



## *SchoolLinks Programme*

# **POLICY DOCUMENT**

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## Background

VVOB aims for a sustainable world with equal opportunities. Within the bigger framework of combating poverty we contribute to the improvement of quality of education and training in developing countries. Next to these operations in the south, we also need to increase the social basis in Flanders for more solidarity in our society.

The increasing globalisation of economies, technologies, cultures and societies affects our local context more and more. This is a challenge for our education system that needs to prepare children for this changing world. Knowledge and skills concerning interculturality and world citizenship become increasingly important. But this changing world also offers opportunities!

A school partnership can be a tool to counter new educational challenges in an interesting and contemporary way. It wants to promote an international dimension in education. By means of a direct long term relationship, pupils and teachers can share knowledge and experiences about their culture, values, dreams and worries. In this way, a school link brings the world into the classroom. For pupils, it is a very pleasant way to tackle learning issues and to make global issues very concrete. They can widen their view on the world and acquire new skills (intercultural skills, ICT, language,...). For teachers, the exchange of good practices can improve the quality of their learning and teaching.

Yet, these type of partnerships are not always a success. Misunderstandings or deficient communication can easily lead to disappointment and mutual frustration.

VVOB sees it as its mission to support this need for international contact, for collaboration between North & South, for disclosure of the world. Our SchoolLinks programme aims to assist and support these initiatives from the educational field and provides a framework in which this type of international collaboration has more chances to succeed and can be developed in a qualitative way.

## 1. Concept outline

Partnerships between schools exist on different levels, from an expendable help action to a long term commitment focusing on intercultural exchange and mutual reinforcement. Hence it is rather difficult to give a clear definition.

Though, our concept of a school link does not mean that we want to force schools into a strict frame, yet we strive for an ideal partnership in order to make sure that school links become an added value for all parties. We therefore stipulate several important basic guidelines that have to be taken into consideration.

### 1.1. Our definition

**A sustainable and equity-based North-South partnership between schools, focusing on educational goals**

#### 1.1.1. Sustainable

A school link is not a punctual result but a growing collaboration process. As from the start, the long term vision partly has to be the ambition of both parties.

*=>We aim at a minimum collaboration term of three years. This collaboration has to be established through a step by step process that allows all parties to develop an intense partnership on their own terms. This means that an ambitious partner can stimulate the other, but at the same time takes its limitations into consideration.*

Sustainability also includes independence. In the long run the school link can not depend on the support of VVOB, nor can one school depend on the other.

⇒ *A school link is inherent to the schools. The initiative and responsibility lies with the schools. VVOB can inspire, advise, support, but will never replace the schools.*

Finally, we consider sustainability as a quality condition for the activities within the framework of the school partnership.

*=> Ecological, economic and social interests go hand in hand with sustainable activities, as well as for current as for future generations. We take the needs of the current generations into consideration, as well in the north as in the south, without compromising the needs of future generations.*

#### 1.1.2. Equity-based

Schools are always different. Especially when one school belongs to different parts of the world. The background, context and position are fundamentally unequal. On the one hand his diversity can be a source for exchange. On the other hand, the motivation for the partnership, the priorities, the desires, the contributions and way of communicating will be different for both parties. The challenge lies within the acknowledgement of these differences, and in the ambition to establish a relationship that allows both parties to preserve their personality and to use it: the partners are unequal but their partnership has to be equity-based.

An equity-based partnership is rarely a reality; it is a continuous balance exercise, a goal that we try to reach through empathy and dialogue.

If one of the objectives of a school link is to teach values such as mutual respect and social justice, then it is indispensable that these values are inherent to the partnership itself. Both parties should have the opportunity to communicate their needs and should gain as much as possible from this partnership. Hence the keywords of this partnership are respect, openness and participation.

#### 1.1.3. North-South partnership

The essence of a school link is a collaboration process. Not a one way transfer of knowledge or resources, a one time joint activity or an official but empty commitment, but a collaboration process working on joint themes and goals.

Cooperation implies gathering forces, a common input and a certain return. Reciprocity is an indispensable element of the partnership. This does not necessarily include an equal contribution. Both parties unequal, but it requires a mutual effort and commitment. They share responsibility for the success of the collaboration and the achievement of the objectives. A mutual benefit will be the end result of such collaboration.

VVOB recognises the potential added value of partnerships between southern countries. In the future, this also can be supported and SchoolLinks can become bigger partnerships that involve three or more schools from different countries. But the approach of the current programme is to broaden the platform for more solidarity in the Flemish society, so first of all, we solely focus on northern-southern partnerships.

#### 1.1.4. Educational objectives

Essential for a school link is that an international collaboration process contributes to the development of knowledge, values, attitudes and skills that become increasingly important, dealing with the challenges of the global society. At the same time, the exchange of experiences between teachers and schools can contribute to a reinforcement of the education quality and school management. The partnership focuses on educational goals: the learning aspect is fundamental, but this can be interpreted in various ways.

At the same time, education on the position of southern countries versus northern countries can never be neutral. It causes feelings of indignation and implies a call for action. Development education or global education calls for possibilities to act. This can also be interpreted in various ways. It can include the opening of a world shop at school, writing a letter to the minister, or organising funding actions. This can and surely may be part of the school link. Preferably, it is a tool to reinforce the partnership itself or to support certain educational goals.

At all times, we should make sure that every action is always part of a broader (educational) goal. Further, the financial aspects should not be the only objective of the partnership nor can it compromise the aspect of equivalence and reciprocity. Other important elements that we emphasise concerning material support of the partner school, is that this need should be based on a clear question of the partner. It can not cause an interruption of the local economy and should be in harmony with the criteria of sustainable development cooperation at all times.

## 1.2. Added value of a school link<sup>1</sup>

Both in Flanders as in southern countries, schools appear to express the need for partnerships between north and south. Furthermore, the motivation behind this need is surprisingly parallel. If the school link turns out positive, the result is a mutual win-win situation.

In the **Flemish context** the added value is as follows:

- Education: School links as an educational tool
  - ⇒ Education to be a world citizen: teaching knowledge, values, attitudes and skills  
Global development in an interesting way – approaching global problems through children's eyes.
  - ⇒ Correct image of the southern part of the world (breaking through stereotypes)
  - ⇒ Intercultural exchange
  - ⇒ Education corresponding to the challenges of the global society
- Expression of solidarity: it is important to offer action perspectives to students and teachers to express their solidarity. Nevertheless, it is important that such actions do not compromise the partnership
- In the line of the school's vision – contribution to the charisma of a desired image

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<sup>1</sup> Hereby we try to describe a global image, even when this does not correspond to the differences of opinions between schools and especially between southern countries. Sometimes other elements are accentuated but we can identify a clear common value.

- Relational connection: Personal contacts, relationships as an added value on its own (for school and individual) – and relationships with southern countries are more interesting and exciting.

In the **southern countries, the added value for schools** and their motivation for a school link mainly consists of:

- Education: School link as an educational tool
  - ⇒ Intercultural exchange: getting to know the culture, sharing each other's values
  - ⇒ Education corresponding to the challenges of the global society (broader knowledge of the world, ICT skills,...)
- Exchange of experiences between teachers – capacity building for the teachers
  - ⇒ Learning methodologies, school management, material development, new educational insights, putting forward common issues (behavior and learning problems, dealing with other languages, bullying, ...)
- Relieve material needs (being provided with didactical material and so on...): An excessive emphasis on this aspect or a bad considered action can rapidly compromise the partnership. A well-thought-out solidarity action plan can reinforce the partnership and can be an answer to the needs of the southern school.
- Relational connection and networking: Personal contacts, relationships as an added value on its own (for school and individual) but also the aspect of networking, having contacts in the developed northern part of the world is important.

### 1.3. Target group

#### 1.3.1. Which schools?

In this first stage of the programme (first three years) we firstly focus on primary and secondary schools that are acknowledged by the ministry of Education. We do not give a preference to the type or level of the school (technical, general, special). Each has its own obstacles and possibilities and the success depends on the input of the people involved, even more than on the type of education.

Also colleges express their need for international collaboration. VVOB also wishes to stimulate this type of partnerships. This type of international collaboration requires a different kind of support, hence why we exclude colleges from the SchoolLinks programme.

#### 1.3.2. The southern partner countries

One of the most important added values offered by VVOB to schools are our personnel in the southern part of the world, who are active in the education field. Thanks to them, we can support and guide the southern pillar of the partnership. From that perspective, it is logical that we work within our 9 partner countries. We also added Malawi and South Africa because these are priority countries of the Flemish development.<sup>2</sup>

Our partner countries for the SchoolLinks programme are:

Rwanda	Kenya	Zambia	Zimbabwe	DRC Congo	Vietnam
Cambodia	Surinam	Ecuador	Malawi	South Africa	

There are 2 exceptions to this:

- Schools that already have a sustainable school link that corresponds to the higher stipulated vision may also join the VVOB programme.
- Schools within an existing city link of their city/community.

<sup>2</sup> Mozambique is not included in the programme because of the extra obstacles of the Portuguese language

Both cases will be studied separately and it will be examined whether a partnership is useful for each party.

### 1.3.3. Broad school

Ideally, we want to achieve an integral partnership that requires the involvement of an entire school and of other local actors with whom the school can collaborate and that can offer support.

We strive for an involvement of as many actors as possible: students, teachers, management, pedagogic personnel and parents. This process of broad involvement will have to grow gradually. Sometimes it is better to start with one (or a few) class(es) and gradually involve more classes.

### 1.3.4. Integration in the VVOB programme

Ideally, a school link also connects to one of our VVOB programmes in our partner countries. This allows us to gather forces. It will also play a decisive role in the choice of the southern school. Nevertheless, this will not always be feasible in the current programme operation which is often situated on macro or meso level.

## 2. The programme put into practice

### 2.1. Selection of schools

#### 2.1.1. Criteria

**Motivation:** How strongly does the school want to be part of the SchoolLinks programme and is their vision and motivation sufficiently in line with those of VVOB?

**Location:** Is the school sufficiently in line with the possibilities of support of VVOB (country/location/coherence of the programme)?

**Experience :** Experience with North-South cooperation is a valuable asset. International experience of the school's teachers or headmaster is certainly valuable, as well as the extend to which the school tries to maintain a broad outlook on the world.

**Existing school links:** It is favourable to support an existing school link instead of creating a new one. It can never be the intention to undermine an existing cooperation by taking the school into a new project. On the other hand, an existing school link may often geographically be impossible for VVOB to support. Therefore it will be examined case by case whether we can assist the existing school link.

**Strong schools:** Even though it is essential in development cooperation to not solely work with strong participants in a project, but to opt for a good mix of strong and weaker schools, it is still recommendable, especially in the first years, to choose only the strongest schools. A 'strong school' has head master with a vision and decisiveness, and a motivated teaching staff that is not afraid of a challenge and open to change.

Though this may seem taking the easy way out, the underlying motivation is different. The SchoolLinks programme is not a development project that sees the improvement of the school standards in the south as a goal. Our aim is to maintain a meaningful cooperation, contact and exchange between schools, and this within the limited possibilities of both schools and VVOB. Working with weaker schools will only lead to frustrations amongst the schools and be counterproductive.

**Internet access:** Smooth Internet access for teachers is a basic condition. Preferably the school has its own computer and Internet connection.

## **2.1.2. Selection process**

### **In Flanders**

All interested schools in Flanders may apply on the website [www.scholenbanden.be](http://www.scholenbanden.be). This does not necessarily imply an immediate commitment, but these schools will be kept informed of the further evolutions within the programme. By means of a questionnaire the school can give its profile and preference (profile school, preference partner, interest activities, term...).

Based on this profile, on the interest in other continents, and depending on its own possibilities, VVOB will gradually address schools to join the programme. A consultation meeting/workshop will be held in the school to discuss the concept and the role of VVOB thoroughly, so that the school can confirm its commitment on a well-informed basis.

### **In the south**

Every VVOB country office decides autonomously how many schools it can and wants to assist in starting a school link. It can also decide how to select schools that best meet the criteria formulated above (address in person or rather on the basis of a wider appeal).

The selected school will be informed thoroughly on the 'SchoolLinks' concept, the role of VVOB and the implications, so that the school can decide whether to proceed or not.

A school in the south that sides with the philosophy of SchoolLinks - as stipulated in this policy document - may contact the regional VVOB office to obtain more information on the possibilities to apply and the current procedure. More detailed information on the VVOB SchoolLinks can be found at [www.scholenbanden.be/english](http://www.scholenbanden.be/english).

## **2.2. Initial phase**

VVOB suggests that both schools create an profile that will be exchanged with the candidate partner school. If both schools agree, the initial partnership is a fact.

VVOB concludes a cooperation agreement with both schools. This is a very limited agreement between VVOB and each of the schools separately in which both partners in general terms confirm their commitment.

If the schools want to appeal to the SchoolLinks support fund, they have to present a concise but jointly formulated yearly action plan with a budget estimate. The first year it can be difficult start up a school link and formulate an action plan; therefore VVOB offers support.

As from this moment schools start collaborating, although VVOB will certainly take steps in getting the school link going. In the following cases VVOB will offer support and advice from a distance to shape the partnership additionally.

## **2.3. The school link in action**

### **2.3.1. Interpretation**

The entire interpretation of the school link (what happens exactly, which activities are developed, how intensive is the cooperation...) is completely up to the schools. So they will decide how the school link is shaped, as long as it is consistent with the principles of VVOB.

After all, it is essential that a school partnership does become dependent on the support of VVOB. VVOB may inspire or give tips, but it will not carry out any activities itself, and will never come to the forefront in a school link.

Whatever the link may be, it is important that the relation is meaningful, fascinating and pleasant for both parties.

### **2.3.2. A gradual process**

The possibilities within a school link are numerous, and can be as fascinating and varied as the creativity of the teachers and pupils. In practice the possibilities will be confined by the limited availability of teachers in schools both in the south and in Flanders. It is therefore very important to have or create **realistic expectations** and to be satisfied with what the weakest link in the partnership can offer. If both partners and VVOB do not share the same views in regard to the expectations, this will only lead to disillusionment and frustration.

Due to the lack of time or other elements, the school link will indubitably be a **gradual growing process**. Some people will not take the time or have the custom (culture) to have contact, to consult or to plan regularly. The experience and mentality to deal with these issues in a creative way can often be absent, let alone the inspiration how to bring about a school link. Those are obstacles that can be overcome, and should happen gradually. A couple of years is largely insufficient to come to a long lasting partnership. It is recommendable not to start with the entire school and all the classes immediately, but rather with a smaller group and extend it gradually.

### **2.3.3. Step-by-step plan**

The reality described above does not mean we should not be ambitious. VVOB always aims at the highest quality possible of the school links it supports, in accordance with the individual possibilities of each school. Schools can of course stipulate themselves how and how intensively they interpret their partnership.

Nevertheless, it is obvious that a school link where the basic principles of a good cooperation are not fulfilled, cannot enjoy support at the expense of another school that has good intentions and a lot of energy. Therefore a quality framework has been elaborated, a step-by-step plan with a number of levels that point the way to how a school link can be brought about most adequately according to VVOB. A number of indicators evaluating the growth process of a school link were formulated.

VVOB will advise, guide and support schools in the realisation of this step-by-step plan, without imposing a too ambitious target. Nevertheless, it is clear that if in the future choices have to be made concerning the allocation of scarce means, the school's efforts and the school link's level of quality will be important criteria.

This step-by-step plan will be made available on the web site.

## **2.4. Role Schools - Role VVOB**

### **2.4.1. Principles**

In view of the sustainability of a school link, VVOB emphasises strongly the self-reliance and independence of the partnership. The initiative, responsibility and realisation of a school link as well as the activities lie within the schools, not within VVOB.

VVOB will help and support schools in the process of becoming self-sufficient. This means that we do not assume any executive educational and logistic tasks, but that we can familiarise a school with how certain issues can be tackled. It means that we keep an eye on things in the initial phase to see whether anything important has been forgotten. It also means we will refer schools to other organisations that can possibly assist schools in the execution of certain specific activities.

Certainly in the initial phase and surely for certain small schools in the south a more intensive guidance will indeed be necessary, but it is crucial for the sustainability that VVOB does not assume too much; the essence of our task is to strengthen the school's capacity so that VVOB becomes redundant.

### 2.4.2. In practice

**Linking schools and start-up process:** VVOB searches interested and motivated schools in Flanders and the south to start a school link, and that have the possibility to extend it successfully. As an intermediary VVOB introduces those schools to each other and guides the start-up process.

**Support tools:** VVOB will gradually develop support tools that may help schools extending their school link qualitatively. Among other things, this concerns a manual, an extensive web site with a good deal of information regarding SchoolLinks, the organisation of consultation meetings and exchange of experiences for the teaching staff. Those instruments will mainly be developed for Flanders, but can also serve as a source of inspiration for our colleagues in the south.

**Advice and adjustment:** VVOB will assist the schools with professional advice on the development of their school link. This implies personal consultation meetings during a visit to the school (attend a study group, training...). On the other hand VVOB commits itself to providing advice on their action plan, and will be available by telephone or e-mail for questions concerning SchoolLinks, both regarding practical matters and matters with respect to the content.

**Financial assistance:** A third support tool that VVOB offers to schools is a limited financial contribution. This is mainly meant as an incentive, a bit of encouragement, but it must not carry the partnership. Therefore it is limited and several conditions are attached to it. Enclosed you can find the guidelines.

**Training and coaching:** The southern partner school benefits less from support tools, but for those schools a more personal coaching and training is provided: training on the concept of a school link, what it can be, how to tackle it, how to communicate, how to cooperate, training on integrating a school link into classes creatively, on dealing with ICT... At the same time some coaching and guidance on the first activities or on the practical organisation of a visit will be needed, even though it is intended that the school can assume this all by itself as soon as possible.

**Traineeship programme:** Interested schools can ask VVOB to have a student teacher. He or she can, in addition to the regular teaching practice, at the same time strengthen and extend the school link.

**Ad hoc necessities:** Each school link will be interpreted differently, depending on the schools' possibilities and interests. Each partnership will also come across its own necessities, focal points or problems. VVOB will have to respond to them case by case. VVOB is acquainted with both the Flemish and the southern educational context; so it can take action more easily should there occur any problems.