



Putting SDG4 into practice

# *School leadership*

**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 describes why school leadership matters for quality education and the evidence-based approach VVOB takes to introducing and embedding school leadership in developing countries. The experiences of VVOB show the value of identifying an appropriate entry point, working with governmental agencies responsible for training educators, demonstrating the ‘what, who and how’ of school leadership through pilot programmes, and institutionalising school leadership in the education system. As described in the case study of VVOB work in Rwanda, developing and embedding school leadership requires long-term commitment and solid partnerships.**

### Why school leadership matters

School leaders have a vital role in creating the conditions for effective teaching and learning. No school sustainably improves the quality of education in the absence of effective school leadership. Good leaders identify the aspects of their schools on which to focus in order to help students learn. They do this through a set of leadership behaviours that affect student learning.

#### **Successful school leaders**

##### **School leaders who are successful:**

- **define their values and vision to raise expectations, set direction and build trust**
- **structure the organisation and assign roles and responsibilities**
- **shape conditions to enhance the quality of teaching and learning**
- **enhance teacher quality**
- **enrich the curriculum**
- **build strong relationships inside the school community**
- **build relationships outside the school community.**

Source: *10 strong claims about school leadership*. National College for Leadership of Schools and Children's Services. 2010.

#### **The evidence**

International literature identifies effective leadership as a critical factor in raising the achievement of learners. Research has shown that school leadership matters for quality education because:

- school leaders who develop, support and evaluate the quality of teaching have a big influence on learning outcomes
- the impact of school leadership on learning outcomes is second only to the quality of teaching and learning
- effective school leadership is critical for raising learners' achievement
- effective school leadership is particularly important in improving poorly performing and disadvantaged schools
- successful school leadership has a positive impact on the entire school.

*“School leadership has become a priority in education policy agendas internationally. It plays a key role in improving school outcomes by influencing the motivations and capacities of teachers, as well as the school climate and environment. Effective school leadership is essential to improve the efficiency and equity of schooling.”*

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

## School leadership and Sustainable Development Goal 4

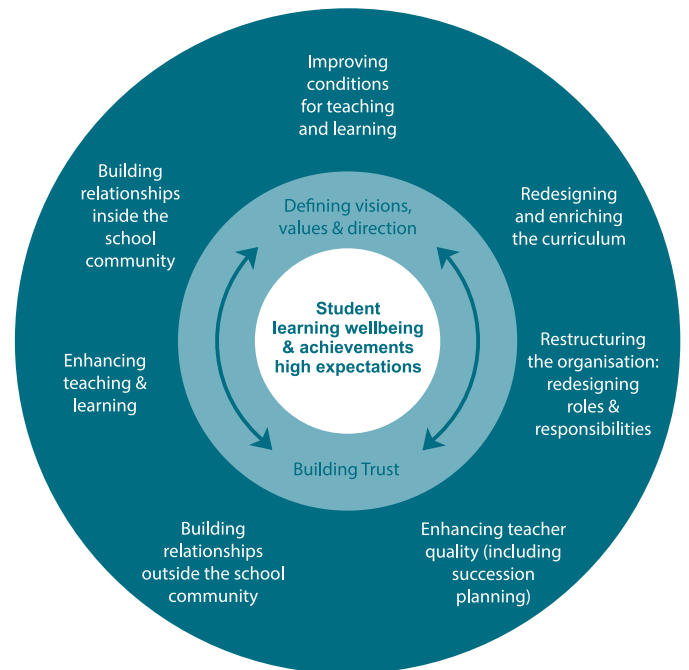
School leadership plays an important part in realising Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4): ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all. A key strategy in the vision for education to achieve SDG4, the *Education 2030 Incheon Declaration and Framework for Action* adopted by the World Education Forum 2015, is to “Strengthen school leadership to improve teaching and learning”.

## VVOB approach to strengthening school leadership

VVOB programmes use a model of the dimensions of leadership affecting student outcomes developed from research as a starting point.

The approach VVOB takes in a country adjusts this model according to the country’s experience, challenges and needs. This means assessing the context and identifying who exactly needs support to improve school leadership. Local education partners – ministries of education and institutions that are responsible for the professional development of school leaders – may need support to empower school leaders to improve the quality of education. Professional development providers may need assistance from experts. VVOB deploys a wide range of methodologies, from classical training and workshops to mentoring, coaching and peer learning, as appropriate to particular circumstances.

## Dimensions of successful school leadership



Source: *10 strong claims about successful school leadership*. National College for Leadership of Schools and Children's Services. 2010.





### **Building capacity in school leadership**

In practice, building capacity in school leadership starts with building the capacity of those who provide professional development for school leaders. Initially, this means working to introduce the concept of school leadership in ministries and other institutions. Once the concept has been accepted, understood and tested by these partners, VVOB endeavours to institutionalise school leadership practices in a country's education system.

The professional development of school leaders throughout their careers is one of the linchpins of the VVOB approach to school leadership. Experience has shown that top-down strategies alone, such as building the capacity of those who provide professional development for head teachers, are ineffective and need to be complemented by strategies that involve school leaders themselves. Programmes follow six principles in developing leadership practices associated with improved learning.

### ***Building capacity in school leadership***

#### **Programmes to build capacity in school leadership:**

- are embedded in the overall school leadership support system
- are stimulated by education leadership at higher levels
- are tailored to school leaders' existing knowledge, practices and context
- are sustained, ongoing and intensive, with regular follow-up support in schools
- emphasise learning-by-doing and reflective practice, and are oriented to implementation in schools
- focus on student wellbeing and learning outcomes.

### ***Leadership practices associated with improved learning***

#### **Leaders who improve learning:**

- build a vision
- get the basics right
- share leadership
- lead for learning
- improve teaching
- enrich the curriculum
- engage the community.

Source: *Learning achievement: engaging with evidence. A working evidence paper – version 1.* UK Department for International Development. 2014.

## Case study: building school leadership in Rwanda

In 2017, net enrolment in primary education in Rwanda was 98%; enrolment in secondary schools continues to rise rapidly. Yet, learning outcomes remain low. As a result, the emphasis has shifted from enabling access to education towards improving the quality of education. Since 2003, VVOB has been supporting the push for quality education in Rwanda, initially focusing on school management and more recently concentrating on school leadership.

### Aligning with transition

When VVOB began working in Rwanda, the Ministry of Education (MINEDUC) was already moving towards a demand-driven, competency-based schooling. The ministry and VVOB funded a three-year pilot project to enhance the managerial competencies of school leaders and school administration support staff in 30 pilot schools. The aim was to strengthen the pilot schools to serve as resource centres for neighbouring schools. The pilot project proved successful. VVOB and the ministry jointly organised trainings in school management nationally, and developed and disseminated training manuals for school leaders and school administrative support staff in all primary schools.

In 2007, this initial phase culminated in the ministry's distribution of a handbook that explains who does what in school management to guide school managers across the country.

### Institutionalising change

To consolidate and sustain progress, the strategy then became to institutionalise school management in the education system. In 2008, the ministry and VVOB began looking at how and where to set up a department responsible not only for school management but also for school leadership. In 2011, this collaboration led to the formal establishment of the School Management and Leadership Unit within the ministry. The unit is mainly responsible for the quality of school leadership and management in basic education and, more specifically, for pre- and in-service training, peer learning, and monitoring and evaluation of school leaders. To establish an in-depth understanding of the principles and practice of school leadership in the new unit, VVOB drew on its extensive network to train the staff.

The establishment of the School Management and Leadership Unit shows the extent to which partners took school leadership on board and are willing to continue to develop school leaders in Rwanda. Testifying to this, school leaders who have passed through the training now hold senior leadership positions in the ministry, districts and sectors and are helping spearhead school leadership across the country.

### Building capacity to sustain momentum

By 2013, the School Management and Leadership Unit was well established and tasked with providing effective, gender-sensitive, professional development for school leaders. Work began on developing a system to extend such professional development to school leaders across the country. VVOB and the College of Education, a research and training institution under the University of Rwanda and the ministry, joined forces to design courses in school management and leadership. This collaboration led to the introduction of a post-graduate diploma in Effective School Leadership recognised by the Rwanda Education Board, the institution in charge of policy implementation within the ministry. In 2016, a first cohort of 397 school leaders, one from each sector, was awarded the diploma in effective school leadership.

### Creating an enabling policy

To firmly embed school management and leadership in the education system, the ministry and VVOB continued to work together. The next step was the integration of school leadership into the Teacher Development and Management policy, with the aim of making the diploma in school management and leadership compulsory for all school leaders and new appointees. Together, they also identified five professional standards for effective school leadership. These standards cover in-service assessments, professional development, certification and recruitment, and provide a framework for monitoring and evaluating school leader performance, school leader reflection and self-evaluation, and promotion.

### Continuing professional development

The Teacher Development and Management policy requires school leaders to maintain and advance their knowledge and skills through continuing professional development (CPD). Together with the School Leadership and Management Unit and funded by the UK Department for International Development, VVOB has developed, piloted and researched professional learning communities (PLCs) for school leaders as a cost-effective complement to pre-service and in-service training courses provided by experts. Prior experience shows that a strict focus on individual learning needs to be accompanied by group learning: Sharing professional problems helps school leaders to learn from each other's experiences and to become more competent leaders.

### Professional learning communities and coaching

To pilot PLCs, VVOB trained 116 sector education officers on how to lead PLCs and provide ongoing coaching for school leaders. These sector education officers now organise bimonthly PLCs that reach 962 school leaders. Within each PLC, at least one school leader is enrolled in the post-graduate diploma. The Rwanda Education Board and sector education officers use the standards and norms for school management and school leadership developed by the School Leadership and Management Unit to monitor performance. VVOB regularly visits the PLCs to assess learning and evaluate behavioural changes among school leaders.

*“... but when we are there we compare the theory and the practices, so we gain more knowledge and experience from other schools ...”*

School leader



### **Linking school leaders**

Linking the PLCs and PLC members, Rwanda Education Board publishes a biannual magazine (*Urunana rw'Abarezi*) for school leaders and teachers that features articles and testimonies by their colleagues on key issues, such as school drop-outs, equity at school, and advancing the competence-based curriculum, and provides a space for sharing experiences and perspectives.

While the diploma programme is currently being expanded to reach school leaders in Rwanda's Eastern and Western province, the challenge is to enroll many more in-service as well as all newly appointed school leaders in the diploma programme. Having this in mind, VVOB is working together with the ministry to explore ways to deliver the diploma course efficiently through, for example, online modules.

### **Committing to long-term partnerships**

VVOB's experience in strengthening school management and leadership in Rwanda demonstrates the value of a long-term commitment to stable partnerships, understanding and aligning with government strategies, and providing technical and financial support. VVOB partnerships actively engage government, non-governmental and development agencies involved in the education sector. VVOB also has experience in coordinating two task forces, one of which was on school leadership. Cooperation helps VVOB to ensure that programmes align with Rwanda's standards and policies, and that the use of resources is optimised.

### **VVOB programmes supporting school management and school leadership in Rwanda**

#### **School Management and School Leadership for Secondary Education 2008–2013**

School Leadership and Management Unit formally institutionalised in the Ministry of Education and 30 resource centres established. 2,500 school leaders trained in school management. Standards for school leadership developed.

#### **Common Belgian Technical and Vocational Education and Training Support 2010–2015**

Focus on school leadership to lead and support a reform of the education sector towards practice-based, demand-driven, competency-based pedagogy.

#### **Coaching School Leadership to Achieve High-level Learning Outcomes 2013–2015**

116 sector education officers trained to lead and PLCs for school leaders. School leaders brought together to meet, interact and discuss specific school issues and best practices to address them.

#### **Learning Outcomes in Primary Education Programme 2014–2016**

Post-graduate diploma in Effective School Leadership developed and recognised by the Rwanda Education Board. A first cohort of 397 school leaders graduated in 2016.

#### **Girls on MARS (Mathematics Achievements in Rwandan Schools) 2017-2021**

533 primary school leaders in Rwanda's Eastern and Western province are trained to effectively implement the competence-based curriculum within a gender-responsive environment to improve pupils' learning outcomes, especially those of girls, in mathematics via participation in PLCs and enrolment in the post-graduate course in Effective School Leadership.

#### **Leaders in Teaching 2018-2021**

1600 secondary school leaders from 14 districts benefit from improved delivery, sustainability and institutionalisation of CPD services through a post-graduate course in Effective School Leadership and participation in PLCs.

### **Tools and processes for strengthening school leaders**

*VVOB has developed products that help Rwandan partners understand, internalise and put learning into practice:*

#### **Professional standards on effective school leadership**

Standards define benchmark practices for assessing school leaders' performance. The standards are now incorporated in the Rwandan Teacher Statute.

#### **Training needs assessment**

Training needs assessments ensure that programmes start by considering the needs of schools and school leaders when developing approaches to building capacity.

#### **School leader performance assessment tool**

Assessment tools include performance assessment criteria and a description of the types of evidence that school leaders can collect to demonstrate that they can perform or behave according to the professional standards for effective school leadership.

#### **School leader self-assessment tools**

Self-appraisals and portfolios of evidence demonstrate school leaders' competence. Self-assessments allow them to reflect on practice, how to use what they have learned, and what works best in their schools.

#### **Quality audits**

Continuous mentoring and coaching in schools follows up on capacity development, helping school leaders address challenges.

#### **Professional learning communities**

PLCs provide a structure for CPD for school leaders, recognising that learning stems from learners collaborating rather than from an expert imparting knowledge.

### **Going forward**

Entrenching school leadership and school management in the Rwandan education reform agenda has led to a shift in attitudes. Providers and recipients of capacity building in school leadership have come to perceive themselves as agents of change.

Currently, VVOB is cooperating with the Rwanda Education Board and the College of Education of the University of Rwanda to enhance school leaders' leadership in two critical areas: learning outcomes in mathematics and girls' learning outcomes. This involves introducing and building capacity in gender-responsive and student-centred pedagogies for mathematics among school leaders of two provinces in Rwanda.

Going forward, VVOB has started to cooperate with the Mastercard Foundation to expand the reach of its programme from school leaders in Eastern and Western province to school leaders all over Rwanda. What is more, the programme no longer targets primary school leaders alone, but secondary school leaders as well. In total, school leaders from 800 secondary schools will participate.



### School leadership for improving learning 2017–2021

Programmes for 2017–2021 adapt approaches to school leadership that have worked well in Rwanda to other countries. Work in Rwanda has showed that school leaders need to steer their own learning with respect to teaching teachers to improve learning outcomes. VVOB programmes thus increasingly involve school

leaders themselves to complement the top-down tactics of developing the capacity of providers of professional development for school leaders. Programmes for 2017–2021 work with school leaders to improve learning and close achievement and gender gaps in literacy, mathematics and science.



#### Rwanda

In Rwanda, 46% of primary school learners in fourth grade do not achieve the objectives for numeracy. To improve pupils' learning outcomes in mathematics, VVOB is cooperating with the Ministry of Education, the Rwanda Education Board and the University of Rwanda – College of Education to enhance school leadership. Effective school leadership is only second to teacher quality in terms of impact on learning outcomes. By the end of 2021, 533 primary school leaders and 800 secondary school leaders throughout 14 districts in Rwanda will have graduated in the diploma course in Effective School Leadership and Management, and will further their professional development through participation in professional learning communities (PLCs). The diploma course is revised to include a special focus on student-centred pedagogies for mathematics. Best practices to enhance learning outcomes in mathematics are also shared during PLC sessions.

Whereas diverse learning barriers are at play, gender barriers in particular need to be tackled to improve pupils' learning outcomes in mathematics, and particularly those of girls. To promote gender equity, VVOB and its partners are working together to mainstream gender in the diploma course curriculum and to include gender-responsiveness training, all the while seeking to achieve a correct representation of male and female trainers and trainees. Similarly, PLC sessions are geared towards discussing and sharing best practices with respect to gender equity.



## Vietnam

In Vietnam, 3-to-5-year-old children from ethnic minorities are struggling to learn. VVOB concentrates its activities on districts with vulnerable ethnic minority populations in three provinces in Central Vietnam to improve the quality of learning in early childhood education. Together with our partners, VVOB builds the capacity of national, provincial and district education ministries to set up professional development trajectories for preschool leaders and teachers. In turn, school leaders are then strengthened to support teachers in applying process-oriented child monitoring. This approach allows preschool teachers to closely follow-up on how their learners are developing. Based on the child-monitoring data, school leaders and teachers address specific barriers to children's learning, such as barriers related to gender, the environment and ethnicity.



## Ecuador

In Ecuador, VVOB contributes to the quality and relevance of secondary technical education, making sure that graduates are equipped with skills for work and life. We operate in three provinces struck by the 2016 earthquake and focus on trades that hold the promise of decent entry level employment for Ecuador's youth, such as construction, auto mechanics, agriculture and tourism. VVOB strengthens the capacity of the government services responsible for the continuous professional development of school leaders and teachers.

Through professional learning communities (PLCs), school leaders inspire each other to create a safe and supportive learning environment, engage in partnerships with the private sector, create professional development opportunities for teachers and use evidence from tracer studies to improve the quality and relevance of the technical education their schools supply. VVOB also trains and coaches district-level staff from the Ministry of Education so that they, in turn, can support and motivate school leaders that embark on these innovations.



### South Africa

Primary school learning outcomes in South Africa are among the lowest in the region and dropout rates among the highest, affecting in particular the most vulnerable learners. Fostering a culture and pedagogy of inclusivity can help to facilitate the inclusion of vulnerable learners and to break down existing barriers to learning, including gender barriers. By working at national, provincial, district and school level, VVOB aims to support the implementation of an inclusive education system in South Africa through continuous professional development (CPD) of school leaders and teachers.

In cooperation with education district officials of the provinces of Free State and KwaZulu Natal, VVOB is setting up professional learning communities (PLCs) among school leaders and teachers from ordinary, full-service and special schools to exchange best practices on inclusive policies and practices, and to strengthen cooperation between and within schools. At the same time, VVOB is focusing on strengthening the capacity of relevant partners to organise, monitor and report on a wide spectrum of CPD activities that support inclusion.



### Democratic Republic of the Congo

In the DRC, technical agricultural education could make a much greater contribution to local economic development and youth employment by equipping students with an entrepreneurial mindset and entrepreneurship skills. In three provinces (Bas Fleuve, Cataractes and Lukuya) VVOB partners with the Ministry of Primary, Secondary and Professional Education in supporting school leaders to introduce entrepreneurship education. Together with the provincial inspection services we offer quality professional development to school leaders, focusing on the effective management and pedagogical usage of schools' production units and cross-curricular collaboration of teachers around competency-based entrepreneurship education.

### Suriname

In Suriname, students in lower secondary vocational education are a very vulnerable group, often coming from broken homes or families with a low socio-economic status. They have an urgent need for a nurturing school environment and for a pedagogy that is more active, competency-based and learner-centred. School leaders are often at a loss for effective strategies to address their students' needs.

VVOB supports school leaders by grouping them into professional learning communities (PLCs), where a case-based approach is used to stimulate self-reflection and meaningful exchange. At the same time, we strengthen the capacity of the Department of Vocational Education of the Ministry of Education, which is responsible for the organisation of the PLCs.



## About VVOB

VVOB is a Belgian non-profit organisation with more than 30 years' experience in sustainably improving the quality, efficiency and effectiveness of education. VVOB's annual budget is approximately €11 million.

### VVOB focus

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

- 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 aligns its work with national education strategies to inspire policies adapted to local needs and contexts.

### Collaborates with a network of educational partners

VVOB develops educational expertise based on its know-how and exchanges within its worldwide and Flemish 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, Mastercard Foundation, other foundations and international non-governmental organisations.

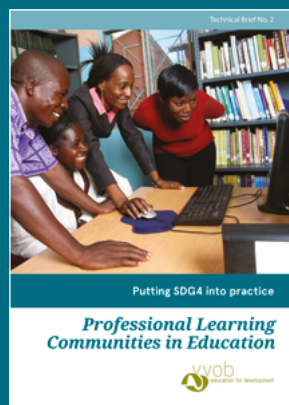
### Stimulates cooperation

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 and Zambia – and on assignments in other countries.

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