



Putting SDG4 into practice

# *Gender-responsive pedagogy for early childhood education*

**Inclusive and equitable education provides all learners with the capabilities to become economically productive, develop sustainable livelihoods, contribute to peaceful societies and enhance their individual wellbeing. This technical brief describes how Gender-Responsive Pedagogy for Early Childhood Education (GRP4ECE) contributes to achieving this fourth Sustainable Development Goal. GRP4ECE empowers preschool teachers and school leaders to create learning environments where harmful gender stereotypes are challenged and addressed. This lays the foundations for young children to grow up freely and to explore and develop their unique interests, talents and capabilities.**

### 1. Why gender-responsive early childhood education matters

Evidence shows that the concept of gender takes root in children between the age of three and seven. From about the age of two, children begin to develop the ability to recognise and label gendered concepts like ‘man’, ‘woman’, ‘girl’ and ‘boy’. By the age of three, children start to understand gender as a stable trait and are able to identify their own gender. By the age of six, gender stereotypes in children have often already been firmly set.

These stereotypes seriously limit children’s freedom to develop their unique and full potential, as they shape and steer children’s expectations from an early age. They have an impact on the choices children make in their lives, in terms of relationships, hobbies, education, profession... etc. Tackling gender bias and stereotypes early on is fundamental to address gender inequalities that manifest later in life.

Early childhood education (ECE) teachers are in a unique position to challenge and limit the maturation of these gender stereotypes before they have a lasting harmful impact. However, teachers are

often unaware of their own stereotypical gender beliefs and gender bias, which manifest in their teaching practice. Research across the globe shows that girls, for example, are more often praised by teachers for their clothing, appearance, and caring behaviours. Boys, on the contrary, are complimented for their physical strength and are given more complex tasks in class.

Similarly, many teaching and learning materials also contain stereotypical representations of girls and boys, women and men. Most teachers have difficulties to identify and challenge these biased depictions, nor are they able to address gender stereotypes that pervade children’s lives in environments other than the classroom, e.g. at home and in their communities.

If we want to harness the liberating power of ECE, teachers need to be supported to challenge gender stereotypes and to transform their classrooms into gender-sensitive learning environments. This is what we call Gender-Responsive Pedagogy for Early Childhood Education (GRP4ECE).

*“We must raise boys and girls with the knowledge and understanding that no person has the right to treat them inferior or to harm them in any way and that boys and girls are equal in all respects.*

*This points to the need to target our education programmes at young children in order to make a difference in attitudes from the start”*

Excerpts from the keynote address by the President of the Republic of South Africa Cyril Ramaphosa, Presidential Summit Against Gender-Based Violence & Femicide, South Africa (November 2018)





## 2. GRP4ECE and SDG4

Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) aims to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promotes lifelong learning opportunities for all. GRP4ECE is an essential building block for reaching this goal, as it provides all children with the opportunity to develop their unique and full potential irrespective of their sex.

**SDG 4 has ten targets. GRP4ECE particularly contributes to the achievement of the following four:**



**SDG 4.5** refers directly to the elimination of all gender disparities in education.

**SDG 4.7** refers to the role of education to provide all learners with knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, human rights and gender equality.



**SDG 4.2** stipulates that all girls and boys have access to quality ECE. Other than focusing on the motor, cognitive or language development of children this also implies building knowledge and values on fundamental human rights including gender equality.

Gender-responsive teachers and learning environments are part and parcel of the **first and third means of SDG 4's implementation:** **4.a** establishing effective learning environments and **4.c** increasing the supply of qualified teachers.



## 3. What is GRP4ECE?

### Gender-responsive pedagogy...

Gender-responsive pedagogy (GRP) refers to teaching that considers gender roles, norms and relations. It actively contributes to reducing the harmful effects of these on the learners. On the continuum of pedagogical approaches towards gender, gender-responsive pedagogy is at the opposite end of gender-blind pedagogy.



*From: Subramanian, S. (2019). India's policy on early childhood education: Lessons for a gender-transformative early childhood in India. Echidna Global Scholars Program Policy Paper Washington DC: Centre for Universal Education Brookings*

**Gender-blind** pedagogy does not recognise or acknowledge the unequal opportunities or barriers created by gender roles, norms and discrimination. It fails to challenge and compensate for these barriers. Teachers who believe that gender differences are natural/biological usually take a gender-blind approach and reinforce gendered classroom behaviours. **Gender-neutral** pedagogy treats learners of all sexes in the same way, by avoiding gendered language and materials for example. However, it still fails to recognise and counteract the impact of traditional gender roles and norms on children. A **gender-sensitive** or **gender-aware** approach aims to avoid discrimination.

**Gender-responsive** pedagogy not only considers the effects of gender norms, roles and relations, it also actively counters them to reduce gender inequality. Gender-responsiveness recognises the need for teachers to take a much more proactive role in the classroom and the broader institutional environment to promote an anti-bias approach. GRP prompts teachers to reflect on their own beliefs about traditional gender roles. It helps teachers to provide equal opportunities for all learners to engage and learn, regardless of their sex, and it provides them with the opportunity to give adequate attention to gender issues in teaching and in all interactions both within and outside of the classroom.

### ...for Early Childhood Education

GRP4ECE, developed by VVOB and the Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE), refers to gender-responsive pedagogy that is tailored specifically to the context of young learners and early childhood education. It takes into account the specific setting of ECE schools and classrooms and provides pedagogical guidance which is appropriate to the age and developmental levels of young learners. As play is a crucial and effective driver for learning in preschool-aged children, the GRP4ECE approach builds on play-based learning pedagogies for ECE.

Together with ministries of education, teachers and teacher trainers, VVOB and FAWE have translated this approach into a GRP4ECE toolkit. This Open Educational Resource (OER), endorsed by the African Union and UNESCO-IICBA, provides ECE teachers and school leaders with a set of practical and low-cost instruments which they can use to reflect on their own gender biases. It also includes hands-on tips to introduce GRP in their schools and classrooms.

#### **GRP4ECE and Learning through Play**

**Play** is a crucial element of VVOB and FAWE's approach to GRP4ECE. Play is how young children learn. Ideally, teachers take a play-based approach to gender-responsive teaching. However, Learning through Play is not always part of the ECE system/curriculum. In cases where it is, it might not yet be fully implemented at school/centre level. As a result, teacher professional development (TPD) on gender-responsive teaching practice preferably also includes elements of play-based teaching and learning. If capacity on playful and interactive learning methods within the ECE workforce is low and/or options for (extensive) TPD on these methods are limited, elements of GRP4ECE can still be implemented at less ambitious play-based levels.



## 4. The GRP4ECE approach – 4 areas of professional development

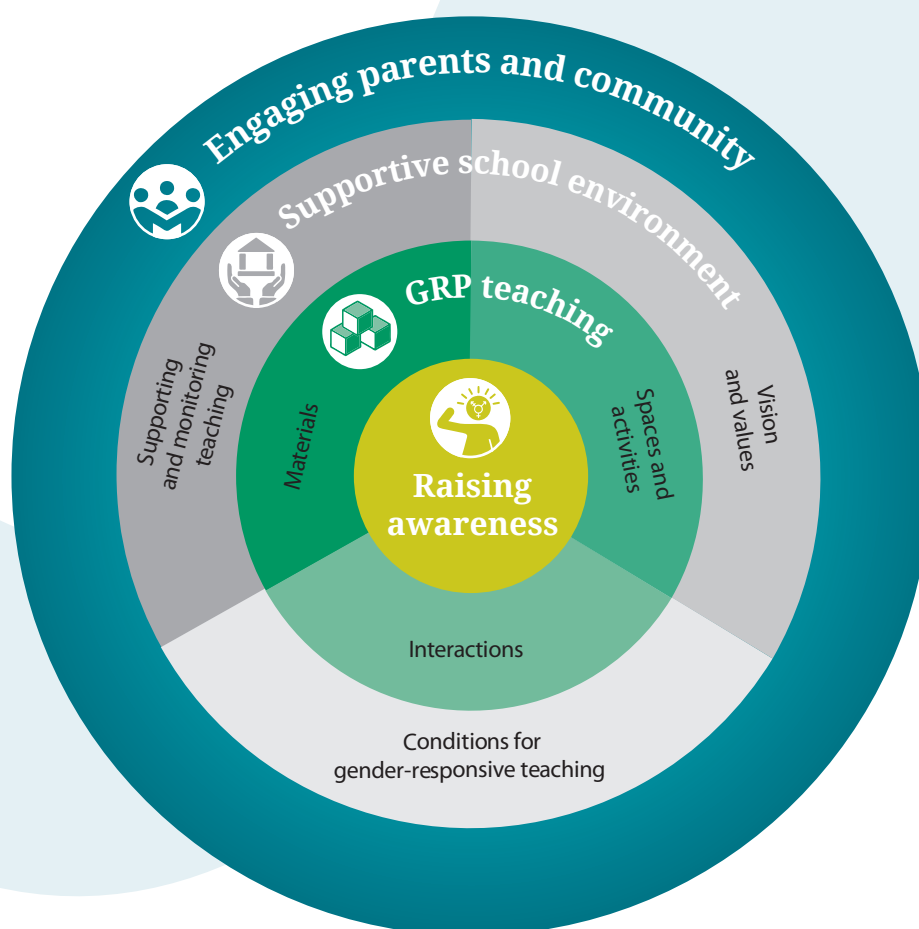
While the GRP4ECE toolkit was originally developed as a self-teaching material, building capacity of teachers and school leaders for GRP requires broader professional development trajectories. VVOB's approach to GRP4ECE has identified four crucial areas for teacher and school leader professional development.

As concepts of gender, gender norms, expressions and stereotypes can differ significantly between cultures, societies and contexts, any approach to GRP4ECE will first require **contextualisation** to fit the region, country, system and society in which it will be implemented.

Key to such contextualisation processes is the involvement and buy-in of a broad range of relevant stakeholders. In South Africa for instance, where VVOB is currently implementing a project on GRP4ECE, coordination of the contextualisation process lies with the National Department of Basic Education (DBE). DBE organised and hosted an initial two-day 'round table' engagement with representatives from a range of stakeholders, including several DBE directorates, the South African Council for Educators, teacher unions, the umbrella organisation of school governing bodies,

universities, local civil society organisations that work on gender inclusion, gender inclusion experts and UNESCO. In a next phase, together with VVOB, an internal DBE working group held a series of smaller meetings to guide the writing process for the contextualised approach. During these meetings, further input and support was provided by gender inclusion and education experts. Finally, small groups of teachers, teacher trainers and school leaders were consulted to further add, clarify and improve on the approach.

Contextualising the GRP4ECE approach also offers opportunities to promote a broader inclusion agenda in ECE. In South Africa for instance, the GRP4ECE approach embraces a more explicit inclusive concept of gender. Going beyond the traditional gender binary that promotes "gender equality for all", the contextualised approach consciously aims to include people who do not identify with the conventional binary concepts of 'boy' or 'girl', 'man' or 'woman'. Taking into account the specific context of South African society, contextualisation similarly led to the inclusion of elements of education for peace and non-violence, and supports children to develop empathy and appreciate diversity.





### Raising awareness

**ECE teachers need to become aware of their own conscious and unconscious gender biases:** this is a first crucial area of professional development. Only when teachers reflect deeply on their personal understandings of gender, can they begin to make more informed decisions and create opportunities to address inequity and bias. This implies that the GRP4ECE approach always starts with (self) reflection exercises which help raise awareness of these gender biases and stereotypes. This includes offering opportunities to educators and school leaders to discuss how gender biases and stereotypes can have negative impacts on preschoolers' learning and development, and providing them with information and knowledge on gender theory and the concept of GRP.

While raising awareness is a crucial first step towards gender-responsive teaching practice, it is important to take into account that acknowledging deeply engrained stereotypes and gender norms does not happen overnight. Findings from the VVOB GRP4ECE pilot conducted in **Zambia** showed that the effects of

the intervention were more tangible between the mid-line and end-line measurements than shortly after the initial awareness-raising activities. This suggests that teachers need enough time to process and internalise the outcomes of the initial awareness-raising activities. As a result, in VVOB's programme in **South Africa**, awareness-raising on own gender biases remains an explicit pillar of support throughout different professional development activities, from initial training sessions to professional learning communities.

Finally, while raising awareness of teachers is key to this pedagogical approach to gender, it is of utmost importance that awareness-raising activities also reach other stakeholders, including school leaders, parents and caregivers, ministry officials, etc. In VVOB's GENTLE project in **Vietnam** for instance, the awareness-raising activities also reach school leaders and ministry officials from the province and district education offices. They are the gatekeepers for the effective implementation and scaling up of gender-responsive education.



### Building capacity for gender-responsive teaching: materials, space and activities, interactions

Once teachers have taken the first crucial step of self-awareness, they can take the important next step: becoming proactive champions that address and challenge gender stereotypes through their classroom practice. In order to do so, teachers need to be given the opportunity to develop **knowledge and skills on gender-responsive teaching**.

Gender-responsive teaching can be put into practice by focussing on the following important classroom elements: **materials, organisation of space and activities, interactions** (teacher-child, child-child).

#### Materials

Children absorb information and messages from materials. Books, displays and toys can affirm gender stereotypes in explicit or more subtle ways. Colour coding of toys (pink and blue) is one of the most salient cues. The inclusion of a thoughtful selection of gender-inclusive and gender-neutral play materials, non-traditional (anti-bias) books, and a wider range of role models in displays can help counter gender stereotypes. Providing a wide range of materials for fantasy play allows children to explore their own sense of gender and gender roles.

The GRP4ECE approach does not necessarily strive towards the creation of entirely gender-neutral classroom environments. In most settings, this is not a realistic ambition due to limited resources and conflicting priorities. One of the main strengths of the GRP4ECE approach is that it uses existing stereotypes that pervade children's lives, such as those prevalent in materials, as an opportunity to challenge, discuss and reflect with young learners on such stereotypes.

In **Zambia**, teachers are asked to each bring a few gendered materials from their own classrooms to the training. These materials are then used to stimulate reflection on the stereotypes they convey. Teachers are then supported to use these materials to challenge learners or to adapt these stereotyped materials to be more gender-responsive. Furthermore, teachers learn how to develop their own low-cost gender-responsive learning materials using locally available resources.

*"The training courses and workshops showed us how gender stereotypes and gender prejudices had delicately infiltrated in teaching aids and toys, in classroom and school decorations"*

**Model school teacher, GENTLE project, Vietnam**



### Organising spaces and activities

Teachers can encourage inclusive **activities and play** in interest areas that tend to be dominated by one particular sex, by using exciting toys or activities that attract all children to play or work together. Making the play cooking area into a superhero restaurant could bring together boys - who often take on hero roles - and girls. Girls could be attracted to a construction play area that may usually be boy-dominated, by adding particularly appealing construction materials like decorative elements or by adding puppets who “need” a house.

Gender-responsive teachers avoid assumptions that learners are not interested in an activity that may be typically associated with one sex. Instead, they stimulate all learners to join in. For example, they invite girls to use trucks in the block area or to play soccer, while boys can be invited to join in dress-up fantasy play, beading or weaving.

In **South Africa**, VVOB has developed a resource which provides teachers with ideas to encourage equal participation of children in various activities and routines. These ideas range from making sure children get equal turns during morning circles to regularly changing groupings during teacher-led activities. This way, different children can work and bond with one another. Teachers are also encouraged to think of questions they can ask in different learning themes, that stimulate conversations and discussions about gender with the learners.

**Organising classroom space** differently can change play behaviours.

For example, researchers found that combining house and block areas to create a gender-neutral play area, increases housekeeping play by boys and block play by girls (Aina & Cameron, 2011). In **Zambia**, during GRP4ECE training, teachers are provided with opportunities to experience play themselves in both gendered and non-gendered play areas and materials. Teachers are encouraged to reflect on the effects on their learners of playing with these different sets of materials. Subsequently, teachers are encouraged to think about how the gender-stereotyped play areas and materials can be altered to be more gender responsive.

### Interactions

Young children learn through **interactions** with adults (parents, teachers) and interactions with one another. These interactions influence their wellbeing. They also provide emotional support, especially for the youngest.

The GRP4ECE approach supports teachers to address verbal and non-verbal, conscious and unconscious interactions with their learners. Not only in terms of gender-responsive language, but also in terms of non-verbal gestures, facial and eye expressions, tone of voice, the use of positive and negative messages, and giving attention to the type of questions or the number of turns and opportunities children get.

Using gender-responsive language and engaging in gender-responsive interactions with learners is often one of the biggest challenges for preschool teachers. In VVOB's GENTLE project in **Vietnam**, observations in schools show us that while teachers want to use gender-responsive language, they sometimes unconsciously use gender-stereotyped language and compliments such as: “You boys danced very well, even better than girls”. To better support teachers to avoid such remarks, the GENTLE project has developed a ‘miss list’ with the most frequent gender-stereotyped slip-ups that teachers make. This list is used during teacher training to build teachers’ awareness of how their language and interactions can convey unconscious stereotypes and how to go about it in a more gender-responsive way.

GRP4ECE also supports teachers to manage and promote gender-responsive child-to-child interactions. In **South Africa** for instance, VVOB focuses on three elements of learner-learner interactions: i) how learners should treat each other with respect, taking a zero tolerance approach to gender-based (or other forms) of teasing, exclusion, bullying or violence; ii) Encouraging all children to equally express their emotions, regardless of their sex and associated gender and stopping any negative comments when children express emotions or vulnerability; iii) help children to develop empathy and appreciate diversity.





### Building leadership capacity to create enabling and a supportive school environment for gender-responsive teaching

Because (gender-responsive) pedagogy is very much related to the act of teaching itself, teachers are at the centre of the GRP4ECE approach. School leaders, however, are also crucial to GRP4ECE because they create the conducive and supportive school environments which allow, enable, and encourage the implementation of GRP by teachers. The GRP4ECE approach therefore also directs sufficient attention to school leaders in 3 specific areas.

A gender-responsive school starts with **a vision and a set of values that promote gender equality**. Strong school visions and values are the ones that are shared. They impact the actions of all stakeholders involved in the school environment: leaders, teachers, parents/caregivers and other community stakeholders. Building such vision and values requires participation of all these stakeholders.

Once established, school leaders need to translate the school vision and values into school policy and guidelines. They also need to continuously convey and promote the vision and values to stakeholders both within and outside the school.

A second area in which GRP4ECE strengthens school leaders, is **their capacity to create and improve the conditions for gender-responsive teaching**. This refers to infrastructural elements such as gender-sensitive learning and play areas, sanitary facilities, etc. But it also refers to making sure learning materials are frequently screened for stereotypes, and to promoting, enabling and allocating resources for the development of low-cost gender-responsive learning materials.

A third and crucial pillar of gender-responsive school leadership is the role of school leaders in **supporting and monitoring gender-responsive teaching**. School leaders need to organise and promote teacher professional development (TPD) on gender-responsive teaching by encouraging participation in school-based TPD activities, providing individual coaching to teachers on GRP4ECE, bringing up GRP during teacher meetings, etc. School leaders also need to continuously monitor the implementation of gender-responsive teaching at classroom level, e.g. by conducting classroom observations and having regular individual and collective discussions with teaching staff.

In **Zambia**, VVOB provides a similar training on GRP4ECE to school leaders as the one to teachers. During the school leader trainings, school leaders are asked to reflect on their own role in promoting GRP in their schools. Some of the initiatives that school leaders introduced as a result include: better teacher supervision and monitoring through more frequent classroom observations and attention to gender-responsive teaching during observations; providing budgets to teachers to develop gender-responsive low-cost learning materials; giving boys and girls equal turns ringing the school bell or doing chores; and reaching out to parents and community members to challenge prevailing gender stereotypes.

In **South Africa** and **Vietnam**, VVOB supports school leaders to set up professional learning communities or use existing teacher meetings to create school-based peer learning opportunities for teachers on gender-responsive teaching practice. In Vietnam, school leaders also encourage teachers to observe each other's classrooms and to hold reflection sessions afterwards for joint learning.







## Building capacity to engage with parents/caregivers and communities

A final area of professional development in which GRP4ECE aims to build capacities of both teachers and school leaders, is the ability to engage on GRP with parents and stakeholders in the wider school community.

Gender norms, roles and relations are not limited or confined to the classroom or school environment. Gender stereotypes reach children through many different channels and in many domains of life. Children are affected by stereotypes at home, through family members, neighbours, officials, institutions, etc. Dealing with gender norms and views can at times also lead to misunderstandings, or be met with resistance from parents or other groups within the wider school community.

It is therefore essential that schools, parents and communities work together to overcome societal barriers to gender equality. Without the support of the larger community, there are limits to what the school can achieve in creating equal opportunities. The GRP4ECE approach therefore supports teachers and school leaders on how to interact with and engage parents and the local community around these topics.

In **Vietnam**, teachers and school leaders are supported by the GENTLE project to organise parental outreach meetings where parents are informed about GRP and how this is being implemented in the school. Parents are also informed and supported by teachers to implement elements of GRP in their own home environments.

In **South Africa**, fathers are often less involved in children's upbringing. Considering that specific context, particular attention is given to the involvement of male caregivers. The contextualised GRP4ECE approach raises awareness that fathers' involvement adds value to the development of their children. Such efforts are not only directed towards fathers but also to children's mothers or other primary caregivers who need to allow for and encourage fathers to be involved with their children.

*"I sensitise the community on the things I have learnt because certain activities we never used to do cannot harm us, for example cooking; men cook at hotels and restaurants, there is nothing wrong with cooking"*

Senior teacher, South Africa

### VVOB programmes on GRP4ECE

#### Vietnam

VVOB's GENTLE project transforms preschools in 15 districts in central Vietnam into environments of gender-responsive play-based learning, involving parents (and fathers in particular) to the fullest in the process. The project, implemented in collaboration with the Research Centre for Gender, Family and Environment in Development (CGFED), centres on developing the capacity of preschool teachers and school leaders to challenge social and gender norms, and support children in developing and adopting new, more equitable attitudes and behaviours.

#### South Africa

VVOB's GRP4ECE programme in South Africa aims to develop and test a South African approach to gender-responsive early childhood education, developing competences in educators of young children to deliver the curriculum in a gender-responsive and play-based manner. The project is built around four pillars: contextualisation of the GRP4ECE toolkit; development of open educational resources; professional development on GRP for early childhood education teachers, school leaders and subject advisors; and research on the effectiveness of the toolkit.

#### Zambia

VVOB's STEEL programme in Zambia centres on strengthening the professional development opportunities for student teachers and in-service early childhood education teachers on Learning through Play and the use of the Early Learning and Development Standards (ELDS). As part of the STEEL programme, VVOB has conducted a research pilot on gender-responsive early childhood education, drawing lessons learnt for improvement and mainstreaming of the approach in the STEEL programme.



## 5. GRP4ECE – a learning and research agenda

In order to generate further evidence on the impact and results of the GRP4ECE approach and to build the knowledge base on gender-responsive early childhood education, monitoring, documenting and research are crucially important elements of VVOB's GRP4ECE programming. Together, these ensure sustainability and opportunities for upscaling of the GRP4ECE approach within countries and beyond. Robust monitoring and learning helps ministries of education, communities and other relevant stakeholders to understand the importance and relevance of the GRP4ECE approach, and contributes to a better understanding of the conditions that need to be in place and the implementation strategies that deliver the best results. In order to drive this research agenda, VVOB works closely with national and international research partners.

### Generating evidence and building the knowledge base on GRP4ECE pursues four purposes:

1. Generating evidence and knowledge on impact and results of the GRP4ECE approach for accountability and advocacy purposes. This includes measuring the impact of GRP4ECE at the level of the learners, the teachers and classroom practice; and at the level of the teacher professional development systems of ministries of education.
2. Generating knowledge to improve programme implementation; identifying which components of the approach are most effective and (cost) efficient; identifying common challenges, barriers and enabling conditions.
3. Generating knowledge to ensure sustainability, scaling and policy integration. This can refer to identifying the preconditions to ensure sustainability; identifying strategies that allow for cost-effective upscaling or doing research on the attitudes of relevant stakeholders (parents, community members, government institutions, general public, ...) and how to build more public support for the approach.
4. Generating knowledge to improve monitoring and evaluation of GRP4ECE interventions. Little is still known about how to capture and measure changes in stereotypes, gendered forms of behaviour, gender identities of young children. In South Africa for instance, our research partner will investigate to what extent professional development interventions have an impact on teachers' and school leaders' knowledge, skills, attitudes and practices. They will also consider how children's behaviours change as a result of the GRP of their teachers.



## 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 and other foundations and international non-governmental organisations.

### Stimulates cooperation

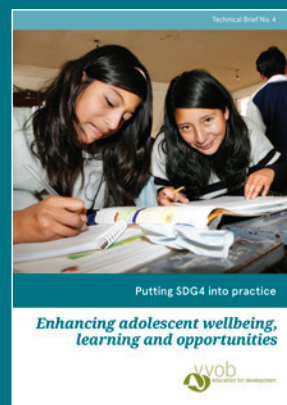
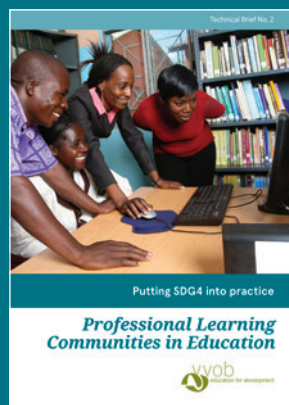
VVOB stimulates cooperation between educational institutions across continents.

## 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.



## *‘Putting SDG4 into practice’ technical briefs:*



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