VVOB Paper
Developing a New Education Strategy from an Equity Perspective: Lessons Learnt from a Case Study
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Colophon

VVOB Paper
Developing a New Education Strategy from an Equity Perspective: Lessons Learnt from a Case Study

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Abstract

This paper describes the process a medium-sized agency active in education for development went through to determine its new global objectives, and draws some valuable lessons for others who may be considering reviewing their own strategies. This strategy formulation process happened in an era of new challenges (such as growing inequalities in terms of learning), evolving country strategies in education, newly emerging scientific knowledge about education in the early years, continuing specialisation amongst agencies, and post-2015 discussions. A deliberate choice was made for a number of participatory subprocesses, which led to one overall strategy with three clear objectives. **Equity** was used as an overarching starting point in the development of the new strategy, and appears implicitly in all three of the global objectives. The choices made also took into account considerations of coherence, synergy and practicality of implementation. The approach to realise the objectives is to enhance the capacities of partners like teacher training colleges, ministries... to ensure that the latter are capable to realize their own education priorities. The paper reflects on how the choices made are likely to remain relevant in the post-2015 education agenda. We conclude our paper by providing some tips and tricks on how to develop strategies that are clear, simple and measurable, and that put equity in learning in the centre of envisioned results.
1. Introduction: VVOB, a Development Partner for Quality Education

This paper describes the process the Flemish Association for Development Cooperation and Technical Assistance (VVOB) went through over the past year to determine its new programme portfolio, which will be effective from 1st January 2014. VVOB is a technical assistance agency with over 30 years’ experience in improving the quality of education systems. VVOB opts for structural solutions, strengthening the capacity of government structures to offer quality education. VVOB does this by supporting local education authorities, such as departments in the Ministries of Education, teacher training colleges and quality assurance services. VVOB is currently active in ten countries: Cambodia, Democratic Republic of Congo, Ecuador, Kenya, Rwanda, South Africa, Suriname, Vietnam, Zambia and Zimbabwe. VVOB works on education interventions that are driven by the local education authorities. VVOB strengthens the capacities of these actors through technical assistance. In order to achieve this, VVOB has permanent in-country teams of local and international experts in educational change. In addition to this, VVOB works with an extensive network of Flemish and international education partners who make their specific expertise available when and where required.

In the current programming period (2008-2013), VVOB is still operating in very diverse areas within the education sector, including strategic planning, curriculum, didactics, continuous professional development, school management, ICT and external quality control. VVOB supports these areas in different education subsectors: pre-school and primary education, lower and higher secondary education and technical and vocational education and training. In 2012, VVOB started a process of specialisation within the education sector. Specialisation increases possibilities for building up high-level expertise. It offers more opportunities for organisation-wide learning, which is of essential importance for the continuous improvement of the quality and efficiency of VVOB’s capacity development interventions to its partners.

VVOB decided to develop its new education strategy with equity as a central starting point. Equity is an important and much-discussed topic in the on-going debates about the post-2015 education agenda. This paper also illustrates how VVOB has made the step from a theoretical discussion about equity to practical application in new programmes. This paper concludes by providing some tips and tricks on how to develop strategies which are clear, simple and measurable, and which put equity in learning at the centre of envisioned results.
2. The Integration of Equity into VVOB’s New Education Portfolio

Equity was integrated in different ways at different levels in VVOB’s new portfolio:

- Adaptation and adoption of an equity-based definition of quality education
- Selection of priority education subsectors based on their potential to promote equity
- Formulation of objectives informed by equity concerns
- Selection of geographical priorities within a country based on equity
- Formulation of programme results with a focus on equity
- Mainstreaming of equity in programme monitoring and evaluation

The following sections will describe the integration and mainstreaming of equity at these different levels.

2.1. Adaptation and Adoption of an Equity-based Definition of Quality Education

When envisioning equity-based approaches in education, it is important to start from a relevant definition of quality education. VVOB therefore looked at existing international research and practical experiences within the education sector. Through a participatory process within the organisation and several external advisory processes, VVOB decided to use the work developed by the research consortium EdQual (a collaborative research programme focused on improving the quality of school and classroom processes in low income countries) as a basis for its definition of good quality education (EdQual, 2010), and expanded it to include VVOB’s focus on capacity development:

“A good quality education is one that provides all learners with capabilities they require to become economically productive, develop sustainable livelihoods, contribute to peaceful and democratic societies and enhance individual wellbeing. The learning outcomes that are required vary according to context but at the end of the basic education cycle must include threshold levels of literacy and numeracy, basic scientific knowledge and life skills including awareness and prevention of disease. Capacity development to improve the quality of teachers and other education stakeholders is crucial throughout this process.”

The definition refers to “all learners”. The term “all learners” refers to non-discrimination and equity. Equity in education means that personal or social circumstances such as gender, ethnic origin or family background, are not obstacles to achieving educational potential (fairness) and that all individuals reach at least a basic minimum level of skills (inclusion) (OECD, 2012). Equity mostly benefits from explicitly investing in those key factors that enhance effective education as such, like high quality teachers. A focus on high quality educational outcomes for all is a means of reducing the dependence of learner achievement on social background. VVOB sees quality in terms of equity: an education that is effective, open to everyone, that is differentiated and adapted to individual learning needs. Overcoming social disadvantage through education is more effective when schools, teachers and school leaders have a clear focus on quality and achievement for all learners and have the flexibility to respond to the educational needs of each individual learner.
2.2. Selection of Priority Education Subsectors Based on their Potential to Promote Equity

Once VVOB articulated its vision on quality education, it also needed to make a selection of which education subsectors to focus on. Equity was at the core of this selection process. VVOB looked at existing international research on effective educational systems and practices, with a particular focus on areas that contribute to learning outcomes and equity. Alignment with VVOB’s partners – often Ministries of Education and their structures – was also a crucial element in the selection of education subsectors. A thorough analysis of education sector plans in VVOB’s partner countries was done. For reasons of harmonisation and synergies, VVOB also looked at the current international development agenda regarding education, and at available Flemish expertise on education. VVOB also took its own existing expertise into account. On the basis of these analyses, VVOB decided to focus its interventions within three education subsectors:

1. Early education
2. Primary education
3. Technical and vocational education and training

In the following sections, the reasoning behind these choices is briefly described.

2.2.1. Early Education

A growing body of scientific research clearly indicates that the first years of life (the early years up to age eight) have a profound impact on a child’s future well-being and learning. During this time, the brain undergoes its most dramatic growth and development. Children acquire the ability to think, speak, learn and reason. For this to happen, they need to grow in a supportive environment. The first years of life do more than build the brain and the body. They decide each child’s lifelong capacity to grow, to learn, to stay healthy, and to interact well with others. For that reason, early education is a “now-or-never” investment, especially for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Quality early education translates into better education and development outcomes over time. Quality early education programmes are run by trained teachers, use child-centred approaches, engage families and communities in children’s learning, are delivered in the children’s mother tongue, use culturally-relevant materials, and offer young children opportunities to play and explore (CGECCD, 2013a). These offer significant advantages in terms of basic cognitive skills, social development, retention in school and pass rates in the early years.

Early education improves the efficiency of the schooling system and saves money by reducing repetition and drop-out and improving completion rates and achievement, especially for girls and marginalised groups (Bartlett, 2010). The emphasis on completion of primary has distracted attention from the heart of the problem – the fact that it is in the first two years of school that the majority of drop-out occurs. Many of those who continue in school end up in persistent patterns of underachievement and leave school unable to read fluently or calculate, let alone problem solve and think critically (CGECCD, 2013b).

2.2.2. Primary Education

In the past decade, significant achievements have been made increasing primary enrolment worldwide. Beyond access, learning is what really matters. Unfortunately, recent studies have shown that only very little learning is actually occurring for many primary school children. Many children still face major barriers to primary education. Most children who are not learning are from families with uneducated mothers, live in rural areas, or come from low-income households. In some cases, girls are particularly numerous among them.
Early grade reading competency is critical for continued retention and success in future grades. From an equity point of view, this link is especially relevant for children from poorer families, because they tend to have home and school environments that are less conducive to early reading development relative to those of children from richer families. Children who do not attain reading skills at the primary level are on a lifetime trajectory of limited educational progress and therefore limited economic and developmental opportunity. Similarly, strong foundations in mathematics during the early grades are crucial to children’s future success in school.

2.2.3. Technical and Vocational Education and Training

Working on the quality of TVET is a legitimate choice from an equity perspective. What continues to be missing in current education debates is the acknowledgement that students joining vocational programmes are mostly from poorer backgrounds (Kumar, 2011, pp. 41-42). On the other hand, there has been insufficient attention to whether the poorest and most marginalised groups in society actually access formal technical and vocational education. For the poorest segments, their prior low levels and low quality of formal education negatively affect access to and acquisition of both formal and informal technical and vocational skills (King, 2011, pp. 122-125). Two dimensions of equity stand out in particular in the TVET subsector. The access of women in TVET is a major concern. UNICEF estimates that only 20% of girls of the appropriate age in Least Developed Countries attend secondary school at all, let alone in TVET programmes. And if young women do enter TVET programmes, in many countries they are restricted to traditionally female occupations (CIDA, 2009). International recognition of this challenge is on the rise. The latest EFA report pleads for prioritising training needs of disadvantaged young women via programmes that address the multiple causes of disadvantage (Education for All Global Monitoring Report, 2012). Another challenge is ensuring conditions to make technical and vocational programs more welcoming to women (Education for All Global Monitoring Report, 2012). Next to gender equity there is also the challenge of the lack of TVET opportunities in deprived agricultural areas. In general, TVET institutions are based in urban centres, attracting urban students and offering exclusively urban skills and professions. In addition TVET in rural areas also has a clear gender dimension: there is a chronic underinvestment in the skills of women farmers, this in sharp contrast to the fact that women play a dominant role in African agriculture and produce more than half the agricultural output in most societies (King & Palmer, 2006).

2.3. Formulation of Objectives Informed by Equity Concerns

Within the identified education subsectors (early education, primary education, and TVET), VVOB then looked at the formulation of specific objectives. An analysis of existing research pointed out that teacher quality and the effectiveness of school leadership are both crucial to learning outcomes. And in particular, both teacher quality and school leadership are important for a quality education for the most disadvantaged. Strategies that strengthen and support school leadership, support and retain high quality teachers and promote effective classroom learning strategies, can indeed mitigate the effects of a learner’s background on his or her educational experience (OECD, 2012).

In the area of teacher development, the primary focus of VVOB is on capacity development of organisations and institutions that target the improvement of pedagogical and didactical competences of teachers, their access to qualitative learning materials and active pedagogies and didactics. This involves not only appropriate initial teacher training, but also professional growth at different stages in their learning process. Professional standards for teachers and school leaders, teacher certification processes, initial teacher training curricula, mentoring programs for new teachers, teacher networks, monitoring and evaluating teaching and learning are important in this (Schleicher, 2012, p. 73). Dealing with equity in the area of teacher development is still a big challenge. In an analysis of teachers’ professional development in 23 OECD countries for example, almost one third of the teachers rated their development needs in the area of “teaching special learning needs students” as
“high”. This indicates that teachers recognise the importance of developing their competence in this area (OECD, 2009).

Research and experience also shows that the operating zone allowing teachers to put their skills into practice, often depends on school leadership. In the area of school leadership, VVOB will in particular focus on the support and development of effective teachers, as an important pathway to influence learner achievement. When school leaders promote effective teacher professional learning (through pedagogical leadership) this has twice the impact on learning outcomes across a school than any other leadership activity (Robinson et al., 2009). School leaders who are supporting, evaluating and developing teacher quality are particularly important in the improvement of low performing and disadvantaged schools (Pont, Nusche, Moorman, 2008).

Combining the selected education subsectors (early education, primary education, and secondary TVET) with the above-mentioned equity-based definition of quality education and the areas of teacher development and school leadership, VVOB formulated the following three specific objectives for all of its supported programmes from 2014 onwards:

1. **Early education** teachers and school leaders provide all learners equal opportunities to enhance their further education and future success.

2. **Primary education** teachers and school leaders use teaching, monitoring, and follow-up strategies to improve learning outcomes of all learners in literacy, numeracy and life skills.

3. **TVET** teachers and school leaders prepare all learners according to the demands of the society and the world of decent work.

VVOB’s core business is strengthening the capacities of its partners to ensure that they are capable of realising their own education priorities. Technical assistance is VVOB’s main instrument to ensure capacity development of its partners. To guarantee ownership by the partners, VVOB fully aligns with the partner’s needs, priorities and strategic plans. VVOB’s capacity development efforts focus on organisational development of the partner. VVOB’s partners are organisations, institutes and departments responsible for teacher development and school leadership, such as:

- Initial teacher training institutions
- Service providers offering professional development of teachers and school leaders
- Departments and services of ministries of education that support teacher and school leadership development

Initial teacher education and continuous professional development are important to ensure that teachers do possess the pedagogical and didactical competences to deal with equity in schools. Areas in which VVOB supports its partners include:

- Strengthening of initial teacher education
- Reinforcement of a range of teacher development activities for school leaders and teachers, ranging from more traditional in-service training through courses to mentoring programs for novice teachers and facilitating professional learning communities
- Ensuring that content on equity has been included in teacher training curricula and teacher materials
- Supporting effective classroom practices, pedagogical and didactical strategies

2.4. Selection of Geographical Priorities within a Country Based on Equity

In some of VVOB’s programme countries, geographical choices had to be made in terms of reach. Though often not the only aspect taken into account when making these decisions, equity did always play a prominent role.

In Cambodia for example, a needs analysis for teacher development took into account available data on education quality as well as poverty in the selection of priority provinces. Primary school repetition
rates were used as a proxy for primary education quality. In addition, the average of two sets of poverty data were used. A combination of the two lead to the selection of three priority provinces.

In Vietnam, similar analyses lead to the choice of four priority provinces. The selected provinces contain high numbers of rural poor and people from ethnic minorities.

In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, where VVOB’s programme will focus on secondary agricultural TVET, a particular emphasis will be placed on some deprived provinces, where the participation of women in secondary agricultural TVET is very low.

2.5. Formulation of Programme Results with a Focus on Equity

VVOB’s overall education strategy with equity at its core is being translated into practice through the formulation of programmes. Programme formulation is a collective process of VVOB and its partners. Existing policies, strategies, plans and budgets of VVOB’s partners are always the starting point. As such, the local context is extremely important, and VVOB’s general portfolio choices do not offer a blueprint for programmes to be implemented in each and every country.

A detailed analysis of the specific context within each partner country and consultative meetings with decision makers and shapers determined which specific objective to focus on in a particular country. The inclusion of partner countries’ needs and priorities as one of the criteria in the earlier decisions on VVOB’s portfolio specialisation ensured that VVOB’s specific objectives were indeed relevant to the contexts of VVOB’s partner countries. Within a chosen specific objective, country programmes were still given a high degree of flexibility and contextualisation (e.g. to focus more on initial teacher training or on continuous professional development of teachers, to put more emphasis on teacher development or more on school leadership development).

Equity was mainstreamed in all new programmes in VVOB’s partner countries throughout the envisioned programme results in teacher and school leadership development. VVOB will work with its partners to deal with multiple dimensions of disadvantages in education including gender, location, socio-economic status, ethnic background and individual abilities. Within the broad spectrum of promoting equity, VVOB’s main focus is on gender equity.

A few examples illustrate how equity is mainstreamed throughout programme results.

In Zambia, the VVOB will support the initial training as well as the continuous professional development of teachers in early education. The programme will pay extra attention to encouraging learning for the girl child, for instance in the development of appropriate teaching materials. Existing government structures at the local level will monitor the way this is rolled out and how gender issues can be tackled at school level. The VVOB-supported programme in Zambia will also promote gender equity by increasing the awareness about the importance of gender sensitivity among student teachers and lecturers at colleges of education. This will be achieved through continuous professional development of lecturers and management in the colleges of education, as well as through capacity development of national structures which have the mandate to monitor teacher training at the colleges of education.

In Zimbabwe, VVOB will support the capacity development of relevant structures within the ministries of education and teacher training colleges on the importance of gender issues in the path towards inclusive early education. College administration and academic boards will encourage research on factors that affect the education of both girls and boys. Such research can inform policy makers and strategy development in the education sector and could, for example, lead to adaptations in the training of teachers. Student teachers, lecturers, teachers and school heads will be equipped with
attitudes, skills and knowledge that can help reduce the enforcement of boy/girl stereotypes e.g. in classroom management and the development of gender sensitive teaching and learning materials.

In **Cambodia**, the focus of the programme will be on pre-service training. The purpose is to counter gender stereotypes towards mathematics and science by encouraging teachers to embed mathematics and science activities in contexts that are interesting both to boys and girls and to counter existing gender stereotypes. Gender mainstreaming concepts will therefore be introduced in teacher training, for instance by promoting female scientists as role models. Female-friendly science and mathematics teaching materials will also be included.

Professional learning communities and networks of leaders and teachers are increasingly considered as alternative approaches to more classical types of in-service training. VVOB will support the set-up of professional learning communities for school leaders in **Rwanda** and for teachers in **South Africa** and **Ecuador**. These learning communities are often locally based, offering more opportunities for female participation than traditional in-service teacher training courses. Traditional courses are in many cases only offered in locations far away from the place of work and living, making it more difficult for women to access such courses. A significant number of professional learning communities in South Africa will have a specific gender equity focus.

In **Suriname** and **Ecuador**, VVOB will support in-service providers in their efforts to develop teachers and school leaders to deal with vulnerable youth. In addition to that, VVOB will reinforce the capacities of the ministry of education in Suriname to establish a system whereby a number of teachers will be prepared for a role as “care coordinator” in TVET schools in order to give targeted and individual support. Special attention will be given to teenage pregnancies, an important factor leading to school drop out of girls. In Ecuador, VVOB will assist its partners in developing, organizing and implementing teacher internships in companies, with an emphasis on conditions that will make these internships possible and attractive for women.

In **the Democratic Republic of the Congo**, the ministry of education will be strengthened in its capacity to integrate the gender dimension in the development of learning materials for teachers for all secondary agricultural schools.

### 2.6. Mainstreaming of Equity in Programme Monitoring and Evaluation

Apart from promoting equity in the formulation of programme results, equity has also been mainstreamed in the planned monitoring and evaluation systems of the programmes. This is done primarily for gender equity. Values for all relevant indicators in the monitoring and evaluation systems of the programmes will be disaggregated by gender.

Where required, VVOB will also support its programme partners in strengthening their monitoring and evaluation systems. In Ecuador for instance, VVOB will support the ministry of education in the setting-up of a knowledge management system which will allow gender-disaggregated monitoring of professional development activities.
3. Discussion, Lessons Learnt and Recommendations

There is now international consensus on putting equity at the heart of a post-2015 education goal, with explicit mention in the proposed goal. Equity will not only have to be made explicit in the goal itself, but also in the indicators and targets. Obviously, this is much easier said than done, and the time has come to “walk the talk”. Ministries of education, development agencies and other stakeholders will have to search for concerted efforts to achieve the desired learning outcomes for those who are denied the opportunity to learn because of their poverty, gender, disability or where they come from.

On its own relatively small scale, VVOB has attempted over the past one year to mainstream equity in its new portfolio of education programmes: starting from an equity-based definition of quality education, over the selection of education subsectors and specific objectives, to the formulation of indicators for monitoring and evaluation. A change of mindset across the organisation was necessary to achieve this mainstreaming. Just like with any other change process, the shift in focus required constant attention, follow-up and support from the organisation’s management and technical advisors. Although organisational change doesn’t happen overnight, VVOB has managed to put the reduction of inequalities in educational opportunities at the core of its work within the timeframe of one year. The formation of several feedback groups and the organisation of an internal organisation-wide seminar were probably good cornerstones towards the success of this change.

Although the promotion of equity in learning offered a global framework for VVOB’s new portfolio of education programmes, it was not restrictive and allowed for flexibility. Country-level contextualisation, decision-making and target setting for the new programmes was necessary and proved to be at least as important as the global priority setting. The result is a specialised education portfolio, with the promotion of equal opportunities for all learners as its backbone.

The process was lead and implemented from within the organisation. Some subprocesses (such as the analysis of available scientific research) were supported and validated by small teams of external experts. This proved to be useful in adding the required credibility to some of the choices made in VVOB’s new portfolio.

One of the challenges VVOB encountered in the process was the lack of reliable data and scientific studies, particularly from countries and regions where the problems are the biggest. There are a lot of data and studies available on access to education, but much less on education quality. And when they are available, they are often not disaggregated by gender, region or socio-economic background. Measures for assessing equity in learning have been lacking. This is surely something the international community should invest in in the coming years.
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VVOB, the Flemish Association for Development Cooperation and Technical Assistance, is a non-profit organisation that implements development programmes in the education sector. Our core business is to provide technical assistance in education programmes. This way VVOB supports local capacity building as a means to stimulate sustainable development and poverty reduction.