

# e+i network of the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC)

## E-discussion on youth-specific approaches in the context of Vocational Skills Development (VSD) interventions

### Summary report

#### 1. Introduction and background

From 19<sup>th</sup> till 30<sup>th</sup> June 2017 the employment and income (e+i) network of the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) hosted an e-discussion on youth-specific approaches in the context of Vocational Skills Development (VSD) interventions. Network members were invited to share experiences and good practice examples along seven key questions facilitated by the backstopping team of KEK/INBAS/HELVETAS<sup>1</sup>. Prior to the e-discussion an [introduction paper](#) with some guiding questions provided basic information on background, purpose and organizational issues. Each of the seven days focused on a core topic with guiding questions introduced consecutively day by day<sup>2</sup>.

The background of the e-discussion roots in reflections on the concept of VSD at SDC with regard to the main target group for interventions in VSD, namely young people, and the development of their personal, social and technical competences. This focus on young people is restated in the [SDC's new Education Strategy for Basic Education and VSD](#). Therefore, the application of holistic approaches and instruments towards building social, personal and technical competences of young people gains importance in SDC's work. It was reiterated during the e-discussion that the field of youth work applies relevant approaches, including non-formal or informal learning, which are close to young people's expectations. It equips them with skills, competences and experiences for life, including the labour market, and enhances their personal, social, educational, vocational and occupational development, well-being and social inclusion.

Against this background it was asked in how far VSD interventions and strategies might liaise with the youth work sector, apply youth work and youth-specific approaches and collaborate with youth programmes and projects or youth organisations in order to better reach out to target groups and meet their requirements while adopting a holistic understanding of their situation and needs in the context of VSD interventions.

#### 2. Summary and results of discussion

This (draft) report is based on [seven summaries](#) which had been shared with the e+i network the following day of each discussion round. It **condenses results, clusters good practice examples, elaborates lessons learnt and provides a number of recommendations**. Where possible the report also identifies **suitable approaches** for specific problems young people are facing and how to take advantage of youth work approaches in VSD in general. There is also a [full documentation](#) of the e-discussion with individual contributions.

#### Aims of the e-discussion

- To discuss on how to deal with the main target group of VSD interventions i.e. youth in order to develop (or enhance/strengthen) their personal, social and technical competences and prepare them for life and work
- To exchange experiences and good practice examples related to youth-specific approaches in the context of VSD interventions

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<sup>2</sup> The language of the e-discussion was English, but participants were invited to post their inputs also in French or Spanish; however, no other contribution than in English was provided

## 2.1 Characterizing young people in VSD programmes

**Definition:** There is no coherent definition of 'youth' in terms of age groups: it ranges from 15 (Kosovo), 16 (Bangladesh, Nepal) or 18 (Handicap International) to 35, sometimes even 40 (Morocco) years. Often the official definition of youth (Morocco) is based on the UN system which is between 18-30 years old. The SDC refers to a definition of youth as persons from the age of 15 to an upper age defined by its respective partner countries<sup>3</sup>.

**Target group:** The main target groups for SDC interventions in VSD are **all young people, including from disadvantaged backgrounds, in transition from school to work**. Where possible, the inclusion of disadvantaged groups in existing VET or active labour market policy systems should be aimed for, in order to enhance sustainability.

**Guiding questions:** Who are the groups of young people the SDC programmes are dealing with? What are typical common features of the current generation of young people? What are their main characteristics that have to be considered? What is the difference to the past, if there is any? What did change for young people recently? Are there new target groups and which? What are particular challenges and opportunities?

Many projects specifically target **disadvantaged young people**, school drop-outs and so-called NEETS (Not in Education, Employment, Training) (e.g. in Bulgaria) and **young people with risk of marginalization**<sup>4</sup>. Another relevant group is the unemployed and underemployed **youth**. Projects focusing on **disadvantaged young people** are following an **individual, target group-specific approach** with special support and personalized solutions<sup>5</sup>.

Projects oriented towards inclusive economic development, following a **sector-based VSD approach** aim at providing the skills demanded by the private sector. The latter generally asks for a high level of technical, social and personal competences, including good literacy, numeracy and life skills or certification of completion of basic education. Such training offers tend to **potentially exclude the most disadvantaged**, as they often do not fulfil these criteria.

**Challenges:** Recurrent **challenges of youth encountered in SDC partner countries** (e.g. in Niger and Nepal) are unemployment and underemployment, labour-migration for better opportunities, low job creation, low wages of employed people, scarcity of jobs in agriculture, VET system failing to train according to the needs of the industries or the local economy.

Often **entrance requirements** to formal VET are higher than what most young people possess (e.g. in Bangladesh or Tanzania). Even if the level of basic education competencies of school leavers has improved over time according to international statistics, important variations depending on the region as well as on the wealth-quintile can be observed. Globally primary-school enrolment has improved, but completion and quality is still a concern and completion of lower-secondary education is still low in many regions. Since **low quality basic education** can gradually undermine educational achievements, VSD training courses may **compensate** what had been missed at an earlier stage of a person's educational life. This is especially the case when dealing with young people that missed out on basic education or dropped out of the formal schooling system.

### Lessons learned and recommendations:

- The age range of 'youth' is applied in a flexible manner in VSD projects and is adapted to local context
- The main target group for SDC interventions in VSD is young people in transition from school to work
- Another relevant group is working, but underemployed youth as well as the unemployed

<sup>3</sup> The SDC's Education Strategy, Basic Education and Vocational Skills Development, pp. 19 and 56

<sup>4</sup> Such as young women, teenage mothers, disabled, intellectually and physically challenged persons, internally displaced persons, former child soldiers, youth in refugee camps, LGBT, Indigenous & Tribal People (e.g. in Bangladesh)

<sup>5</sup> Such as coaching and mentoring and other services to lower barriers for access, completion and labor market integration (e.g. child care).

- Many projects target people from disadvantaged backgrounds and often provide individualized special support and personalized solutions
- Depending on the given pre-conditions a local/regional or a sector-based approach are proposed strategies to meet the needs of both, local economy and young people in search of jobs
- VSD training courses can compensate what had been missed at an earlier stage of a person's educational life, e.g. thanks to lower entrance requirements than formal VET.

## 2.2 Learning today

**(Higher) education or VET?** With regard to **education and training systems** we are facing a double **dilemma**: most school leavers with good educational attainments aim at a university education and do not opt for VET (e.g. Moldova). At the same time, VET schools struggle to train low performers up to a level needed by the labour market. An improved image and efficiency of VET would help attracting more young people. To enhance quality and attractiveness, VET systems development projects should focus on of the mass of young people, not only the disadvantaged.

**Guiding questions:** How do these young people learn and what is the role of new technologies (mobile phones, social media) in learning processes? What are chances and risks of new media? Which role does informal and non-formal learning play for these young people besides formal learning?

**Formally structured apprenticeships** and **'dual approaches'** are still the exception in partner countries despite efforts to enhance both (e.g. Bulgaria). In small enterprises and the informal sector **'non-formal apprenticeships'** are common (Tanzania, Niger), but participants can be prone to exploitation by employers. Many young people particularly in rural areas learn through 'on the job training' supported by a mentor or by 'informal' apprenticeship courses which take sometimes up to 10 years (Niger). Mainly for disadvantaged young people, projects propose **short non-formal training courses** (e.g. Competency Based Training in Bangladesh, Cambodia). Skills development here means providing entry level vocational skills to find a job or improve self-employment.

**The role of new Information & Communication Technologies (ICT):** Young people are increasingly technologically well connected, which affects their learning opportunities as well as their attitudes. Mobile devices have a great potential, e.g. in **coaching programmes** and for exchange of ideas; communication with peer learners and tutors can be enriched in many ways<sup>6</sup>. Often **projects** have their own internet pages for providing information and exchanging opinions. Also learning processes are **monitored** online (e.g. through Training Management Systems in Bangladesh<sup>7</sup>) and **job orientation & career guidance** services are offered in a user-friendly manner (e.g. in Mongolia). However, not all young people have **access** to ICT and not all e-learning facilities are accessible for people e.g. with hearing or visual impairment. Many VET schools have restrictive policies for the use of new media and sometimes ICT introduction programmes have a limited impact because of teachers' resistance or overloaded curricula (Morocco). Using ICT entails further the **risk of young people accessing** to destructive content. A **helpful approach** is to jointly reflect on their behaviour, develop guidance how to use ICT and to coach online learning carefully.

### Lessons learned and recommendations:

- To ensure broad access to quality VET, image, reputation, efficiency and attractiveness of VET need to be increased; this, however, demands approaches to strengthen VET systems overall
- Formal apprenticeships and dual system elements can build upon existing structures of informal apprenticeships and on-the-job training practices?

<sup>6</sup> See good practices on facebook [blog post](https://www.facebook.com/sudokkho/) by Christoph Pimmer/Urs Gröbriel (e.g. Zimbabwe) or in [https://www.facebook.com/sudokkho/](https://www.facebook.com/PKSF-SEIP-Skills-for-Employment-Investment-Program-247147825616287/) and <https://www.facebook.com/PKSF-SEIP-Skills-for-Employment-Investment-Program-247147825616287/>

<sup>7</sup> <http://tts.seip-fd.gov.bd/tms/login>

- VSD short courses remain a commonly proposed project solution in particular for disadvantaged young people in view of their rapid labour market insertion. However, sustainability concerns are to be addressed in this type of projects
- New technologies can play an important role in learning strategies of young people as well as in information, guidance and monitoring activities
- Access to new technologies and internet are still a challenge as well as the incentives for the use of ICT by VET schools
- To handle chances and risks of ICT, on- and offline training and coaching is recommended.

## 2.3 Approaches and instruments

**Outreach:** There is **no standard answer** with regard to reaching out to target groups and enabling in particular disadvantaged young people to participate in and successfully complete VSD.

An assessment of target groups is needed including their basic skills and practical experiences as well as individual living conditions. Often young people face various challenges to attend full day and longer-term courses. Consequently, VSD courses should be run close to where young people live, or online, or during evening, weekend and off-season time; for young mothers sometimes childcare services need to be organized (good practice examples from Nepal Skill Franchise, Tanzania / Uganda ULearn project and Kosovo Skills for Rural Employment).

**Guiding questions:** Which approaches and instruments can be used and applied by VSD programmes, including from youth work, to better reach out to their target groups and motivate in particular disadvantaged young people to participate in skills development? How can they be applied in order to increase retention and successful completion of the courses? How can this be done in collaboration with youth work, youth organizations and youth projects?

Some initiatives (e.g. Kosovo) try to apply **new ways of learning**, including non-formal and informal learning with **extracurricular activities** providing valuable inputs for personal and social skills development. For youth in rural areas **direct support and partnerships** with local institutions and youth organizations are organized and training offers are developed in cooperation with the **community and local economy** (e.g. in Niger).

**Life skills education** is about a wide range of skills and attitudes including skills required by employers and the labour market such as team work, responsibility, planning and critical thinking. Life skills can also be acquired outside the formal training system. Some projects combine life skills training with inclusive multi-stakeholder dialogues for youth and adults (e.g. new HELVETAS project in Kyrgyzstan).

### Lessons learned and recommendations:

- It is recommended to first assess basic skills, knowledge and practical experiences of beneficiaries before defining a project intervention strategy
- To increase retention and successful completion it is important to support young people in meeting the challenges they are facing and organize VSD offers accordingly<sup>8</sup>
- New ways of learning, including non-formal and informal learning and extracurricular activities can provide valuable inputs for personal and social skills
- Education and training offers should be developed with the community and the local economy in which they take place in order to enhance relevance and to meet local needs
- It has to be analysed case by case how appropriate life skills can be integrated in curricula of training courses without overloading them.

<sup>8</sup> The SDC document [Understanding and analysing vocational education and training systems – An introduction](#) provides an overview on the different access barriers to VET.

## 2.4 Participation, democracy and human rights education

**Participatory principles:** The quality of VSD projects can be enhanced by considering **participation** of young people in the design and implementation as well as in monitoring & evaluation of VSD interventions. Different means are applied, e.g. consultations, surveys, focus groups or young team members, up to co-management strategies.

There are encouraging **examples of good practice**, such as the 'opportunity group methodology'<sup>9</sup> (Kosovo) which invites peer groups to apply newly acquired skills, councils of VET-students at national and school level (Moldova), projects involving youth organizations, local authorities and community representatives (Mali), the "Making it Work" methodology<sup>10</sup> (also Mali) and projects of Handicap International to identify good practices for ensuring inclusion of disabled youth in VSD.

**Guiding questions:** How can young people better participate in the design, implementation and evaluation of these strategies? How can this be done in collaboration with youth work, youth organizations and youth projects? How can relevant themes such as intercultural dialogue, democracy, citizenship- and human rights be included in VSD strategies? What are the experiences so far?

**Human Rights and democracy:** Some contributors support the concepts of human rights and citizenship education as cross-cutting themes throughout curricula at different levels of the education system, including VSD. The high value of **life-skills education** based on a 'human rights based approach'<sup>11</sup> (e.g. in Mongolia) also in VSD was stressed since the more engaged youth are the more effective and sustainable is their learning.

However, it was questioned **how** issues like **democracy and human rights** can be addressed in VSD in order to make a real change. Some contributions also doubted if VSD is the **right sector or means** to tackle these complex issues. When promoting **labour market insertion** via short course training, time is already limited and the major strategy of VSD is to insert young people into the labour market or drop-outs back into the education system, not to compensate and substitute for general education.

### Lessons learned and recommendations:

- Participation of young people can enhance the quality of VSD projects and participatory principles may be considered at all stages of VSD interventions
- Education and training based on a human rights-based approach allows young people to express themselves, to participate and to co-determine education and its delivery. However, it was questioned if VSD is the right means to tackle such complex issues. The SDC education strategy puts focus therein on basic education.

<sup>9</sup> <http://blog.helvetas.org/from-providing-direct-solutions-to-taking-up-a-facilitative-role-the-case-of-opportunity-group-methodology-in-kosovo/>

<sup>10</sup> Methodology for documenting and promoting good practices in line with the principles of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. [http://www.handicap-international.us/making\\_it\\_work](http://www.handicap-international.us/making_it_work)

<sup>11</sup> A human rights-based approach as developed by United Nations agencies is a conceptual framework for the process of human development that is normatively based on international human rights standards and operationally directed to promoting and protecting human rights. It seeks to analyse inequalities which lie at the heart of development problems and redress discriminatory practices and unjust distributions of power that impede development progress. For more information, see <http://hrbaportal.org/faq/what-is-a-human-rights-based-approach>



## 2.5 The relevance of non-formal and informal learning

**Mix of competences and skills:** With regard to VSD the skills learned have to be relevant for the **labour market** since the main objective is to bring participants in a job. Diverse inputs underline the need to start thinking from the employment side.

But, no clear line can be drawn between **hard and soft skills** and their relevance for the diverse labour markets. Whether or not VSD should provide **soft skills** with only little relevance for the labour market depends on many **factors**, including the length of training programmes, participation of private sector in training or learning trajectories of students.

The **six strategic orientations** of the [SDC Education Strategy](#) can be used as building blocks and with regard to context and specific training formats, prioritizations will have to be made since not all strategic orientations can be integrated to the same extent. The weight given to one or the other objective may differ from context to context, depending on specific project or programmatic goals. The newly developed SDC [project typology tool](#) facilitates this prioritization.

SDC's definition confirms that the main aim of VSD is to ensure integration of graduates in the world of work, while the importance of technical, social and personal competences is highlighted. In trainings of longer duration or in case of a special project focus, there might be more room for building **life skills**, whereas in shorter trainings greater emphasis will have to be put on developing technical and soft skills with focus on direct **employability**.

Approaches from **youth work** and similar fields can contribute to labour market integration. To improve employability, projects e.g. in Mongolia, include classical VET approaches, human rights-based approach, life skills education and support to youth start-ups. (Soft) **skills and competences** acquired in **non-formal and informal settings** are **complementary** to a learning process in the formal VET system and need a better visibility, recognition and validation, e.g. through accreditation systems of prior learning (e.g. in Bangladesh).

**Guiding questions:** Which skills achieved through non-formal and informal learning including in youth work projects can be relevant to support the transition school / training - employment? How can personal and social competences be built? How can skills and competences acquired in non-formal and informal settings be validated and recognised and which support measures are needed? How can the impact of non-formal and informal learning be made more visible?

### Lessons learned and recommendations:

- The skills learned in VSD have first of all to be relevant for the requirements of the labour market; but, no clear line can be drawn between 'hard' und 'soft' skills
- How relevant soft skills are for the labour market depends on the needs of a sector with regard to competences and skills and the demands of potential employers
- Approaches from youth work can be valuable means for labour market integration, if recognized by the employer
- Skills acquired in non-formal and informal settings are complementary to learning in formal VET systems and need a better visibility, recognition and validation.

## 2.6 Cooperation, networking and partnerships

**Cooperation structures:** Most VSD projects mentioned in the discussion are focusing on **partnerships** with the **public and private (business)**, less the **civil society sector**. **Cooperation with the private sector** in skills development means to accept the business interest of employers in training. Some **positive good practices** show how cooperation structures function. The PROMOST project in Rwanda uses an existing public system of **business advisors** to support VSD graduates with business ideas while adding incentives and additional training. The 'Coaching for Employment and Entrepreneurship' project for disadvantaged groups in Albania focuses on relationships between schools and employers. Cooperation of VSD projects with **government and non-government actors** in Bangladesh ensure coordination and ease **private public partnerships**. To facilitate inclusion a **development fund for human resources** (also in Bangladesh) provides special support for disadvantaged young people and women. In order to improve coordination, SDC **domain meetings** in Mongolia are regularly organized to monitor a domain synergy plan. In Morocco, the AJI project (UNICEF / DELL company / Ministry of youth) targeted 15-24 years old through a **Youth to Youth model**; 41 youth trainers trained in 40 youth centres 13,000 young people in ICT were trained; a ICT caravan reached marginalized youth in rural areas and is still running through youth association held by the AJI trainers<sup>12</sup>.

**Guiding questions:** How can VSD projects cooperate with other structures? Which concepts and practices exist in terms of networking, partnerships, cooperation ties, between public and private actors, civil society, youth work providers, young people and others in order to implement holistic inclusion strategies for young people in vulnerable situations?

### Lessons learned and recommendations:

- Cooperation structures in most VSD projects are focusing on partnerships with the public and private sectors, less the civil society sector
- It depends to a large extent on local and individual conditions how cooperation is structured, be it rather informally or in formal terms and how synergies can be achieved.

## 2.7 Programmes and strategies

**Complex programmes and strategies:** To combine skills development with other objectives, such as **community or business development**, projects (e.g. in Mali and Niger) use a variety of approaches and follow a double strategy: enhancing employability and strengthening local communities resp. civil society while applying participatory principles. **Urban development programmes** (e.g. Convivir in Honduras) generate positive results addressing young people in deprived areas with the objective to prevent violence and crime by improving the physical infrastructure of neighbourhoods and fostering skills development. The premises established in the framework of the programme provide numerous services to local youth. A newly planned project (in Kyrgyzstan by HELVETAS) aims at **empowering youth** while combining **life skills training** (based on intercultural education) for youth with **inclusive multi-stakeholder dialogues** for youth and adults.

**Guiding questions:** What experiences are available of VSD interventions in the context of broader programmes and strategies that combine skills development with other objectives, such as local (community) and/or business development, health promotion or violence prevention, housing or others? Which examples for integrated joint projects do exist?

### Lessons learned and recommendations:

- Some VSD projects follow a kind of double strategy when combining skills development with other objectives, such as community and/or business development
- These projects enhance employability *and* strengthen local communities / civil society while applying democratic and participatory principles.

<sup>12</sup> [http://www.huffpostmaghreb.com/2017/03/16/dell-maroc-caravane-aji\\_n\\_15403348.html](http://www.huffpostmaghreb.com/2017/03/16/dell-maroc-caravane-aji_n_15403348.html)

### 3. Conclusions

The daily business of most VSD projects is to reach out to young people, to motivate them, to build their social, personal and technical competences, to assure their retention and successful completion of programmes and to support them in the transition to the world of work. In view of these complex aims and objectives the application of more holistic approaches and instruments and a closer cooperation with various structures gains importance in SDC's work. In this regard VSD interventions can profit from experiences and approaches in other related areas by looking beyond the closer education and training sector as well as the world of work, even if these domains remain core. Nevertheless, it is of crucial importance that VSD interventions from the beginning set clear priorities, considering the country and the project contexts. VSD is no magic wand that allows you to solve a multitude of problems at once – but a powerful tool to tackle very specific challenges.

Project examples and statements have shown that liaising with civil society structures and communities in which projects are implemented and in which young people live can make a difference in terms of quality and attainments. Cooperation with the youth work sector, applying youth (work)-specific approaches and collaborating with youth programmes can help meeting the often complex challenges that VSD projects are facing with regard to working with young people with low educational attainments and in deprived areas, which are characterized by violence, crime, poor social services and physical infrastructure. Also participatory principles and 'human rights based approaches' can contribute to achieving projects' objectives even if the discussion has shown some limitations in terms of a potential overloading of a programme with too many objectives.

The lively and engaged e-discussion and feedbacks<sup>13</sup> received show that the theme "youth-specific approaches in the context of VSD interventions" is topical. Many good practice examples and approaches were collected through the e-discussion which might inspire new initiatives in the VSD-field.

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<sup>13</sup> 24 contributions made to the raised discussion questions and 4 general contributions



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