policies.

From data to evidence – improving supply and increasing demand

The issue of focusing on only visible disadvantage has been identified as one of the traps of evidence based policy making⁵ in general. However, the ERI SEE countries face a considerable challenge of significant lack of systematic data on various aspects of education.

Data is mostly collected through one-time projects and initiatives. If researchers want to address more complex phenomena (e.g. reproduction of inequalities through education transitions⁶), it is often necessary to connect several different sources of data, which can be extremely labour intensive and is actually not even possible in many cases. Although a number of projects focusing on building robust data bases about education have been started in the ERI SEE countries, almost all of them are facing significant problems in setting and/or filling up.

Further challenges with respect to data include:

- lack of relevance – sometimes the data collected is not actually relevant for the targeted phenomena, categories and classifications used tend to correspond more to previous political, economic and social context. For example, some data about the socio-economic background of higher education students collected in some of the ERI SEE countries are still classified in the same way as in the Communist times;
- lack of possibility for longitudinal analysis – if the data collection is fragmented and organised in an ad hoc manner, it becomes impossible to provide a proper monitoring of various processes in education and therefore. This is in particular problematic for education, where it is essential to adopt a mid to long term perspective in order to adequately capture both possible causes of some problems as well as to monitor the effectiveness of policy measures introduced as responses to said problems;
- lack of qualitative data – The focus on quantitative data which are relatively easier to collect is a challenge that does not exist only in ERI SEE countries and not just only in the area of education. However, some processes require a qualitative approach as well. Otherwise, it is not possible to understand the causes of problems and therefore the focus solely on quantitative data runs the risk of inadequate identification of policy problems in the first place and therefore development of policy measures which are misguided.

Some of these problems will also be addressed in the next section “Policy development – expectations and practice”.

⁵ See the presentation by Péter Radó.

⁶ See the presentation by Martina Vukasović, available at http://www.erisee.org/downloads/2011/12/7_Martina%20Vukasovic.ppt (page accessed 19 December 2011).

Having considered the challenges in data collection, the participants also discussed analysis of data, or rather the supply of evidence for policy making. Similarly, data analysis also tends to be fragmented in small research projects, focusing on isolated problems or one education stage at a time. A further problem is that evidence about education can not, by virtue of phenomena studied, be simple and policy makers are seldom willing or able (for various reasons, including politics outside of the education sector) to address such policy problems in a more complex manner. Furthermore, researchers are sometimes pressured to deliver neat and simple recommendations, essentially blurring the distinction between analysis and policy development and neglecting that a policy development process is also always a political process (see next section).

Another issue with respect to supply of evidence for policy making is the lack of multidisciplinary perspective. Research on education systems seems to be dominated by psychologists and pedagogues who focus on the micro level, i.e. processes of learning and classroom interaction, while meso and macro level are largely neglected⁷. With some exceptions, there is a notable lack of participation of experts from other disciplinary background, such as sociology, economics, political and organisational sciences etc.

The participants also discussed how to boost demand for evidence for policy development. One of the issues discussed was whether there are any pitfalls on a too strong focus on evidence, primarily in terms of falling into the already mentioned “trap of measurement”⁸ – what is measured (and therefore seen as evidence, essentially neglecting the process of turning data into evidence through analysis and interpretation) becomes a problem, while phenomena that are not measured remain invisible. Some participants therefore advocated a finer grained perspective on policy development, i.e. evidence informed policy making.

The participants discussed also how to increase demand for evidence, and not only on the side of policy makers, but also on the side of the general public and media. Evidence about complex phenomena (such as various aspects of education) need to adequately be communicated, and it may be useful to distinguish between the so-called communicative and coordinative discourse (Schmidt & Radaelli, 2004), i.e. language used to communicate issues to the general public (which tends to be simpler and more straightforward) and language used amongst policy makers and between researchers and policy makers (which tends to be more complex). This distinction also requires a higher capacity on the side of policy makers to, on the one hand, follow the coordinative discourse, and, on the other hand, transform the coordinative into communicative discourse.

Three further points, linked to communicative discourse, are of the essence here and concern the attitude towards reform processes as such. Firstly, reforms are can be seen by some actors in the education system as an extraordinary event which needs to be survived after which the period of “business as usual” would ensue. Such

⁷ One of the exceptions are studies done by the Centre for Education Policy which focus on system level analysis, including regional comparative studies. See www.cep.edu.rs for more information (page accessed 19 December 2011).

⁸ See the presentation by Péter Radó.

sentiments emerge in processes of reform consultations but more importantly they indicate that there might be significant problems in the implementation stage. Secondly, and connected to the previous, is the frog vs. bird perspective⁹, or rather (1) individual vs. collective interests and (2) short-term vs. long-term perspective on education reform processes. Thirdly, reforms “cannot be successfully marketed unless they promise more than they deliver” (Allen Schick, quoted in Caiden (1991, p. 104)). This is partly connected to the definition of policy problems which will be discussed in the following section.

With all this in mind, a number of suggestions were made during the conference:

- concerning data collection
 - make data bases and information systems fully operational and build in possibilities of linkages between the data, also to avoid fragmented policy development targeting isolated issues and stages,
 - collect also qualitative data to provide a better insight into the phenomena and thus to allow for a more adequate identification of problems and therefore development of a better targeted policy measures;
- concerning data analysis and supply of evidence for policy making
 - pool capacity and expertise, both between the different stages in education (primary, secondary etc) and between different ERI SEE countries. This also included setting up a regional platform for exchange of information, expertise and experience¹⁰,
 - involve more multidisciplinary teams in analysis to allow for adequate coverage on issues on all levels (system, school/university, classroom);
- concerning demand side and activities of those involved in policy making
 - further promote the pressure on policy makers to explore linkages between different education stages (primary, secondary etc) and levels (system, school/university, classroom),
 - rethink overall governance of education, in particular striking the right balance so that decentralisation is not confused with fragmentation,
 - promote more strongly and, also through own example, support professional accountability, to improve the general attitude towards reforms and decrease the possibility for window-dressing during implementation,
 - striking the right balance between marketing reforms that are supposedly aiming at achieving the optimum situation and the reality of reform processes and achievement of the possible¹¹, including the promotion of “reforms are continuous fine-tuning” attitude, being aware of possibility of reform saturation.

⁹ A very useful metaphor borrowed from Dženana Husremović, a participant in one of the expert panels at the conference.

¹⁰ Similar to the one developed in an international project “European integration in higher education and research in the Western Balkans”, see www.herdata.org (page accessed 19 December 2011).

¹¹ See the presentation by Péter Radó.

Policy development – expectations and practice

The participants also discussed their experience and views on the overall process of policy development. Here, two opposing views on the process should be highlighted.

The first, hereafter referred to as “neat version” of the policy process, foresees a number of steps. The first step is the identification of policy problems. Policy problems come to the forefront of policy makers’ attention based on collected evidence in which some of the traps earlier mentioned are avoided. Secondly, with the support of a research community a number of alternatives of policy solutions are discussed and evaluated against each other. Once the preferred policy solution is chosen, the policy is formulated and adequate policy instruments are developed, with strong horizontal linkages to other education policy subsectors and other public policy sectors and strong vertical linkages in terms of different governance levels (system, municipality, school/university). The next step, the implementation process goes smoothly and the extent of unintended and perverse effects of policy is insignificant. All of this is followed by adequate collection of data, which allows for proper monitoring and evaluation and if necessary evidence based reformulation of policy.

However, as both experience of conference participants¹² as well as more general policy research (see e.g. Gornitzka (1999) or Sabatier (2007)) demonstrate, the previous version is useful for analytical purposes but policy processes are never as neat for a variety of reasons.

Consider the first step – identification of policy problems. Essentially, it requires identification of causes of outcomes seen as problematic by a number of relevant actors in education. This is challenging for two reasons. One is a fundamental challenge of social sciences or even sciences in general, i.e. identification of causal mechanisms. In complex processes, such as education, it is extremely difficult to trace the source of the problematic outcome and therefore tackle the issue at its source (and not treat only the symptom). The second reason is related to the political character of the policy process. What ends up being perceived as a problem depends on which actors are seen as relevant in the first place, what kind of power they have within the political system to promote their own policy preferences and which disadvantaged groups in the society in essence do not have access to the policy process, and therefore their problems do not make it to the policy agenda in the first place.

The second step – identification of possible solutions – is also messy. First of all, the discussion of policy alternatives, as was discussed in the conference, is not always rational and based on evidence. As indicated in

¹² In particular highlighted in the presentation of Tünde Kovács-Cerović, available at: http://www.erisee.org/downloads/2011/12/1_Tinde%20Kovac%20Cerovic.ppt (page accessed 19 December 2011)

policy studies literature (Sabatier, 2007), it can also turn out to be the so-called “garbage can approach” to decision-making and temporal sorting, a process in which policy problems and policy solutions are matched not because they correspond to each other, but because they appeared on the policy makers’ horizon at the same time. Secondly, the view that proposed policy solutions would fix the problematic outcomes is vulnerable in terms of assumed causal linkages (addressed above) as well as in terms of messy implementation (to be addressed below). Therefore, it is impossible to guarantee that the solution would indeed produce the desired outcome.

The third challenge lies in the formulation of policy. More often than not, and not only in the ERI SEE countries, policy development stops short at adoption of a policy document (e.g. a white paper) and adoption of new legislation. Other policy instruments, in particular those that require more significant investment of money and time (e.g. information systems) or those that touch upon strong vested interests (e.g. financing) lag behind and in essence the whole policy package ends up incoherent since policy instruments do not end up supporting the overarching policy. Furthermore, as said previously, policy development is fragmented, often targeting an isolated phenomena, and thus linkages to other policy sectors or governance lacking is frequently lacking.

An additional issue stems from the first three steps jointly – policy is often ambiguous. In order to adopt a policy, a multitude of stakeholders has to come to an agreement, which often leads to various compromises about formulations and also dilution of some policy instruments. This causes further problems in the process of implementation because the actors that are expected to implement policy can get mixed signals and end up being confused in terms of what is expected from them. In this respect, the importance of teachers in the process of policy implementation was highlighted. Furthermore, the process of policy implementation in general is a top-down process, going through many governance layers and involving actors with vested interests who can be quite keen on (ab)using the possibility for interpretation for their own ends.

The multi-layer multi-actor character of the education system also affects the stage of monitoring and evaluation. Although “the truth is in the classroom”¹³, it is very difficult to monitor adequate implementation of policies so deep into the education system due to lack of capacity. As indicated earlier, this allows for a lot of window-dressing and this is also something to be aware of in the process of monitoring and evaluation, since it makes it difficult to adequately evaluate the true impact of implemented policy measures. Finally, it would be wrong to monitor and evaluate one policy (measure) at a time due to complexity of processes and outcomes, mid- to long-term character of changes in education as well as overlap of education reforms that makes it hard to disentangle possible impact of one policy measure from another.

Concluding remarks

¹³ As claimed by Jugoslav Bogdanović, a participant in one of the expert panels, presentation available here: http://www.erisee.org/downloads/2011/12/5_Jugoslav%20Bogdanovic.ppt (page accessed 19 December 2011).

In general, the conference highlighted some similarities as well as some differences in the ERI SEE countries. While the similarities provide a good basis for policy learning, it has to be stressed that the differences should not be neglected when analysing the transferability of policy solutions and the transferability of identified policy problems.

Yet, there was a sentiment that the challenges that the education systems in ERI SEE countries are somehow specific, or rather that the more developed and stable political systems and economies do not face the same challenges. However, it must be stressed that such views fall short in terms of understanding of the basics of the education process as such: regardless of the context, maturity of the policy and political system, available resources and strength of coalitions, many of the challenges highlighted are in essence founded in the first and foremost complexities of the education as such and furthermore complex linkages between education and other segments of society. This points to the possibility of widening the scope of policy learning but also to the necessity for trying to fix the possible, while aiming for the optimal.

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