1 Background

The Education for All (EFA) – Fast Track Initiative (FTI) (now: Global Partnership for Education GPE) and the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) 2 and 3 call for free, compulsory, and quality elementary education for all children and young people. However, according to the last UNESCO World Education Report (2013/14), 57 million children and young people worldwide still do not go to school, and some 774 million adults cannot read or write. The international community unanimously stated that inclusive education is a key strategy for bringing education to everyone (UNESCO, 1994, 2009). In a global context, inclusion in education is seen as a process that looks at the different educational needs of children, young people and adults. Successful inclusive education ensures joint and participatory learning by all population groups within an integrated educational system, and at the same time takes into account disadvantaged groups which are either still excluded from education or are not supported to the necessary extent in the existing system. Seen from the perspective of inclusion, this means that it is not the child that poses the problem, but the educational system that must adapt to all individuals.

Preliminary work on inclusive education has already been done in development cooperation, amongst others, by UNESCO. Even so, various parts of the global population are either still without access to education, or students drop out prematurely from the formal educational system. Despite the known facts about the causes of disadvantage, applied research is still missing to pinpoint the mechanisms that determine the success or failure of inclusion in educational systems in developing countries. This makes it difficult to identify definite countermeasures at the level of educational planning.

This project aims to advance our understanding of developing inclusive educational systems in developing countries in order to improve inclusive policy and practice in technical cooperation. The combination of academic research and development cooperation practice in applied research has the potential to generate evidence-based knowledge on the successes and failures of inclusive-education implementation. Consequently, the scientific findings can be used to recommend direct action and measures. Evidence-based results and recommendations for actions can also be suitable to strengthen the international prioritisation of inclusion in development policy, and help achieve the goals of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) in a growing number of countries.

This project is designed as an applied research study. The research approach implies that new knowledge is generated to improve inclusive-education practice and the current challenges it faces. The aim is to show whether, where and how things can be changed to increase the probability of successful implementation of inclusive education in Malawi and Guatemala. "What qualitative research can offer the policy maker is a theory of social action grounded on the experiences – the world view – of those likely to be affected by a policy decision or thought to be part of the problem" (Walker, 1985). The initial aim of the research is a detailed, in-depth and multi-perspective description of the views of the persons involved, including their subjective and social constructions.

According to Ritchie and Spencer (2002, p. 307), four perspectives form the focus of applied research:

- contextual: identifying the form and nature of what exists;
- diagnostic: examining the reasons for, or causes of, what exists;
- evaluative: appraising the effectiveness of what exists; and
- strategic: identifying new theories, policies, plans or actions.

This particular research project revolves around the first two perspectives. Firstly, specific forms of inclusion and exclusion are identified in the unique educational systems of both countries. This implies, on the one hand, investigating views and attitudes of persons/stakeholders involved; and on the other hand, ideas, wishes and perceived options for and/or barriers to actions. Furthermore, differences and consistencies of actors involved within, across and between different system levels are identified.

Secondly, the underlying patterns of arguments are investigated for specific attitudes, views and options or barriers to actions. This includes an analysis of why specific measures or decisions are taken or not taken, and which reasons for certain views and attitudes are mentioned.

Both perspectives therefore aim for a deep understanding of views, attitudes, and perspectives of actions, of groups of persons involved (experts/politicians, head teachers/principals, teachers, parents and children). On the basis of this understanding, recommendations for the development of inclusive education can be drawn.

The fundamental distinction between scientific research and actual application still exists. The expectation that the results of applied research can directly lead to changes in practice would be naive. The use of the results through politics and practice is autonomous and happens – according to system theory – as a result of the internal logic of the political or educational system.