Putting SDG4 into practice

Moving education innovations from pilot to scale

vvob
education for development

Inclusive and equitable quality education provides all learners with the capabilities to become economically productive, develop sustainable livelihoods, contribute to peaceful and democratic societies, and enhance individual wellbeing. This technical brief explains why it is crucial to increase the chances of education initiatives to reach a significant scale, and presents the approach that VVOB takes to scaling. As a partner to Ministries of Education of low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) across three continents, VVOB is committed to scaling education initiatives through government systems. The experiences of VVOB demonstrate the importance of building strong and lasting alliances and ensuring ease of adoption for government partners. We are grateful to Management Systems International (MSI), the Brookings Center for Universal Education, Educate!, Pratham and STiR Education for sharpening our thinking along the way.

Why scaling matters

With only ten years to go to 2030, the goal of inclusive and equitable quality education for all is far from ensured. It has been projected that, if we do not change course, close to a billion school-aged boys and girls in LMICS will not have the basic secondary-level skills they need to succeed in life and work. The education needs globally are immense; improving learning at scale is a matter of urgency. Ultimately, widespread educational effectiveness depends on ensuring every school and every teacher does not "reinvent the wheel" of enabling learning for every student. But scaling up locally effective education innovations to many different contexts and then sustaining – in each setting – the shifts in practice, policy and structures that this improvement requires, is proving to be quite challenging.

The hurdles faced

- An exceptionally high number of decision-makers are involved in adoption at scale, with teachers deciding mostly individually and behind closed doors.

- Pilot initiatives are designed, executed and supported in ways that make it difficult for government systems to adopt them and make them fit within existing resources, structures and incentives.

- Government systems are not necessarily receptive to change, especially when additional resources are called for or when influential constituencies see themselves as losing out in the scaling process.

The evidence

International literature shows that scaling quality education calls for:

- **A strong instructional core that demonstrably improves learning.**

- **Effective teacher and school leader professional development delivered at scale.**

- **Widely available high-quality low-cost teaching and learning materials to accompany professional development.**

- **Context-sensitive, long-term capacity development support to government institutions at different levels of the education system.**

Scaling up and SDG4

Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4) focuses on ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting life-long learning opportunities for all. Successive *Global Education Monitoring Reports* make it clear, though, that we are far from realising the pledge to ensure actual, meaningful learning and to not leave anyone behind. With COVID-19 heavily disrupting the learning process of more than 1.7 billion children and youth, hard-earned progress may turn into learning loss, especially among learners in difficult socio-economic and family situations. Solutions that work need to start working for the many, in as many different contexts as possible and for as many different learners as possible. Scaling up is nothing less than essential to reaching SDG4.

VVOB's approach enables scaling up

Scaling up education initiatives is not like gearing up factory machinery to produce more or better cars. It is a different kind of challenge altogether. The large number of frontline implementers — that is, teachers and school leaders — combined with their relatively high levels of professional isolation, makes it difficult for those who want to bring about large-scale improvement in education systems. Teachers and school leaders work, moreover, in systems that are often quite complex and resistant to change, with decision-makers at many levels and across many departments and accountability practices that often do little to motivate them.

As the principles and good practices for successfully and sustainably scaling up in the education sector are becoming increasingly clear from research and experience, VVOB has come to realise that our signature approach consists of three characteristics that are especially important to the endeavour:

1. We work well with/in government systems

When it comes to delivering public goods such as education sustainably and at scale, government institutions are essential. Even when faced with serious constraints, government systems remain unrivalled when it comes to their delivery network, operational capacity, funding base and incentive structure. Moreover, in most countries, the government plays a crucial role in the provision of education and in the preparation, selection, placement and continuous professional development of the education workforce, as well as in setting and watching over standards and norms for private providers.

VVOB maintains longstanding partnerships with governments and works with and within existing structures and institutions, as this is the steadiest pathway towards sustainability and scale. Drawing from a well-established toolkit of eight capacity development (CD) methods, we tailor-make CD trajectories that enable strong ownership at the level of the targeted institutions. Government partners value our respect for national priorities, participatory approach to decision-making, planning and implementation and flexibility to adapt solutions to different contexts.

VVOB offices and staff are often embedded in Ministries of Education and beneficiary institutions to enhance the institutionalisation and sustainability of results. To ensure high-level buy-in, we invest in building an evidence-base, (close to) budget neutral solutions and in soft advocacy at all relevant levels of the education system.

2. Devoted to elevating teachers and school leaders

There is ample evidence that teachers and school leaders have an exceedingly large effect on learners' learning and wellbeing. Scaling quality education will simply not happen if these frontline workers are not on board. But teachers and school leaders, like most people, are not particularly keen on executing and scaling other people's ideas. Ownership is key to any change process. Both the fact that there are so many owners and the fact that they are in a position to act according to their 'very own' ideas and beliefs behind (mostly) closed doors, can be a challenge to large-scale change in education.

To build teachers' and school leaders' ownership and hone their professional judgement, VVOB invests in strengthening the professional development systems in place to support them. We look for solutions that increase teachers' and school leaders' autonomy, competence and relatedness without overstretching the human and financial resources already available within the education system.

3. VVOB is a "long-termer"

In 2021, VVOB has an average presence of just over three decades in its current countries of operation – not counting Uganda, where we started working in 2019. For sure, our way of working has evolved considerably over those 31 years, but our partnerships with Ministries of Education are longstanding and our trust and mutual understanding have deepened with time, dialogue and dedication. It is not uncommon for the journey from pilot to national scale to take upward of 15 years, even for highly productive initiatives.

Scaling, in other words, takes considerably longer than the time-horizons of most donors and governments. Securing resources and conviction over such a long time is no mean feat. VVOB's long-term commitment is an absolute plus when it comes to maintaining momentum and monitoring progress, then, and it puts us in a favourable position to accompany scaling processes. By thinking through scaling from the start of our interventions, we are becoming increasingly deliberate in our strategies and in providing the kind of capacity development support to our partners that can help them sustain education initiatives at an increasingly larger scale.

Building broad and lasting alliances

With a shared interest in improving our own scaling strategies and supporting partners in scaling processes, MSI, the Brookings Center for Universal Education, Educate!, Pratham, STiR Education and VVOB put their heads together to adapt MSI's existing Scalability Checklist to the education sector. In developing the *Education Scalability Checklist*, one matter for reflection were the ways in which the education sector differs from other sectors and what the implications of those differences are for scaling up. The combination of millions of frontline implementers (teachers, school leaders), many parties involved in deciding whether or not to adopt an initiative (a range of departments at Ministries of Education, typically at several levels in the education hierarchy) and a multitude of stakeholders (learners, parents and caregivers in addition to those already mentioned) emerged as an important distinguishing characteristic. This specific feature also poses a challenge to scaling an education initiative, which can be addressed by building a broad and lasting support base. Below are some of VVOB's preferred strategies for doing so, illustrated with examples from practice in Ecuador, Rwanda, Vietnam and Zambia.

Address an objectively significant, persistent problem

To build a broad and stable support base and increase the chances of scaling, the problem addressed by an education initiative needs to be clearly demonstrated and it needs to be evident that many learners are affected. By and large, VVOB's partner Ministries face three types of challenges: of access; of quality and ensuing learning; and of equity. The focus of VVOB is on the latter two.

As a first step in identifying objectively significant problems, VVOB relies on available data regarding achievement and attainment levels overall and in sub-groups of learners, as well as data on teacher and school leader qualifications and performance. We mainly draw this data from government information systems, various UN databases, national and international assessments, citizen-led assessments and longitudinal research initiatives. **We then discuss our findings with the Ministry of Education to arrive at a priority focus, which we also bounce off our operational partners (schools and providers of professional development for teacher and school leaders) and other implementers.** This way, we get a clear sense of whether the problem we (plan to) address "matters", and of the level of attention it can already count on.

In **Rwanda**, a close look at the national assessment data of multiple years prompted a focus on mathematics teaching and learning in primary education; and on science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) in lower secondary education. In **Zambia**, a similar exercise made literacy and numeracy into a priority for remedial education for learners in grades 3 to 5 of primary. In **Vietnam**, we found greater concern for so-called "skills for the future", such as creativity, critical thinking and problem-solving. On this front, the country's international ranking does not compare well to its ranking for more academic subjects. In **Ecuador,** we focus on skills mismatch and misalignment between upper secondary technical education and the world of work in a number of sectors that are promising for youth employment. To demonstrate this problem, VVOB invested in an assessment to compare skills supply and demand in one educational Zone – a type of study that was then replicated by the Ministry of Education elsewhere in the country.

In each case, the identified problem sets boundaries to the instructional core of the education initiative that VVOB wants to scale up.

Focus on an issue that is high on the policy agenda

Building support to scale an education initiative is easier when that initiative addresses an issue that is high on the policy agenda. **To ensure that our work is well-aligned with policy, VVOB teams invest in policy document analysis, participate in education sector working groups where these exist, and follow the communications of influential politicians, administrators and civil society organisations.** In addition, we have a number of strategies in place to manage the inevitable risk of policy priorities changing over time.

One is to make it clear that our initiatives address policy issues that have an importance beyond the education sector and to policies with a long shelf life. For instance, in Vietnam – where VVOB has embarked on a journey to pilot and scale play-based learning in primary education – we have tied our advocacy of the initiative to the objectives of the national socio-economic development plan. This plan values "future-proof" skills such as creativity, leadership and innovation in Vietnam's workforce. Similarly, in Rwanda, our investments in the professional development of teachers and school leaders to improve learning outcomes for STEM are framed by the country's aspirations to transition to a knowledge-based economy, as expressed in Rwanda Vision 2020 and in the current 7-year National Strategy for Transformation (2017-2024).

Another is to remain agile in linking our initiatives to "trending" policy issues. Several of the countries where VVOB works have fairly high turnover rates among Ministers of Education. With these changes also come policy adjustments, often in response to new developments. In **Ecuador**, over the past five years, we have navigated a model for collaboration between upper secondary technical education and the productive sector – so-called proyectos *relaciones colegio-comunidad* or RCC projects – through five Ministers. Our team shows the model's relevance to issues as varied as earthquake recovery, social dialogue and community participation, and decentralisation and school autonomy. By keeping our finger on the pulse of each administration's specific priorities, we were able to keep ours on the agenda as well.

A third strategy is to proactively shape the policy agenda. Still in **Ecuador**, VVOB supported the Ministry of Education through two cycles of updating its national policy for technical and vocational education and training (TVET) in 2015 and 2019. Our reliable position in the policy dialogue has made it possible to put and keep issues such as TVET relevance and alignment with the world of work high on the agenda, thus also creating a supportive policy environment for the RCC projects that we were piloting. In **Rwanda**, VVOB is very active in the Education Sector Working Group (ESWG), a technical working forum through which the Government of Rwanda and stakeholders meet to discuss sector planning and prioritisation. In 2021, we are co-chairing the ESWG taskforces on School Leadership and Pre-service Teacher Training, which has allowed us to keep our education initiatives high on the agenda.

Constitute a coalition for change

Our experience in Rwanda and elsewhere has also taught us the importance of building alliances of actors in favour of the change that is being promoted. **Ideally, coalitions for change are both broad-based *and* in a position to mobilise prominent individuals or institutions for their cause.**

In **Vietnam**, for instance, VVOB cooperates with the National Women's Union (NWU). Vietnamese parents typically prioritise cognitive skills development at the detriment of creativity, critical thinking or social and emotional skills. They expect teachers to do the same. With its 13 million+ members, the NWU is well-placed to organise community outreach activities for caregivers to promote new norms for learning and foster an enabling environment for learning through play. In **Ecuador,** our collaboration with the Organisation of Ibero-American States (OEI) and UNESCO has allowed for a deeper political dialogue on aligning TVET with the world of work. In **Zambia**, the successful introduction and progressive scaling of Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL) as a method for delivering remedial education is explained, at least in part, by the fact that highly respected research institutions J-PAL / Innovations for Poverty Action and internationally acclaimed NGO Pratham joined hands with VVOB, a trusted partner of the Ministry of General Education.

Importantly, coalitions for change also need to secure the support of learners and educators themselves. Pilot projects initiated by NGOs or social entrepreneurs in education are often designed based on what the originating organisation *thinks* the needs of learners, teachers and school leaders are, rather than on a thorough understanding of these beneficiaries' *actual* needs. This is a common flaw. TaRL would not have been able to expand from an 80-school pilot to an intervention in more than 1,800 Zambian schools in five years without the positive response and infectious enthusiasm of learners, teachers and Ministry staff for this method of instruction, assessment and monitoring. As these stakeholders' felt needs were addressed, we could garner their support through means that promote intrinsic motivation, such as building a sense of TaRL community and celebrating teachers' competence to apply the new approach. WhatsApp groups and monthly newsletters create a sense of shared purpose and spark an infectious enthusiasm among educators and at the Ministry.

Excerpt from the *Education Scalability Checklist*

Model Categories	Item	A	<<< Scaling up is easier	B	Scaling up is harder >>>	C
A. How convincing is the scaling strategy?	1.		Presence of a clear and compelling strategy for reaching scale		No articulated scaling strategy	
	2.		Homogeneous problem, target group(s) and setting -- geography, language, economy, politics		Multiple, diverse problems, target groups(s) and/or settings	
B. Is the initiative credible?	3.		Robust evidence that the initiative works in diverse settings and for diverse target groups, incl. ones similar to the given		Little or no robust evidence of the initiative working in diverse settings and/or for diverse target groups, incl. ones similar to the given	
	4.		Independent external evaluation of the initiative in the given setting		No independent external evaluation of the initiative in the given setting	
	5.		Impact on learners very visible to decision-makers and users and easily associated with the initiative		Impact on learners relatively invisible to decision-makers and users and/or not easily attributable to the initiative	
C. How strong is the support for the initiative and the change it entails?	6.		Addresses an objectively significant, persistent problem that affects a lot of learners and has significant impact		Addresses a problem that is temporary, affects few learners or has limited impact	
	7.		Addresses an issue that is high on the national policy agenda		Addresses an issue that is low on the national policy agenda	
	8.		Addresses a need that is sharply felt by potential target groups		Addresses a need that is not sharply felt by potential target groups	
	9.		Strong sense of urgency regarding the problem or need		Relative complacency	
	10.		Supported by eminent individuals and institutions		Supported by few or no eminent individuals and institutions	
	11.		Strong leadership coalition committed to the change and this coalition is expected to stay in place		Strong leadership coalition committed to that change or the one is place is volatile	
	12.		Demonstrable support for the initiative among educators and key staff in the education system, particularly the adopting government institutions		Lack of support for or active resistance against the initiative among educators and key staff in the education system, particularly adopting government institutions	
	13.		Faces limited opposition		Faces strong opposition	
D. Does the initiative have relative advantage over the current state of affairs and alternative solutions?	14.		Current state of affairs and alternative solutions considered inadequate		Current state of affairs and alternative solutions considered adequate or better	
	15.		Clearly established superior effectiveness		Little or no objective evidence of superiority	
	16.		Implementable with infrastructure and human resources already present in the education system		Requires significant new or additional infrastructure and / or human resources	
	17.		Small departure from current practices of educators and key staff in the education system		Large departure from current practices of educators and key staff in the education system	
E. How easy is the initiative to transfer and adopt by the education system, particularly the adopting government institutions?	18.		Fully consistent with government policy, regulations and structure of the education system		Requires substantial change in government policy, regulations and / or structure of the education system	
	19.		Few decision makers involved in agreeing to adoption		Many decision makers at multiple levels of the education system, across departments or Ministries involved in agreeing to adoption	
	20.		Initiative is highly structured		Initiative lacks structure	
	21.		Initiative shows low complexity; few components; easily added onto the education system		Initiative shows high complexity with many components; integrated package	
	22.		Uptake and quality of implementation are easy to monitor		Uptake and quality of implementation require substantial effort in terms of monitoring	
	23.		Able to be tested on a limited scale		Unable to be tested without adoption at large-scale	
F. How good is the fit between the initiative and the education system, particularly the adopting government institutions?	24.		Strong collaborative relationships exist between originating, intermediary and adopting organizations		Inexisting or nascent collaborative relationships between originating, intermediary and adopting organizations	
	25.		Adopting organization has the operational capacity and financial resources to implement at scale		No organization with the systems, delivery agents, and resources to implement at scale	
	26.		Adopting and intermediary organizations with experience scaling similar interventions		Adopting and intermediary organizations lack experience scaling similar interventions	
	27.		Adopting organization has physical presence or strong network and credibility in relevant contexts		Adopting organization lacks footprint and credibility in relevant contexts	
	28.		Initiative is consistent with the leadership team, organizational norms and incentives of the adopting organization		Initiative is not consistent with the leadership team in place, and / or with existing organizational norms and incentives	
G. Is there a sustainable source of funding?	29.		Substantially lower cost than existing or alternative solutions		Higher cost than existing or alternative solutions	
	30.		Budget implications are clear, predictable and justifiable for those who are expected to bear the costs		Budget implications are unclear and / or difficult to predict and justify for those who are expected to bear the costs	
	31.		Taking the initiative to scale requires small amounts of funding that can easily be mobilized internally or externally		Taking the initiative to scale requires large commitment of funds that are difficult to mobilize either internally or externally	
	32.		Cost of implementation at scale can be integrated in government budget and / or in budget of key implementing organizations		Cost of implementation at scale cannot be integrated in government budget and / or in budget of key implementing organizations	

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The *Education Scalability Checklist*

Keen to improve our own scaling strategies and to support government partners in scaling up education initiatives, VVOB joined hands with Management Systems International (MSI), Brookings Center for Universal Education, Educate!, Pratham and STiR Education to adapt MSI's "generic" scalability checklist to the education sector. The fruits of this collaboration are the *Education Scalability Checklist*, an excel-based tool for assessing the ease or difficulty of scaling specific education initiatives and planning action to facilitate scaling, and an accompanying *User Guide*. The *Education Scalability Checklist* is designed for practitioners ("implementers"), governments ("policymakers") and funders who are interested in seeing a particular education initiative move to a larger scale. On the previous pages, you can find an excerpt from the tool.

Ensuring ease of adoption for government partners

When it comes to delivering public goods such as education sustainably and at scale, government institutions are essential. Even when faced with serious constraints, government systems remain unrivalled when it comes to the delivery network, operational capacity, funding base and incentive structure needed to deliver education in perpetuity to large populations, particularly when it comes to compulsory education. At the same time, many governments struggle to implement the various initiatives included in their own education sector plans. Additional innovations proposed by "outsiders" may well be met with resistance, then, even when there is robust evidence that these interventions are effective at tackling problems high on the policy agenda. Here are some of the strategies that VVOB uses to support government partners through the process.

Use a systems approach from the start

Scaling up is sometimes thought of as a process that begins with trying out an initiative – for example, a new methodology or technology for teaching – in a small number of schools and then, when there is robust evidence of its impact, gradually transferring ownership to the government system for its adoption at scale. In VVOB's experience, it is best to engage with "the system" from the start. After all, from the perspective of government partners, scalability trumps impact: if the initiative cannot take hold in a sector, district, province, or wider because it is difficult to adopt and fit into existing structures, then its potential for impact has little value. **As many of the countries where we work have only partially decentralised education systems, a combined top-down and bottom-up approach is often useful.**

To introduce play-based learning in primary education in **Vietnam**, we worked intensively from the beginning with the relevant departments of the Ministry of Education and Training and with the leading universities that developed Vietnam's competency-based curriculum. The effort focused on integrating **learning through play pedagogies into the continuous professional development system and the formal school-year tasks for primary**; and on **ensuring alignment with existing curriculum requirements**. Without this close collaboration and the formal "green light" it represents, it would be more difficult to engage schools and districts in trying out the new approach in a well-set-up pilot.

Further in **Ecuador,** early endorsement from the central level of the Ministry of Education also benefited the introduction of *proyectos relaciones colegio-comunidad* or RCC projects in upper

secondary technical education. Without it, **getting the necessary permissions** for schools to meet and negotiate collaborations with the private sector would have been difficult, even at a small scale. By engaging with schools, districts, zones and central level from the start, we were also able **to identify bottlenecks in existing guidelines and regulations and addressed them in a specially developed RCC protocol approved by the Ministry.**

Working from within the system from the start gives VVOB a double advantage. On the one hand, we see how new approaches play out at school level and in what way their design needs to be trimmed for optimal feasibility and impact. On the other hand, we can proactively contribute to creating an enabling environment.

For instance, in **Rwanda** VVOB has been instrumental in shaping the policy environment in favour of effective school leadership. Some of the critical milestones of the past decade include: the establishment of the School Leadership and Management Unit at the Rwanda Basic Education Board (REB) with support from VVOB early-on; the introduction of Professional Standards for Effective School Leadership through the Unit; the provision of incentives for decentralised level staff to engage in the implementation of continuous professional development of (deputy) head teachers, making sure that government budgets cover travel for sector education inspectors and school leaders to participate; the permanent provision of professional development opportunities for district directors of education and SEIs are permanently provided; and the official accreditation of the diploma course in Effective School Leadership and the certificate

course in Educational Mentorship and Coaching that VVOB developed together with the University of Rwanda – College of Education (UR-CE).

In this way, scaling is clearly about more than "reaching numbers". It is about bringing about lasting change in the education system by altering underlying structures and supporting mechanisms that make the system operate in a particular way.

Structure the initiative in a way that fits the existing system

From teachers to Ministries of Education, scaling a well-structured education initiative is considerably easier than scaling one where principles, practices, processes, roles, … are not well described and documented. At the classroom level, **structured teachers' guides are extremely helpful as are concrete activities that teachers can use to build curriculum-aligned lesson plans**. At the level of a school, school leaders need to know what their **best options are for fitting the initiative into the school calendar**. Striking the right balance between fit (contextualised) and fidelity (standardised) is important for scaling. VVOB prefers to find this balance together with its partners.

The scaling of Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL) is an illustrative case. VVOB is a TaRL implementing partner in **Zambia** since 2016 and in **Uganda** since 2020. In both countries, the key TaRL ingredients are the same and centred on a strong instructional core. The starting point for instruction is to find out what learners already know and to

further build on that. For example, in terms of reading, learners are assessed and grouped into five levels: beginners (cannot recognise letters), letter recognition, word recognition, simple paragraph reading, and story reading. The teaching methodology and regular assessments, too, are well-structured, with an elaborate menu of activities to choose from and clear principles (child-centred, lively, …) for creating additional ones. At the same time, VVOB has leeway to identify the model of implementation that allows for the easiest mobilisation of learners and teachers for TaRL remedial lessons and to set up the most appropriate TaRL support system of mentors and monitoring officers.

Importantly, in structuring an education initiative the difference between must-haves and nice-to-haves also becomes clear. The changes that are introduced can thus be simplified without becoming a straitjacket. At school level, the RCC projects that VVOB started piloting in **Ecuador** in 2015 and, to date, expanded to four provinces and four study areas of upper secondary technical education, consist of three evidence-informed core components: study and career guidance, project-based learning and internships. Each component comes with support materials to guide concrete activities – for example, career talks, projects to develop marketing resources for eco-tourism, … – and with modalities for collaboration with the world of work. As a priority, the accompanying professional development for teachers and school leaders focuses on these same components. In addition, there are also the options to collaborate with the world of work for technical upskilling of teachers and for access to equipment.

Make optimal use of existing human resources

Initiatives that rely on human resources that are not already present in the education system are very difficult to scale up. Many countries not only wrestle with shortages of teachers and school leaders, there are staff shortages along the teacher and school leader "pipeline" from initial training over to selection and placement, induction and continuous professional development and ongoing evaluation. **VVOB therefore adjusts its solutions to the education workforce in place, keeping in mind existing roles and responsibilities, numbers and reach.**

Working closely with the Ministry of Education, VVOB in **Rwanda** was well-placed to advise on the mandate and function descriptions of the sector education officers – now: sector education inspectors (SEIs) – when the position was originally created. As there was already a shared agenda of advancing school leadership, it was possible to carve out a role and time for these officers to set up and facilitate professional learning communities (PLCs) for school leaders. Between 2014 and 2016, VVOB trained 120 sector education officers to facilitate these PLCs and coach the school leaders participating in them. In a next phase, VVOB and UR-CE joined hands to develop a blended certificate course in Educational Mentorship and Coaching directed at SEIs.

For scaling school leadership and teacher professional development, the use of information and communication technologies is very promising. These technologies make it possible to reach the education workforce in greater numbers than face-to-face. They can also save time (on travel) for those delivering training, mentoring, coaching and so on. However, **working face-to-face does remain a strong added value. For continuous professional development, school- and cluster-based approaches can be both effective and helpful in making optimal use of existing human resources.**

Apart from a limited number of training sessions, the introduction and scaling of play-based learning in **Vietnam** relies mostly on the presence of provincial and district education officers combined with an existing system of school-based teacher professional development. **VVOB's role is to strengthen what is in place – notably, by introducing a roadmap for action-oriented peer learning among teachers and capacitating school leaders and districts to enable this process and follow up on progress.** Each learning cycle consists of four steps: teachers meet to identify how to integrate learning through play in their lessons and discuss related challenges; teachers implement learning through play and observe their colleagues at agreed-upon moments; teachers gather to discuss the implementation, experienced difficulties and identify solutions to the latter; and teachers try out the adapted approach in the classroom.

Creating this culture of learning across all levels of the education hierarchy is an important driver for scaling, but often it also entails a shift in the accountability mechanisms that are in place. Many teachers, school leaders and middle-tier education officers find themselves caught up in administrative tasks that direct their attention away from (their own) learning. **For VVOB, making optimal use of existing human resources means elevating teachers and school leaders and igniting trust between schools and the education administration.**

Make meaningful monitoring easier

Among the characteristics of education initiatives that lend themselves more easily to scaling, is the ease with which uptake and implementation quality can be monitored by the government system. An important challenge is that schools and education officers working at the level of a sector, district, zone, … spend much energy on accounting for things that are insufficient for learning and then, when the time for national examinations has come, it becomes obvious that not much was learnt. Unfortunately, many school leaders and middle-tier education officers find themselves at a loss for alternatives that are both meaningful and that fit into their busy schedules. **To improve scalability, producing and disseminating tools that support educators and improve implementation is key.**

To verify whether TaRL is put to practice properly, monitoring officers from the zones and districts in **Zambia** need to **focus on only seven key principles that are easily observed**, such as: Are children in groups per level? Are children handling teaching and learning resources? Was the teacher talking less than half of the time? Whether or not learners are actually progressing is frequently measured by teachers with simple assessment tools that take less than 15 minutes to administer one-on-one. Learning level data is aggregated at classroom, school, zonal, district and – ultimately – provincial level. By moving from a fully paper-based to an excel-based system, we were able to reduce the turnaround time for data to arrive at the province from 30 to 10 days. **Zones and districts are now also in a much better position to target their mentoring activities, which saves them time and transport costs.** Next step? Take monitoring fully online.

In **Rwanda**, VVOB has already developed an e-monitoring tool that enables SEIs to follow up on the productivity of the professional learning communities that they facilitate or on whether stated objectives are being achieved. The ease of data collection with tablets and real-time access to a dashboard where analytics are visualised are much appreciated by the SEIs and the Rwanda Basic Education Board, as data-driven learning and decision-making is now within reach. **Introducing such tools is, in other words, also a perfect opportunity to stimulate a culture of continuous improvement within the government system.**

About VVOB

VVOB is a non-profit organisation with more than 35 years' experience in sustainably improving the quality, efficiency and effectiveness of education.

VVOB focus

In pursuit of quality education, VVOB works in two niches, the professional development of teachers and the professional development of school leaders, in the following subsectors:

- early education to improve the quality of formal pre-primary education and assist the transition to primary school.
- primary education to improve literacy, numeracy and life skills.
- secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes.
- secondary technical and vocational education and training to improve quality, align knowledge and skills imparted with the labour market, and integrate entrepreneurship.

As a fundamental principle, VVOB firmly believes that quality education can only be achieved if equity, and particularly gender equity, is achieved in the education system.

VVOB expertise

VVOB teams of experts specialise in meeting the most important education needs identified by international research and in the education strategies and priorities of VVOB partner countries. We do this through capacity development and technical assistance.

Developing the capacity of local education authorities

For VVOB, developing the capacity of local education authorities means:

- professionalising teachers through strengthening teacher training institutions and professional development organisations, and mentoring and coaching systems.
- professional development of school leaders through professional development organisations, and mentoring and coaching systems.
- enabling a strong policy environment for the professionalisation of teachers and school leaders, by enhancing dialogue, communication and collaboration among stakeholders.

Providing technical assistance

For VVOB, providing technical assistance means:

- offering structural and sustainable solutions to support and reinforce the capacities of governments and local education authorities responsible for the professional development of teachers and school leaders.
- offering practical and technical education expertise and support for processes through a wide range of methodologies, from classical training and workshops to mentoring, coaching and peer learning.
- ensuring that partners increasingly take the lead throughout programmes to guarantee sustainability.

How VVOB works

Addresses local needs and contexts

VVOB works in close partnership with governments to put education policies, priorities and strategies into practice.

Collaborates with a network of educational partners

VVOB develops educational expertise based on its know-how and exchanges within its worldwide network of educational partners – teacher training institutions, universities, ministries of education, educational service providers and international organisations.

Operational partners

VVOB partners with ministries of education, teacher training institutions and organisations focusing on professional development. Partners range from national and regional governments to institutions, individual schools, school leaders, teachers and students.

Financial partners

Local governments finance programmes from their own budgets and with support from national and international donors, including the Belgian and Flemish governments, the European Union, USAID, Mastercard Foundation, the LEGO Foundation, Dubai Cares, the ELMA Foundation, UNICEF, Global Partnership for Education (GPE) and other foundations and international non-governmental organisations.
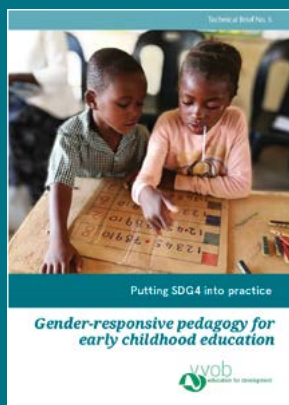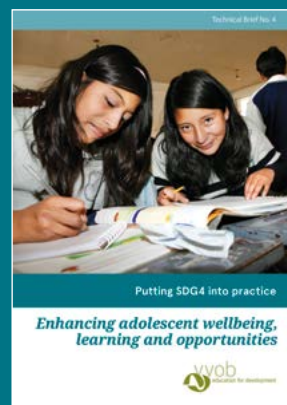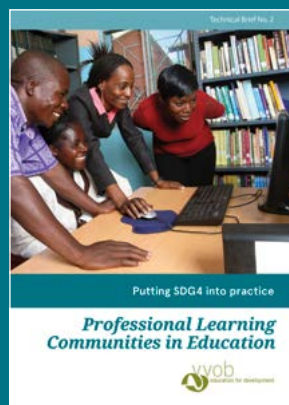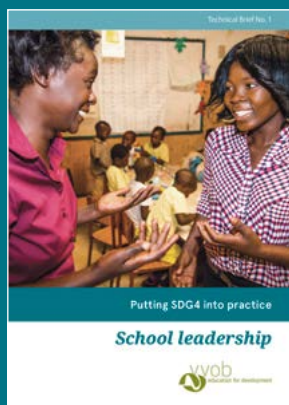
Stimulates cooperation

VVOB stimulates cooperation between educational institutions across continents.

Where VVOB works

VVOB works in 10 countries – Belgium, Cambodia, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ecuador, Rwanda, South Africa, Suriname, Uganda, Vietnam, Zambia – and on assignments in other countries.

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'Putting SDG4 into practice' technical briefs:

Technical Brief No. 1 — Putting SDG4 into practice — *School leadership*

Technical Brief No. 2 — Putting SDG4 into practice — *Professional Learning Communities in Education*

Technical Brief No. 3 — Putting SDG4 into practice — *Learning through Play*

Technical Brief No. 4 — Putting SDG4 into practice — *Enhancing adolescent wellbeing, learning and opportunities*

Technical Brief No. 5 — Putting SDG4 into practice — *Gender-responsive pedagogy for early childhood education*

Technical Brief No. 6 — Putting SDG4 into practice — *Moving education innovations from pilot to scale*

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