e+i | employment and income network

SDC Network
Education

Putting education to work: Where does education lead the youth of today?

Synthesis of the online discussion
hosted by SDC's "Education" and "employment and income (e+i)" networks
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Introduction

What follows is a synthesis of an online discussion hosted jointly by the e+i Vocational Skills Development (VSD) network and the Education network of SDC from mid-October to early November 2012. The discussion was timed to coincide with the launching of the UN's Education for All (EFA) Global Monitoring Report, whose theme this year was "Youth and skills: Putting education to work". The objectives of the online discussion were (i) to help publicise the report, (ii) to animate an exchange of ideas, information, and experiences relating to the main issues addressed in the report, and (iii) to foster collaboration between the two networks and enhance their mutual understanding of the basic concepts they work with.

The online discussion was open to 227 persons. A total of 46 written contributions to the online discussion were posted by 28 basic education and VSD experts from 16 countries.

Executive summary

1) In addition to identifying key skills, attention should be focused on the process by which young people learn to develop their skills. It is important that all students be able to constantly test and apply what they learn in the classroom by connecting it with their daily lives and experience. It is only in this way that both the foundation skills and the vocational skills that they acquire can be made transferable.

2) Closely linking basic education with the learning of vocational skills appears to be a highly useful approach in many contexts. This is particularly the case when reaching out to young people who have had little or no formal schooling. Despite the fact that basic education and vocational training have different objectives, the roles they play in economic, social, and personal development are complementary.

3) For young people to successfully make the transition from the classroom to the workplace they must receive proper guidance, underpinned by a thorough knowledge of the labour market. As more and more information on the labour market is gathered, this should be reflected in adjustments to curricula, so that they remain up-to-date. Collaboration with private sector employers can often facilitate such information-gathering.

4) Future interventions should give priority to bringing together actors from the domains of basic education, VSD, and the labour market, and to facilitating coordination of their activities. For its part, SDC should continue working in the areas in which it has become a recognised expert, in particular, through its support of innovative approaches in education and VSD.

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Developing life and work skills

1) In addition to identifying key skills, attention should be focused on the process by which young people learn to develop their skills.

Students have a need to be able to constantly test and apply what they learn in the classroom by connecting it with their daily lives and experiences. It is only in this way that both the foundation skills and the vocational skills that they acquire can be made transferable. In other words, it is necessary that the relationship between theory and practice be developed. And it is important that a greater amount of time and attention to be devoted to the latter. At the same time, stress should be placed on the link between the practical and theoretical aspects of all learning. For in reality, truly mastering a skill means being able not only to translate theory into practice (application), but also practice into theory (understanding the logic, rationale, and causalities behind concrete action). A solid theory is always rooted in practice, and vice-versa.

Teaching that is not grounded in what the students see and experience in their daily lives loses meaning, and creates a disconnect between school and reality. This phenomenon can be observed in many places. When education and VSD lose touch with the local realities, they are of no use when students want to join the labour market.

This can lead to paradoxical situations. In certain countries, VSD schools are thought of as being too theoretical and providing poor preparation for the labour market. Because of this, employers often prefer to hire people without training, who command lower wages, rather than taking on people with training who they do not think will be any better qualified. This creates a situation in which young people who have received VSD may be the most vulnerable.

Most discussion participants agreed that all three types of skills distinguished in the report are needed by young people in order for them to meet the challenges they will face in life. At the same time, drawing distinctions between the different types of skills remains a purely conceptual exercise. It does not truly reflect the experience of young trainees or the way in which they function. In actual practice, the three types combine, intermingle, and merge with each other.

Three types of skills
Foundation skills: literacy and numeracy skills that are a prerequisite for education and training; necessary for acquiring both transferable and technical and vocational skills.

Transferable skills: skills needed to be able to adapt to different occupational environments, e.g., the ability to communicate ideas effectively, solve problems, and show leadership.

Technical and vocational skills: technical know-how specific to each occupation or job.

Cf. Pathways to Skills |

Some contributors felt that it would be more useful to define the relationship between the three types of skills in a different way, based on the assumption that all skills (be they foundation skills, or technical and vocational skills) automatically become transferable once they have been truly mastered. One of the problems associated with the categorisation proposed by the report is that it appears to be underpinned by the notion of a hierarchy of skills, going from the most basic to the most useful. More generally, any attempt to identify skills that are needed by all young people raises a question as to the expediency of suggesting an ideal profile suited to all cultural contexts.

On one point, however, there seems to be a broad consensus: young people today are facing **a world of permanent and rapid change** – driven by constant technological evolution and high mobility – in which **the ability to adapt quickly and remain flexible will be increasingly in demand.** In order for them to manage, they will need to learn to feel secure and in control in their surroundings. But there are many young people today who feel completely powerless, not lastly as a result of difficult experiences they have had in school, during their vocational training, or at work.

In addition to providing young people with improved guidance during key transitions (see below, point 3), a number of factors were named that play a role in **building their self-confidence** and helping them attain **genuine mastery of needed skills**: the teaching skills of teachers; the connection made between theory and practice; the number of years of formal schooling/vocational training, etc. The ONG "Caplab" (Peru), for example, provides guidance for young people from particularly vulnerable groups. This includes helping them to make for-

mulate a life plan, so that they are able to see things from a longer term perspective, the perspective of "life-long learning". **A number of other ways were also suggested for reinforcing the development of life and work skills**:

- Stimulate and open the minds of children from earliest childhood onwards, using appropriate teaching techniques (games, etc.)
- Create training programs suited to the needs and potentials of the immediate context (e.g., training of masons in Haiti after the earthquake).
- Promote learner autonomy, which is closely linked to the ability to transfer skills. Women often suffer most from a lack of self-confidence and a fear of failure, which frequently inhibits their capacity to show initiative. Some discussion participants stressed that entrepreneurial skills are themselves very specific professional skills, which demand their own training methods; these need to be systematically developed in partnership with the private sector.

2) Closely linking basic education and VSD appears to be a highly useful approach in many contexts.

Basic education must be understood as encompassing more than what is normally considered as forming the classic primary school curriculum. It includes the entire range of cultural knowledge that an individual needs in order to be able to live and interact as a full member of a given society. The aim of basic education must thus go beyond simply developing skills in reading, writing, and arithmetic, and extend to such things as inculcating notions of proper hygiene, rules of safety, disease prevention, infant care, etc. Non-formal education programs for youth and for adults often address these various issues best. The acquisition of knowledge, skills, values, and abilities is subject to few – if any – economic constraints.

Many examples can be found to illustrate one simple reality: it is impossible to find work at a decent wage without having first had access to basic education. That alone, however, is not sufficient when entering the job market. Success depends, above all, on having access to training that provides the necessary qualifications.

VSD must enable students to choose the role they wish to play within their social and economic environment. Vocational training is a means for young people to gain the knowledge and know-how that will enable them to develop the specific abilities required in their chosen occupations. For such training to be effective, it must relate to the reality of the labour market.

Despite the fact that basic education and vocational training have different objectives, the roles they play in economic, social, and personal development are complementary. Increasingly, they are seen as points on a continuum, providing the elements of an integrated approach to educational support (e.g., Niger's sectoral education and training programme; the SDC guidelines for basic education and VSD, etc.). Concepts such as the "right to education", or "lifelong learning" share this underpinning of an integrated and holistic vision of learning pathways.

Discussion participants saw education and VSD as having a positive impact in many different ways:

- At the community level: basic education and VSD are essential to economic development and the advancement of equal opportunity, health care, social conflict management, environmental protection, gender equality, conservation, and cultural development.
- At the individual level: quality education and training can foster personal development and an individual sense of belonging as a valued member of society; they encourage self-reflection, self-confidence, creativity, and the ability to adapt and take responsibility in the face of collective challenges such as climate change and environmental protection.

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- Some contributors also stressed the importance of empathy, communication (both interpersonal and via the media), conflict resolution skills and intercultural sensitivity as humanist qualities that can be further developed throughout the entire course of training.

This notwithstanding, and despite their emancipatory potential, education and vocational training systems today, at both the national and the international levels, serve mainly only to perpetuate social inequalities and relationships of dominance. The poor, and certain rural zones, are plagued by chronic funding shortages and lower quality education. Their learning environment (Internet access, schoolrooms, workshops, canteens, and sanitary facilities) all too often reflects these disparities.
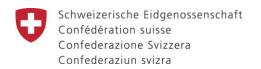
> **SDC Programme: Education for Pastoral and Nomadic Communities**
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> This programme, currently being carried out in the border region between Burkina Faso and Benin, is a good example of how basic education and vocational training can be combined, as a contribution both to sustainable resource management and to the the mitigation of conflicts with sedentary populations.
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> In terms of **form**, the program:
> - combines basic education and VSD;
> - takes into account the lifestyles specific to the target communities (cross-border mobility);
> - includes and coordinates activities between different categories of actors: government ministries, breeder organisations, decentralised communities, technical and financial partners.
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> In terms of **content**, the curriculum includes:
> - reading, writing, arithmetic;
> - technical and vocational training suited to pastoral livelihoods, for instance transformation of milk or animal health (in preparation);
> - civics: comprehension of official written regulations on pastoralism and transhumance; acceptance of intercultural principles.

3) **For young people to successfully make the transition from the classroom to the workplace they must receive proper guidance, underpinned by a thorough knowledge of the labour market.** For this, the input of private sector employers is needed, in order to adapt curricula and make them better suited to the needs of the labour market.

The ability to make choices and find one's place takes self-confidence and a sense of self-esteem. This has been observed by many of the discussion participants in daily practice, who advocate in favour of providing young people with additional support and guidance at the key turning points along their career paths: the transition from primary to secondary school and from secondary school to higher education or vocational training and, finally, the move from the classroom to the workplace.

It is clear that such guidance can be of use only if it is underpinned by a solid understanding of the situation on the labour market. In many countries this means recognising the importance of the informal economic sector and, based on that recognition, approaching the issue of education and training from a perspective that is both realistic and innovative.

Support can take the form of counselling, assistance in formulating a life plan (including personal skills assessment), or different forms of financial assistance. This track will be tested in Haiti, for example, where one idea being considered is to grant young graduates access to microcredits over a sufficient period of time (3 years), accompanied by further assistance in the form of counselling, etc. This would call for the establishment of public-private partnerships (e.g., between SDC and a private financial situation).

In order for guidance of young people entering the labour market to be effective, it must be accompanied by efforts to increase the esteem with which VSD is viewed. The certification of training outcomes can be of use here, but equally important is an increase in both horizontal and vertical mobility within the manual and technical professions. Paradoxically, the low estimation in which VSD is sometimes held has, in a number of countries, created a lack of qualified professionals in certain sectors. In response, employers are often compelled to recruit skilled workers from abroad. This has been the case in West Africa, for example, in the agricultural processing industry.

But education and VSD alone cannot create jobs. The reality, as discussion participants pointed out, is that improvements in education and vocational training are not enough to resolve certain difficulties:

1) It is possible to have received an education or vocational training of entirely satisfactory quality, but which does not correspond to the demand on the labour market. This is the issue referred to as training relevance, which highlights the crucial importance of including employers in the process of curriculum development.

2) It is possible also to have received an education or vocational training of entirely satisfactory quality, but to be entering the job market at a time of economic difficulty (high unemployment, financial crisis), where a lack of available jobs makes it impossible to find work. This is the case in many countries around the world (including the so-called "developed" world), where youth unemployment creates a sense of frustration and hopelessness. In some contexts, this situation leads to a massive brain drain and all of the problems this brings with it (migration, depletion of human capital in the home country, etc.).

Coming to terms with problems of such major dimensions requires a systemic approach, which takes into account the full range of challenges that young people face. With this in mind, the German Agency for International Cooperation (GIZ) applies an innovative solution which it calls the "integrated approach". This calls for the integration into traditional VSD programs of two additional aspects, namely, (1) private sector development for the creation of skilled employment opportunities, and (2) providing market-oriented services such as information systems designed to better coordinate supply with demand on the labour market.

With regard to the question of migration and the specific problem of brain drains, discussion participants were in agreement that it is necessary to squarely face this issue wherever it arises. It must be dealt with proactively, while continuing to give priority to the training of young people for the local market. This can be accomplished, for example, by providing access to skills that are also in demand in other countries, or again, by considering ways of regulating migration (treaties, etc.).

4) Future interventions should give priority to bringing together actors from the domains of basic education, VSD, and the labour market, and to facilitating coordination of their activities.

Coordination/participation/alignment: New education and VSD proposals should place greater stress on involving actors from all domains: national and decentralized ministries, technical and financial partners, the private sector, trade associations, teachers, and not lastly, the students themselves. Coordination frameworks must avoid administrative rigidity and be scaled to the level on which they operate (national, regional, or local). If the need for flexibility is kept in mind, and a participative, practice-oriented approach is maintained, the formulation of national strategies for skills development can be a promising option.

The situation in the occupied Palestinian territories provides a telling illustration of the difficulties faced by a system that is fragmented both geographically and politically. The VSD strategy pursued by SDC, like that of other like-minded donors, seeks to involve all relevant actors, from the young people themselves to ministries and employers from the private sector. Simultaneously, SDC supports the establishment of labour market information systems and career guidance and counselling centres.

> **Setting country-specific priorities: some examples**
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> - Mali: focus on the most vulnerable population groups (pastoral and fishing communities), putting their knowledge and know-how to maximum advantage;
> - Burkina Faso: formulate training strategies tailored to rural communities, combining literacy, practical and technical counselling by local teachers, and family farm support projects;
> - Haiti: develop short-term training courses to meet immediate needs in the current situation (e.g., training of masons in the aftermath of the hurricane).

Continued financing is a vital element in ensuring the sustainability of projects. For this reason it is crucial that education and VSD be kept on the international agenda in the post-2015 era. One interesting proposal con-

tained in the report is that of strengthening the commitment of emerging donors – such as China, India, Russia, Brazil, and South Africa – in the domains of education and vocational training. By sharing from their own experience, these countries can potentially have a great impact. South-South-North triangular cooperation, for example, could provide a viable framework for Switzerland's partners to benefit from that potential.

For its part, SDC must continue its efforts in the domains in which it has become known for its expertise: involvement in fragile contexts where state institutions are weak, counselling on innovative teaching approaches, support for pilot projects that possess a high potential for being scaled-up to the national and regional level.

Discussion participants proposed a three-pronged strategy.

Three-pronged strategy for SDC
Support of national dynamics (ministries) through sectoral financial assistance and contributions to special funds for education and vocational training. It is also at this level that Switzerland can participate in policy dialogue.
Direct support for local partners who develop innovative approaches (nomadic schools, community schools, teaching innovations, etc.).
Assistance to multilateral organisations and regional networks focused on advocacy, sharing good practices and research aimed at raising the quality and relevance of education and VSD.

Acknowledgements

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EFA Global Monitoring Report website

Shareweb e+i VSD

Shareweb Education

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