

Capacity Development for Educational Planning in Caucasus

Region: challenges and perspectives

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Despite different approaches, the ultimate goal of the education reform in Georgia, Azerbaijan and Armenia is to establish a system which will ensure the provision of highly qualified, self-reliant and internationally competitive human resources leading their countries to poverty reduction, social welfare and economic growth. Thus the education reforms in region are based on the globally acknowledged principles of a knowledge-based society and economy.

Although pace and focus of reforms in the region are different, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia face more or less similar challenges and problems in the implementation of the education reform:

1. Structural reorganization of the education sector in the region

In the early nineties the structure of the education system was still essentially based on the former Soviet pattern: centralized planning (Moscow was substituted by the capitals of the former SU republics), inputs determined by “Normative” set in central bodies without regard to efficiency – the costs of the system were largely hidden. The inherited problems stem from three sources: lack of experience in planning and management of the system, which was formerly conducted from Moscow; internal inefficiency of the system under foreseeable levels of funding; external inefficiency of the system, which has been geared to producing workers and professional for a planned economy, not to preparing students for democratic citizenship and changing labor market demand in a liberal market economy.

Starting from the late nineties the education systems in all three countries undergo structural and conceptual reorganization. Reforms planned and implemented so far include legislative, financial and managerial, as well as education content aspects.

Legislation

New laws on general, higher and vocational education have been elaborated and adopted by the Parliament of Georgia right after the Rose revolution, setting new aims and goals of the education system reform (Law on Higher Education – adopted in 2004, Law on General Education – 2005, Law on Vocational Education and Training – 2007). In Armenia the National Assembly adopted “Law about Education” in 1999 and the “Law on Higher end post university education” in 2004, which gave a definite direction to the development of reforming the education system, based on the constitution principles. However, depending on education priorities, it is being adjusted and amended from time to time. Azerbaijan has adopted Law on Education in 1992, which is also subject of changes and amendments, although there still are some gaps: so, the law doesn’t cover field of vocational education and training yet. There are continuous discussions on development of the totally new “Education Code” in Azerbaijan and in Armenia as well.

Financing

Georgia has already introduced the *per capita* financing principle of ‘money follows the student’ in general and higher education; same approach is planned also for Vocational Education and Training (VET). Under the Soviet system and in early nineties, primary-secondary schools were managed by the rayon authorities, according to detailed financial and input norms. By the new law on General Education (2005) schools receive an amount per pupil (a voucher) which varies only according to the location of the school (highest for those in highlands, lowest for those in cities): city schools get 100 per cent of the voucher, village schools 150 per cent and those in mountainous areas 180 per cent. Vouchers cover current but not capital expenditures. Small schools can receive an extra amount

per pupil from the central budget, and extra educational and teaching services and special educational curricula can be financed locally. The lump-sum amount received from the MoES (paid into the school's own bank account) can be spent in any way that school management, approved by the Board, decides, subject only to a minimum salary rate for teachers, depending on their qualifications, experience and the size of their class

At the time of independence, places in HE institutions were fully funded by the state, on the basis of "state orders" for the number of places in each discipline. Currently state grants to HE students are merit based - awarded on the basis of students' scores in entrance examinations through a sliding scale grants system. Social grants are awarded, in addition, to students from mountainous areas, conflict regions, ethnic groups, families of people killed in wars and internally displaced families.

In Armenia pilot project on *per capita* funding has been launched in 30 schools in 2006, while in Azerbaijan centralized state order system still exists and there are no plans for changes yet.

Decentralization of General Education and Higher Education management

Georgian Schools have been converted from local-government budget organizations to autonomous Legal Entities of Public Law (LEPLs) with their own bank account. Board of Trustees (BoTs) were established in schools, which on their turn elect school principals. Heads of HE institutions are no longer appointed by the President but elected by each institution's Academic Council. In Georgia new structures have been created to manage reforms in different fields – National Curriculum and Assessment Center, National Education Accreditation Center, National Vocational Agency, Teachers' Professional Development Centre, National Science Foundation, Resource Centers, etc. In Armenia since 1998 finance and management reform takes place in the schools which was assisted by the "Education Management and Finance Reform" Credit facilities. The reforms include increase of autonomy institutions, management decentralization, introduction of new mechanisms for management and financing, and other processes. The new management system implies school management through boards comprising of school teaching staff, representatives of school councils, community members, representatives appointed by the top management. The school financing new mechanism implies transition from the per article funding system to the *per capita* funding system (see above), in lump sum, and to new autonomous manner of accounting and budgeting. The Government of Azerbaijan is committed to sectoral reforms in the education sector, based on the Education Reform Program of 1999, the draft Ten-Year Education Reform Strategy, and the Government's Letter of Sector Development Policy to improve the quality and relevance of general education and improve efficiency of general education, but decentralization is not considered as priority for the reforming the education system. Throughout 2007 about 20 research institutes in Georgia (from the total number of 68) will be integrated with universities. Neither Armenia, nor Azerbaijan plan same actions: in both countries Academies of Sciences remain their statuses. **(VET) system** is also in the process of reforming with significant support of the European Training Foundation in all three countries.

Unified entrance examinations

Georgia and Azerbaijan already have an experience in unified entrance examinations, using sophisticated testing methods across a range of subjects, while Armenia is generalizing the last year's experience on entrance examination for four more discipline as mathematics, foreign languages and Armenian literature.

Accreditation of Education Institutions

Georgia has established National Education Accreditation Centre in 2006 and carried out institutional accreditation of higher education institutions - number of authorized HEIs has already been reduced from 227 in 2004 to current 43; Institutional accreditation of general schools and program accreditation of both higher academic and professional programs is

planned. In Armenia, as well as in Azerbaijan, special units of the MoES conduct licensing and accreditation of private HEIs. A working group was formed by the MoES of Armenia that will develop a national quality assurance system according to the European recommendations. It is planned to create an independent quality assurance agency in both countries.

Three-cycle degree system and European Credit Transfer System (ECTS).

Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia demonstrated the political will to join European Higher Education Area by joining the Bologna Process in Bergen 2005. Georgia has already implemented mandatory usage of ECTS (it was considered as one of the main criteria for institutional accreditation of HEIs in 2006) and has fully adopted three cycle degree-system. Implementation of ECTS is piloted in some universities of Armenia and Azerbaijan; leading universities have also adopted three-cycle degree system. In Armenia it is planned that by 2010 all universities, including private institutions, will base programs on two cycles and within ECTS.

Content and teaching methods in general education

Active learning is encouraged through introduction of **new curricula** – improvement of the general education content development and compliance to the current needs of the society, which includes curriculum revision by disciplines, textbook publishing and distribution, textbook provision to all the students, etc. All three countries have the same vision and approach to the problem, although differ in scope and structural settings of implementation.

Rehabilitation of educational institutions

This component of the reform envisages providing internet access, educational software and services and technical support to schools; upgrading the ICT skills of teachers and students; integrating ICT into the curriculum through computer-aided instruction in a wide range of subjects; and computerization of the Education Management Information System (EMIS) at school, local and national levels – all three countries share same priorities, as well as all three have developed plans for physical rehabilitation of educational institutions. School rehabilitation programs are funded mainly by the governments, but international donors are also involved.

2. CURRENT CHALLENGES

2.1 Human resources

Reforms have opened new challenges, while resolving their original agendas. Significant work has been accomplished in terms of conceptual and strategic formulation, but a number of problems, mostly in the area of implementation, are open for solution. Importance of qualified education specialists in the successful reform implementation is evident. However, education planning and management is a largely unknown skill in the region. In the Soviet Union, much of education policy was an ideological tool. Planning took place exclusively from the top down. While UNESCO classifies a full 47 education professions out of 557 different occupations, countries of the South Caucasus have not even one third of these. This leaves the region short of modern education managers.

According to the country report, education management system in **Armenia** has experienced frequent and not always justified institutional adjustments and human resource replacements during the last decade. The ministry has been reshaped several times; the middle management level has been reconstructed twice. The education system management in Armenia is performed on three levels: Ministry of Education and Science, and district and community administrations of education. Adequate educational planning and management skills are missing almost in all the levels of education management.

In **Azerbaijan** no significant changes have been made in the staffing of the ministry of education and local authorities in charge of education, almost all key positions are occupied by the same specialists for about 15 years or even more. So the need for qualified education managers is here especially noticeable.

Since the introduction of fundamental changes in the education system (2005) of **Georgia** top and second level management of the education system (at various layers) has been renewed several times and is currently represented by new generation of planners and administrators, which lack specific field-related knowledge and experience of work in the new system.

According to the results of the Needs Assessment workshop at MoES (July, 2007), one of the main problems is a lack of middle-level managers in the education system.

As the reform envisages significant structural changes (establishment of new agencies as well as reorganization of the old ones), the demand for human resources had risen both in terms of quality and quantity. Local labour market could not satisfy existed demand. Limited supply and subsequent limited competition leads to the compromise between quality and quantity.

Purchasing service and expertise from the private sector has opportunity costs. Relevant knowledge and experience cannot be accumulated and transformed into organizational knowledge.

On the background of general unstable political situation in Georgia public discontent with important, but unpopular reforms (i.e staff reduction in public agencies, teacher certification, school accreditation, etc) the certain shortcomings (such as lack of human resources) can be manipulated by political opponents to boost public unrest and endanger already achieved results of the reform.

Time constraints and pace of the reform are pressing. While in the longer run the education reform is itself committed to the improvement of the human capital, there is a pressing need at the moment for capable planners and managers to implement it. The optimal solution is to create affordable, needs sensitive, skill and problem oriented schemes to consult and re-train existed staff of the education system with regard to immediate and very specific tasks and with very flexible schedules and time-schemes to ensure uninterrupted functioning of structural units of the system.

There is a considerable mismatch between the demand for such training schemes (potential targets) and supply (available suppliers) in the region. The problem is discussed below on the example of Georgia.

a. Demand

Recent restructurization of the education system in Georgia has shaped out into a rather complicated structure, which consists of several levels with total number of potential target groups (senior and middle level managers) forming approximately 9500 persons.

As departments of education planning did not exist in HE institutions until recently (only three HE institutions currently provide specialization on education planning), the percentage of those with specific field-related education is very low. According to the information of HR department (April 2007) only two persons have got education abroad with specialization on education planning. With the support of international donors and partly co-financed by MoES, 12 persons have been sent from MoES during the recent two years to raise qualification abroad (Harvard University and Columbia University).

The fact that, after they are back, these persons are rotated from department to department is one more proof to the fact that there is widespread deficit of specific, field-related knowledge.

Another demonstration of the increased interest to specific knowledge and the need for qualified personnel in the education sector is that persons going to study abroad more frequently choose education planning and management as a field of interest (As compared to the previous years).

b. Supply

According to the database of the National Accreditation Center only three HEIs (out of 43 accredited ones) currently offer master's programs in Education Management and administration. Both are located in the capital. Such discipline did not exist until recently. That is why newly established departments experience difficulties with attracting academic personnel and drafting curricula. No schemes exist yet at universities to offer interested persons short-term specialized courses.

As for non-governmental organizations and private training providers so far, EPPM is the only organization which offers special training courses (in 14 modules) related to education planning and management on higher education and general education levels. There are only four non-governmental organizations (apart from EPPM), which currently play more or less visible role on the market, mostly in the general education sphere. Three of them focus on general education only (Liberty Institute¹, Human Development Center and the Center for Strategic Research and Development) and one is offering more general courses in public administration (The Center for Training and Consultancy). All the mentioned organizations have developed modules of general character (such as financial management, strategic planning) which can be considered as basic courses, are less focused on specific field-related context and can be applied to different spheres (apart from Education).

As mentioned above MoES tries to compensate current deficit on the market by introducing its own schemes for sending personnel abroad to raise qualification, but the scope is limited (12 persons during two years) and this is not enough to satisfy the need.

2.2. Education research

Poorly developed or practically absent educational research infrastructure in the region makes reform implementation even more difficult. Education research was generally neglected in recent times – pressing of the reform process left practically no time for research projects. At the same time importance of correctly conducted research and analyzed data on education process is increasingly understood by officials in charge of the reform process. Research capacities (both human and financial) are inadequately low. Only one university in the region (Ilia Chavchavadze State University, Tbilisi, Georgia) offers PhD program in the field of education policy and management.

No special scientific journals on education policy and management exist yet in countries of the South Caucasus. Almost all research projects in the region have been conducted so far by the individuals in the framework of their individual dissertations or for the preparation of donor programs. Joint research projects are quite rare in the region, whereas collaboration with international colleagues would increase competence and qualification of local experts.

¹ EPPM and LI were partners in the project aiming at developing manual for schools on strategic management and training school administration and boards of trustees in management issues.

The region is of particular interest due to the following reasons:

- a. It is interesting to observe in dynamics how international models are adapted to the local needs and context and to assess the degree of effectiveness of model implementation;
- b. To compare the process in three different contexts (three different countries) and see how local context influences the speed and strategy of the reform.

2.3. Regional coordination

Although there is a clear common ground, reforms in region are not coordinated, even more, there is very limited information about reform progress in neighboring countries (restricted availability of information, difficulties of comparison because of different criteria, etc.. This is caused by problems with information management on an intra-country level, as well as by difficulties of communication between Armenia and Azerbaijan (inter-country level). Better information exchange and coordination would increase overall speed of the reform on the regional level. Sporadic meetings of officials and experts, involved in education reform are mainly organized by the international donors, information exchange is poor and joint project are very rare.

Conclusions and perspectives

All the three post-soviet countries of the Caucasus region are in the process of education reform, which aims at realignment of the existed systems to the international standards and requirements. Under this broader objective each of the three countries had chosen their own way of development, but shares the following common challenges which should be addressed on a regional level through the joint effort:

- Strengthen human capital in the education research and management fields in all the three countries;
- Improve production and utilization of research in education policy;
- Elaborate effective and flexible mechanisms to share information between the countries on current and planned changes in the education policy.

The mentioned challenges are of more general character; imply participation of different stakeholders from all the three countries (including ministries, higher education institutions, research institutes etc.) and long-term systematic changes on a state policy level.

However, these challenges can be also viewed from the more short-term and practical perspective. One of the recent initiatives of the International Institute for Education Policy Planning and Management could serve as a concrete example.

In particular, EPPM is currently working on establishing the regional resource center which will function in the regime of filling the gap and will address current immediate need for improved capacity in education planning and management in all the three countries and facilitate education policy analysis (on local and regional levels).

The center will:

- a) Serve as an intermediate link between local and foreign human resources (trainers and researchers) :
 - Organizing information about current training and research needs in the Caucasus region to inform decisions on training and research themes; Help local trainers and researchers develop and implement complex, long-term, needs-based service packages and sound research projects through ensuring consultation and assistance during planning and implementation stages;
- b) Offer affordable price schemes for training participants from Georgia, Azerbaijan and Armenia as compared to international analogues through:
 - Lower travel and tuition costs for participants (for example IIEP training courses in Paris), cross-financing of modules, developing complex packages (linking several modules), involving local trainers (under external quality control).
- c) Increase production of research on education policy in the region through:
 - Increased visibility (the first regional e-journal on education, annual regional conferences of policy makers), availability of consultants (IIEP/UNESCO experts), literature (IIEP library) and financial support (three priority research projects will be financed in the frames of the project each year).

In order to implement the initiative EPPM already cooperates with ministries of education of the three countries, partner NGOs, various stakeholders and international partners. Governments and other stakeholders of all three countries fully acknowledge the need for joint, coordinated efforts. Correctly set system of cooperation on common tasks and objectives will ensure successful reform implementation, thus opening the way for the Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia for mutually beneficial integration both regionally and with Europe and the world at large.

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