



Putting SDG4 into practice

# *Professional Learning Communities in Education*

**Inclusive and equitable 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 how professional learning communities (PLCs) matter for quality education, as they play an important role in the professional development and motivation of teachers and school leaders. The experiences of VVOB demonstrate how reinforcing the capacities of national and local education authorities to establish and support PLCs is of crucial importance to the success of these communities.**

### Why professional learning communities matter

When teachers and/or school leaders work together, they share experiences and create knowledge. PLCs enable deep learning among their participants, and encourage the ownership of their learning. As such, PLCs have an influence on the practices and motivation of teachers and school leaders, i.e. on what they do in their classrooms and schools and on how they do it. Ultimately, through influencing these key actors, PLCs enhance student learning and results.

#### **Successful PLCs are characterised by:**

- a shared sense of purpose and vision.
- close relationships, with trust and respect as key characteristics.
- a collaboration-friendly culture, that allows teachers and school leaders to discuss beliefs and practices freely.
- inquiry, i.e. systematic analysis of certain situations and professional reflection.
- inclusive membership, diversity, and an open attitude towards new members.
- good leadership that provides practical support and instructions.
- regularity. Only regular meetings can ensure profound discussions, gains in knowledge, and a positive impact on teaching and learning.
- external accountability (towards policymakers and the general public) and internal accountability.

Source: Katz, S. and experiences of VVOB country teams

#### **VVOB's experience shows that PLCs:**

- bridge the gap between theory, policy and practice.
- focus on practice, i.e. on the real problems faced by school leaders and teachers.
- provide opportunities to participants to break out of isolation.
- create a forum to share materials, data, and tools.
- are a cost-effective model of professional development.
- contribute to job satisfaction and motivation.

*“Countries that wish to improve the effectiveness of professional development provided to teachers should increase the amount and variation of school embedded offerings such as mentoring and coaching, creating networks of teachers who learn together, and supporting collaborative research and instructional problem solving by teachers”*

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development – OECD (2015),  
Embedding professional development in schools for teacher success.



## PLCs and Sustainable Development Goal 4

SDG4 targets a substantial increase of the supply of qualified teachers, including through international cooperation on teacher training in developing countries.

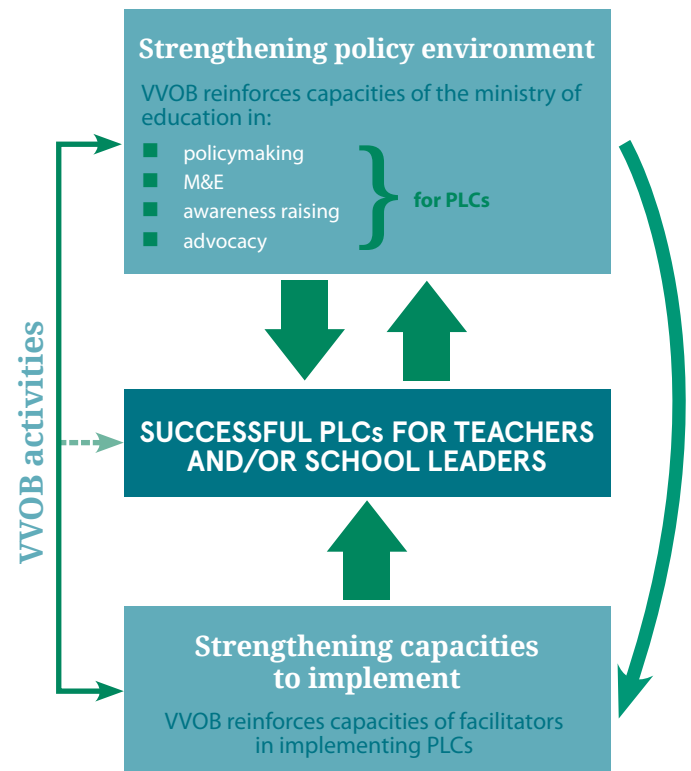
A key strategy in the vision for education to achieve SDG4, the Education 2030 Incheon Declaration and Framework for Action adopted by the World Economic Forum in 2015, is to “strengthen school leadership to improve teaching and learning”.

## VVOB approach to strengthening professional learning communities

PLCs are reliant on a supportive and stimulating policy environment, both at national and decentralised level. PLCs must be institutionalised formally before they can be sustainable. At implementation level, facilitators of PLCs need to have the capacity to facilitate their PLCs effectively.

Both the **policy environment** and the **capacity to implement** are crucial to organising effective and sustainable PLCs that genuinely enhance the professional development of teachers and school leaders.

### VVOB’s model for successful PLCs





### Strengthening policy environment

VVOB reinforces ministries of education in their capacity to fulfil their responsibilities towards PLCs. VVOB currently works on this with the Department of Basic Education in South Africa, the Ministry of Education in Rwanda, the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture in Suriname, and the Ministry of Primary, Secondary and Professional Education in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. These institutions are responsible for creating a climate that nurtures the formation and growth of teacher and school leader communities.

#### *VVOB strengthens the ministries of education through:*

- support to their processes of policymaking, for example by collaboratively developing policy notes, guidelines, toolboxes and manuals.
- monitoring and evaluation of instruments and tools for PLCs.
- advocacy directed at senior and middle management actors.
- organisation of capacity development trajectories for local officials and facilitators.

### Strengthening capacities to implement

At local level, VVOB supports the implementation of PLCs, more specifically by working with the following government officials: provincial inspectors in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, provincial and district officials that directly support schools in South Africa, and sector education officers in Rwanda. Depending on the local context, the facilitation role in PLCs can also be taken up by other actors. For example, VVOB Suriname works with school leaders as facilitators of PLCs, and VVOB Ecuador works with pedagogical counsellors.

#### *VVOB's support takes the shape of:*

- training, coaching and mentoring of PLC facilitators in developing new and sustaining existing PLCs.
- advocacy directed at local officials in high, middle and low management positions.
- documenting local practices and experiences to feed national policies.



## Case study: Rwanda

### Programme on learning outcomes in primary education

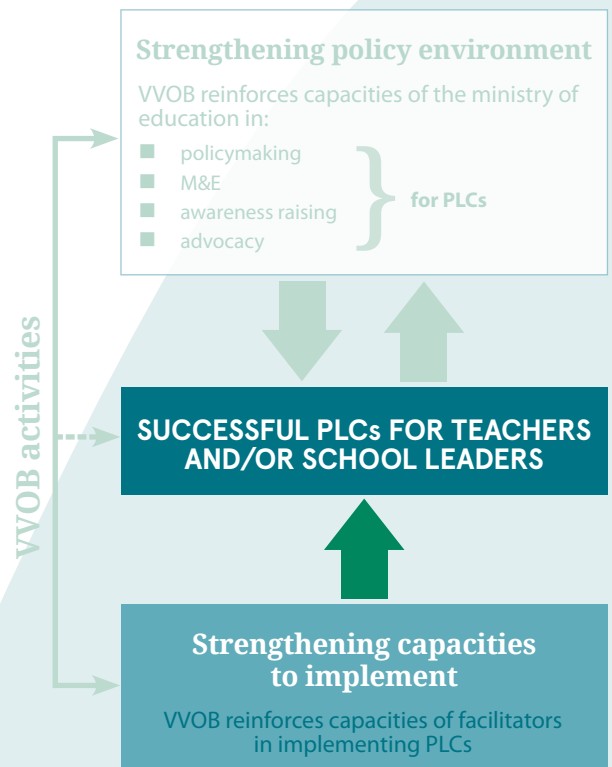
The LOPE programme (2014-2016) embodied a cooperation between the Ministry of Education (MINEDUC), Rwanda Education Board (REB), University of Rwanda – College of Education (UR-CE) and VVOB Rwanda. As the objective was to improve the quality of primary education, VVOB focused its support on strengthening school leadership on the one hand, and on preparing student primary teachers for a learner-centred pedagogy on the other.

### Strengthening capacities to implement PLCs

Within the framework of the LOPE programme, PLCs for head teachers were established at sector level. 120 sector education officers (SEOs) were trained in initiating and coaching these networks. Subsequently, these SEOs were supported during their facilitation of PLC sessions by VVOB, ministry staff and external trainers. At the same time, ministry staff were made aware of the value of PLCs as an instrument for effective professional development of school leaders.

This resulted in operational PLCs in all 30 districts in Rwanda. Through these networks, 963 head teachers were reached. VVOB and its partners conducted 228 feedback visits to PLCs as part of the learning trajectory for SEOs.

PLC sessions in Rwanda are organised once every three months on average. The average attendance rate of head teachers at these sessions is 79 per cent. A peer learning magazine about PLCs and related topics is published and distributed to head teachers and SEOs, with the aim to share experiences and good practices.



*"As we address issues through the collective wisdom and the sharing of experiences by head teachers, we gain new perspectives on issues like school feeding, school sports, dropouts, school performance and parental involvement."*



**Cecile Ntakirutima, Sector Education Officer**



### Strengthening the policy environment

From 2017 onwards, VVOB contributes to the institutionalisation of PLCs in Rwanda.

All SEOs of six districts in Eastern Province and Western Province are equipped with the competencies to effectively facilitate PLCs of head teachers. They receive a training course on mentoring and coaching from the University of Rwanda – College of Education. After successful completion of the course, these SEOs go on to lead and coach new PLCs of head teachers.

In this respect, PLCs also contribute to school leadership in an important way. They can strengthen head teachers to implement the competency-based curriculum in their schools, and to ultimately support the improvement of learning outcomes, particularly in mathematics.

Furthermore, VVOB advocates for the integration of PLCs into policy, such as provisions that create time for teachers and head teachers to engage in school-based PLCs.

#### Results

**An impact study found significant changes in the competencies of head teachers before and after participating in a PLC:**

- increased capacity to engage parents and communities
- bigger focus on data collection and analysis
- improvement of school inspection
- use of PLC principles in meetings with teachers, resulting in better teamwork

**Changes in the school leadership competences of head teachers have an influence on the school environment. Head teachers reported that the most significant changes are:**

- a reduction in the dropout rate.
- an improvement of national examination results.
- an improved quality of teaching.





## Case study: South Africa

### Programme on teaching for improved learning outcomes

The TILOPESA programme (2014-2016) of VVOB South Africa addressed a central element in South Africa's Integrated Strategic Planning Framework for Teacher Education and Development: support to the continuing professional development of teachers through PLCs. This policy document essentially charges the South African Department of Basic Education (DBE) with the task to assist provinces in establishing and supporting PLCs in order to strengthen teacher professionalism.

### Strengthening the policy environment

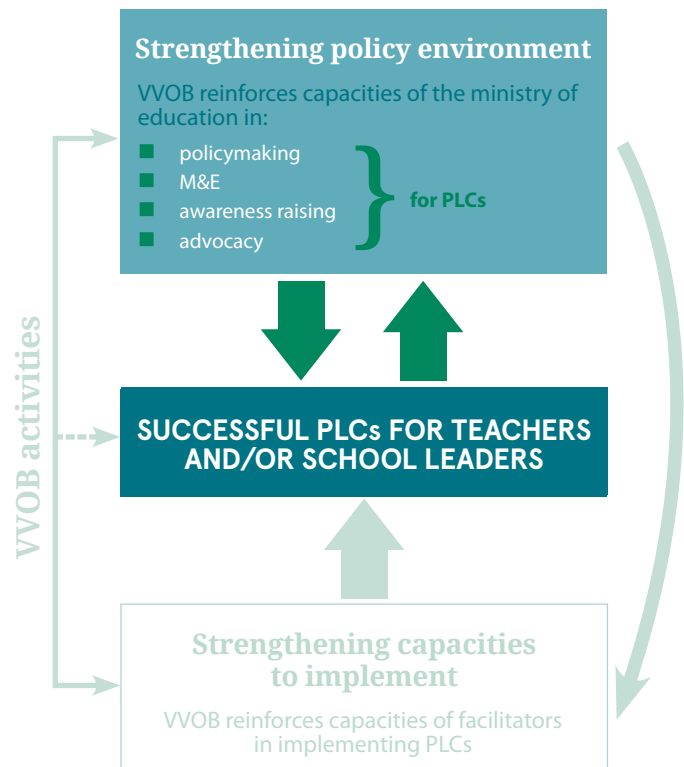
VVOB supports DBE in its role as national policymaker of the provinces, who then implement that policy:

- VVOB supports the development of concept notes and guidelines about PLCs, and diverse facilitation materials.
- VVOB organises high-level events to encourage dialogue between various key players (NGOs, provinces, teacher unions...).
- VVOB supports the organisation by DBE of sessions for provincial education departments on how to implement and support PLCs.

VVOB also develops the capacity of DBE to support provinces in the effective implementation of the PLC policy. The above-mentioned sessions for provincial education departments are followed by trainings organised by VVOB that also include district officials who directly support schools, i.e. subject advisors (for teachers) and circuit managers (for principals).

VVOB also assists DBE in:

- monitoring and evaluation.
- improving their monitoring tools.
- improving the quality of the evidence-based reporting system.
- supporting the effective implementation of PLCs and related aspects in the provinces.



### Strengthening capacities to implement PLCs

In Free State Province, district officials engage in a two-year capacity building trajectory on PLCs. An intense training programme is set up by VVOB. In between the plenary activities, district officials engage in follow-up tasks and keep a learning journal. Case studies and role play are used in particular as tools to train them in providing support to new PLCs. The trajectory allows the district officials to bring challenges they encounter in supporting PLCs to the workshops for discussion. Points of discussion include the profound change in school culture that effective PLCs imply, and the confusion among participants of PLCs about the difference between PLCs and regular school-related meetings.

The experiences on provincial/implementation level feed national policy. With support of VVOB, DBE organises nation-wide colloquia, to track the implementation of PLCs and to harvest good practices.

### Results

VVOB supported DBE in enabling the policy environment by jointly realising a policy note, national guidelines and facilitation materials, and by supporting DBE in their encouragement of PLCs at provincial level.

The province of Free State conducted a survey with teachers on their professional development. This report confirms that 68 per cent of the surveyed teachers participated in PLC sessions. The survey also indicates that school-based PLCs exist and are functioning. With VVOB's support, several provinces developed and implemented a monitoring tool to improve their reporting of PLCs. Reports of DBE confirm that six provinces have started with the establishment of school-based PLCs, and that three other provinces are in a preparatory phase.





## PLCs for improving learning 2017–2021

VVOB programmes for 2017–2021 employ PLCs as an approach to professional development of teachers and school leaders. VVOB South Africa and VVOB Rwanda can further build on their experiences of the last years. However, VVOB is also introducing PLCs to several other countries, including Ecuador, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Suriname.

### Ecuador

VVOB assists the Ministry of Education of Ecuador in the development of quality continuous professional development options. The professional development teachers and school leaders receive, should pay special attention to the realisation of safe school environments and stimulate the employability of their students. To realise this, VVOB supports PLCs of school leaders. VVOB and the Ministry of Education are exploring the possibilities of broadening the focus of the PLCs for teachers to communities of practice where, in addition to technical competencies, pedagogical competencies are addressed as well. Good facilitators are identified, a course is developed for them, and PLCs are institutionalised in the Ecuadorian education system.



### Democratic Republic of the Congo

In two provinces, Kongo Central 1 and Kongo Central 2, the VVOB programme 2017–2021 partners with the Ministry of Primary, Secondary and Professional Education and the Ministry of Technical and Professional Education in supporting school leaders to improve technical education in agriculture. The programme's objective is to make class practices in agricultural schools more active and participative, with special attention for gender, environment and equity. The programme reinforces the capacity of the provincial inspection services and divisions to offer quality professional development to school leaders and teachers in agricultural schools. An important part consists of assisting them in starting and facilitating learning networks of pilot agricultural schools. VVOB utilises workshops, exchange visits, coaching and peer learning for the provincial inspectors, so that they have the capacity to facilitate PLCs.





### Suriname

In Suriname, school leaders' attitudes and work practices hamper vocational education. Students in vocational education are a very vulnerable group, often coming from broken homes or families with a low socioeconomic status. They have an urgent need for school environments that nurture their wellbeing and for vocational education that is more active, competency-based and learner-centred.

The VVOB programme 2017-2021 in Suriname supports school leaders and teachers in strengthening vocational schools, and develops the capacity of local professional development institutions. VVOB assists the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture to pilot, evaluate and institutionalise PLCs for school leaders in lower vocational secondary schools. VVOB reinforces the facilitators of these networks. The purpose is to strengthen the educational leadership of school leaders.



## About VVOB

VVOB is a Belgian non-profit organisation with more than 35 years of experience in sustainably improving the quality, efficiency and effectiveness of education. VVOB's annual budget is approximately 11 million euros.

### 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. VVOB does 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, the British government, international non-governmental organisations and foundations.

### Stimulates cooperation

VVOB stimulates cooperation between educational institutions across continents.

## Where VVOB works

VVOB works in 9 countries – Belgium, Cambodia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ecuador, Rwanda, South Africa, Suriname, Vietnam and Zambia – and on assignment in other countries.

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