Strategic Policy Note on "Digital for Development" (D4D) for the Belgian development cooperation

Input from Educaid.be on the draft note (8 June 2016)

This document summarizes the reactions of Educaid.be, the Belgian Platform for Education and Development, on the draft Strategic Policy Note on 'Digital for Development' (D4D) for the Belgian development cooperation. It was drafted by the members of the platform's working group on ICT & Digitalization and approved by its Steering Committee.

Educaid.be sincerely thanks DGD for proposing this Strategic Policy Note and appreciates the opportunity to contribute to its content. In the spirit of enhancing the Note, Educaid.be would like to propose some comments and suggestions. Its feedback is structured in line with the document itself and the debates scheduled for the Consultation Workshop to take place on June 24th, preceded by some general remarks and followed by a conclusion.

1. General remarks

As representative of the education sector within the Belgian development cooperation, Educaid.be regrets that throughout the Strategic Policy Note, education is almost exclusively mentioned in one breath with health, gender, environment, agriculture, etc. As education is an important sector of intervention for the Belgian Development Cooperation, **Educaid.be strongly suggests that education should be given a more prominent place in the Note.**

ICT has enormous potential to improve the quality and reach of education within the Global South. However, it must be clear that ICT can never take the place of qualitative and motivated teachers and school leaders. ICT can help and support these teachers and school leaders to become even more effective educators. Furthermore ICT can support education systems to become more agile.

It should also be noted however, that inappropriate mainstreaming of ICT could be counter-productive when aiming to achieve SDG4, "Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all". According to SDG4, quality education can only be regarded as qualitative if it is accessible to all learners ('equity'). Educaid.be strongly suggests therefore that ICT interventions within education should primarily focus on **using ICT's potential to reach out to the most marginalized**, rather than to focus only on learners who already have access to quality education. This to avoid a widening of the gap between the have's and the have not's. As such, mainstreaming of ICT in education cannot be regarded as mandatory in each context. Educaid.be also recommends that ICT interventions should be accompanied by education on citizenship, human rights and democratic values so as to avoid misuse and manipulation of ICT.

We would also like to point out the **relative absence of references to the non-governmental cooperation** (both NGOs and institutional actors) in the Strategic Policy Note, and note that the specificity of the realities faced by civil society organization, who generally work at a more micro-level and need practical tools to implement their actions, is insufficiently addressed.

Finally, no mention was made of the **mapping** exercise which took place and which could have provided concrete good practice examples of – and visibility to – ICT initiatives of the Belgian development cooperation.

2. Feedback on the proposed vision and priorities

In terms of its **vision**, Educaid.be welcomes the framing of this Strategic Policy Note by the Sustainable Development Goals, and the fact that D4D is proposed as an enabler, not as a goal in itself.

Priorities

Better use of (big) data (§14-23)

Whilst we are not convinced of "the use of (big) data" being a priority in itself, we at least strongly suggest **inverting the order of the proposed priorities**, and to emphasize digital inclusion as a first priority, with (big) data following as a logical next step. It seems to us that (big) data cannot exist without digital technologies and inclusion. Efficiency could indeed increase with the analysis of data, however this analysis is only meaningful if skilled people are at hand to manage and analyze data and results.

We would also suggest replacing the title "Better use of (big) data" by "Better management, analysis and use of data", as this reflects better the complexity of the process of the use of (big) data (as the final step in the process). In the same vein, we propose to replace the sentence "Data can move decision makers and people into action" (§14) by "Insights into data can move decision makers and people into action", as obviously the data by themselves, without interpretation by (skilled and educated) people, will not lead to any consequences or higher efficiency.

It is also stated that "… education can gain high benefits from big data" (§18), but it is not elaborated in what respect this is true, and what needs to be done to ensure these benefits.

Digital for inclusion (§24-39)

We feel strongly that under the priority of "**digital for inclusion"**, the importance of **education** needs to be further elaborated, in general and specifically in the chapter on "Access to quality basic services" (§36-39). It is suggested to change this into "**Equal access to quality basic services**". As such, the use of ICT is directed towards reaching out to those groups in society that were not reached until now. (see also the general remark on page 1)

To make good use of ICT infrastructure and to be able to interpret (big) data, education has to be innovative and inclusive. D4D should be organized within the framework of the Sustainable Development Goals and Agenda 2030. In SDG4, it is proposed to 'substantially increase the number of people with the relevant skills for employment, decent jobs and entrepreneurship' and to substantially increase the number of 'scholarships including in ICT; and the supply of qualified teachers'. Therefore, investments in capacity building of trainers and teachers are essential.

In general, the paragraphs on access to basic services (§36-39) are very technical and would merit more elaboration.

3. Feedback on the operational aspects

In terms of its operationalization, this Strategic Policy Note seems to be primarily geared towards the bi- and multilateral cooperation and should take more into account the situation and priorities of non-governmental actors.

Basic foundations (§40-48)

These paragraphs emphasize the importance of taking into account the **local context**. This is also mentioned in other places in the document, and all actors agree this is a decisive – and often limiting – factor. However it is not clear how and to what extent the local context will be taken into account.

Footnote 2 states "This provides implementing partners with the possibility to 'opt out' when their detailed and documented analysis of the specific local context shows that the use of data and digital technologies does not help enhance the development impact." We would actually suggest to invert

the logic: ICT interventions should only take place if it is demonstrated that they contribute to the improvement of equitable quality education (reversal of the burden of proof).

The paragraphs on **skills** (§ 43-45) seem focused on ICT skills. We suggest, however, to explicitly mention the importance of several other skills, such as language, levels of literacy, innovation, analytical skills, etc., needed in an entrepreneurial and innovative context (as examples of 'advanced skills'). In this paragraph, the number of examples of disadvantaged people in education is limited, we would suggest to refer to §25 for more detail. When proposing education interventions to foster digitalization, it is important to refer to §72 and design the cooperation strategy so as not to widen the gap between the digital literate and illiterate.

In §44 there is reference to the issue of **brain drain**. In our view, brain drain not only justifies ongoing capacity development, but should foremost launch a reflection on a strategy to retain highly skilled workers, such as the creation of challenging and well paid jobs in the region or country and government incentives.

We suggest developing § 45 as follows:

> "Digital technologies can provide new opportunities to support skills development according to the context, e.g. through e-learning and blended learning, that are already being integrated in the interventions of the Belgian development cooperation, especially in university development cooperation but also by NGOs and Institutional Actors, who use the power of distance learning to improve their vocational and technical training and lifelong learning programs. We promote the use of these new techniques whenever feasible and would like to foster collaboration between the different actors to exchange best practices and collaborate on project implementation (see § 90).

Tools (§49-51)

While we agree with the objective of paying "more attention to building blocks and technology that can be used across sectors" (§49), some important tools, often used in education and capacity building, are missing here, most notably eLearning and e-Documentation.

Sustainability (§52-59)

Improving the sharing of knowledge and coordination (§57) is indeed very important. We therefore regret the lack of a reference to the mapping of the Belgian actors which took place in the consultation phase of this Strategic Policy Note.

Principles (§60-62)

The principles outlined are indeed very important, and we would suggest to list them before the paragraphs on "Building blocks" (VI.1).

Risks (§63-72)

A number of important risks have been identified, unfortunately less attention has been given to providing solutions or strategies for addressing them.

The risks linked to an inadequately equipped education system are mentioned in §64, underscoring our point of view that D4D in/for education should be tackled as a priority. Also, the introduction of D4D as a potential factor for exclusion merits, in our opinion, more attention and should be moved higher up the list.

We would like to refer in this context to Kishore Singh, United Nations Special Rapporteur on the right to education, during the presentation of his report on the 'Right to Education in the Digital Age' to the Human Rights Council: "Digital technologies should reduce inequalities in society, not widen them".

Educaid also the stresses the necessity to take into account the environmental impact of some digital components.

4. Feedback on the proposed partnerships and the orientations for strategic management

<u>Partnerships</u> (§73-92)

Educaid.be regrets the near absence in this chapter of **civil society organizations** (NGOs, institutional actors, etc.) as partners, apart from humanitarian organizations and – indirectly – in the paragraphs on the "Belgian D4D ecosystem".

<u>Strategic management</u> (§93-101)

With regard to funding, is Educaid.be surprised to read that no extra funding will be provided for the implementation of D4D. We believe this may undermine the whole process, and propose that if this aspect has not been settled, the reference to financing be deleted, or that it be replaced indicating that in a first phase, seed money could be supplied for D4D initiatives.

Under **Monitoring** (§97-100), we suggest to further develop (or delete) the paragraph on the **D4D marker**. It is not clear from the document whether this marker will only be applied to the official cooperation (bi- and multilateral) or whether it will also be applied for the non-governmental cooperation, as a criterion of attribution (or refusal) of (parts of) development cooperation sector programs.

In any case, it seems useful to provide more detail as to how the marker would be applied and how it would be attributed. For instance, a project with a small digitalization aspect: is this marker 1 or 0? Or in between? We suggest at least one level should be added (between 0 and 1). Also, how will the element of local context be taken into account?

As for **field visits** and the use of a "simple questionnaire", we hope that this questionnaire and – most importantly – the collected data will be made available to the development actors concerned.

5. Conclusion

Educaid.be welcomes the initiative to give D4D a more prominent role in Belgian Development cooperation, and this Strategic Policy Note provides a good start. We fear however that the Note may be **difficult to implement, in particular for non-governmental cooperation actors, if more concrete pointers, technical support and additional funding are not provided**.