Interview with Renaud Vuignier, Head ad interim of the Office of the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) in Beijing, at the Swiss Embassy in China, for the Global Programme on Climate Change & Environment

Climate change is a priority theme in Switzerland’s international cooperation strategy 21-24: what role do you see for education in achieving this objective of the strategy? Do you have any examples or do you work with or through the education sector?

Climate change is a thematic priority of the Swiss Embassy in Beijing and education plays a key role. Collaboration with China is crucial because of the country’s size, which has a direct effect on the global public goods affected by climate change, and because of the country’s growing importance on these issues.

To solve the big problems, we need all kinds of skills. The solution is to acquire good knowledge and skills on climate change. Education is therefore a key lever. Also, let’s not forget that as we get older, our ability to adapt decreases and we become less of a change agent.

In China, there are two elements that I would like to highlight. Firstly, education is very important because it is seen as a vehicle for development. Historically, science and education have always had a valued place in society. Secondly, China has experienced impressive economic growth and the government now wants to move towards greener growth. Education has great potential to support this goal. The SDC in Beijing is not involved in primary and secondary education, but it is active in higher education. Several universities and research institutes are important partners of the SDC such as Tsinghua University which is interested in developing programmes oriented towards the Sustainable Development Goals.

Strengthening climate change adaptation and mitigation requires cross-sectoral approaches. How can SDC colleagues and partners working in the field of education contribute to this?

The aim is to adopt a cross-sectoral approach to overcome silo logic. Education itself is cross-cutting and crosses several issues and fields in an interdisciplinary way. I think my colleagues are well suited to this kind of approach and to the multicultural environment in which we work. The issue of climate change should also be dealt with in this cross-sectoral way.

The “Innovation Meets Education” Fund has allocated funds to an impact hackathons project for the Asia-Pacific region. Can you tell us a bit about this project and how it contributes to the goal of climate change mitigation through education? What is innovative about this project?
The "Impact Hackathons Asia-Pacific" project was developed on the basis of a partnership between the University of Geneva and Tsinghua University, in collaboration with the UN agency UNITAR. The first SDC-supported hackathons of Geneva and Tsinghua Universities focus on ageing, health and disability but there are also plans to tackle gender and climate change issues.

The hackathon itself is much more than an event because it is also a compelling educational concept as it stimulates innovation and skills are passed on. Hackathons are inclusive and allow all students or young entrepreneurs, regardless of their background or the size of their university, to participate.

It is a specific team challenge to solve big questions. The variety of multicultural and interdisciplinary backgrounds of the students is an asset for the final result. Engineers work with people from social sciences on concrete solutions to global problems. This open innovation model is the future for aggregating skills and pushing for solutions to complex problems. Traditionally, education focuses on imparting knowledge, but the hackathon primarily imparts skills and stimulates entrepreneurial spirit. A hackathon gives students the tools to find solutions, their own solutions, complementing a more traditional approach.

This newsletter is a collaboration of the CC&E - DRR - Education networks: what message would you like to pass on to network members, colleagues and SDC partners?

The SDC has a wealth of knowledge and expertise. The potential is enormous. To make the most of it, I think we should all adopt a more entrepreneurial attitude to make our agency more effective and innovative - our projects could benefit if we dare to move away from the sometimes too procedural and top-down logic. So we need the support of the hierarchy to move in this direction. We should focus more on the opportunities around us rather than on the risks. For example, we often have long internal discussions about how to find a good project. I would be in favour of a more experimental approach, in which we confront external partners and the field more quickly. For example, the model of the “Innovation Meets Education” fund was a great way to encourage innovative ideas, as the process was flexible and allowed us to test different things and develop the project with some agility.

Biography

Public entrepreneur driven by a passion for innovation and impact, Renaud Vuignier is currently Acting Head of International Cooperation at the Embassy of Switzerland in China for the Swiss agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC). He holds a PhD in public administration focusing on economic development. His previous experiences include working for UNDP, the Swiss innovation studio Conexkt, as well as the Swiss State Secretariat for Economic Affairs SECO.