

Policy review

This policy review is based on evaluations in the partner countries Bangladesh, Bolivia, Uganda and Zambia, a literature review on the impact of investment in basic education, a review of external evaluations by six Dutch NGOs that support basic education with Dutch funding, and an analysis of Dutch expenditure on basic education between 1999 and 2009.

Basic education

In this study, the term 'basic education' covers not only formal primary education, but all forms of primary and lower-secondary education, including informal education and lower vocational education and training.

Education plays a role in poverty reduction. A school certificate can improve a young person's chance of getting paid employment. Well qualified workers are good for the economy. The better people are educated, the better they are able to look after their health. This is particularly true for women and girls. Whether more education also creates a more democratic and peaceful society varies from one country to another.

Governments, civil society organisations and aid agencies agreed at the Education for All conference in Jomtien (Thailand) in 1990, that every citizen should have the opportunity to benefit from education. Ten years later, the world community adopted the Millennium Development Goals, in which access to basic education was assigned a vital role.

The role of the Netherlands

In the year following the conference in Jomtien, the Netherlands spent €9 million on aid to basic education. By 2000, the figure had risen to €156 million. In 2001 the Dutch House of Representatives passed a motion to increase support for education to 15% of the total development aid budget. In 2007, the contribution peaked at €658 million (see Figure 1).

Between 1999 and 2009 the Netherlands contributed a total of €3.5 billion to basic education, thereby becoming the world's fourth largest donor in the sector. The bulk of the funding went to education in partner countries, but a substantial amount was channelled through multilateral agencies and Dutch NGOs.

The target of 15% of the total aid budget for education was never reached. Moreover, fuelled by such an input target, the Dutch education portfolio became somewhat fragmented. In the years following the peak of 2007, basic education ceased to be a top priority, but was continued in support of other priority areas. In 2010 it was decided to cut back the education programme further.

Results

IOB concludes that in the period under evaluation, the Netherlands made a major contribution to more and better basic education in developing countries. It did this not only in accordance with international objectives (EFA and the MDGs) but also in line with the plans and priorities of the governments in the partner countries.

The Netherlands has been an innovative donor. A prime example was its support for the Fast Track Initiative (FTI), by which developing countries shape their own education strategies and education aid is increasingly harmonised. Another example was the Dutch contribution to UNICEF's Education in Emergencies and Post-Crisis Transition (EEPCT) programme. In addition, the Netherlands worked effectively with other bilateral and multilateral donors, NGOs and local educational institutions, with a major focus on donor harmonisation and coordination.

More children around the world now attend school, including girls and children from disadvantaged backgrounds. In the poorest countries, participation in basic education rose from 64% in 1999 to 82% in 2008. The biggest increase was in sub-Saharan Africa (48%).

However, IOB concludes that a great deal still needs to be done. Globally, 10% of children who should be in school are still not attending. Although this is an improvement on the 1999 figure of 16%, it is still too high. Many of the children who do not go to school live in fragile states or in countries affected by conflicts and emergencies.

In many places around the world, the quality of education is below par. The results of national and international tests indicate that many pupils are not learning enough. The country studies point out the challenge of simultaneously increasing access to education and improving the quality of education and learning. One of the reasons is that education systems need time to adapt to the rising numbers of pupils. New teachers are often still poorly trained. The education system has to accommodate previously disadvantaged children in the classroom. For these children learning is often harder than for children from more affluent population groups, which influences the average results. Different and new approaches to learning are required.

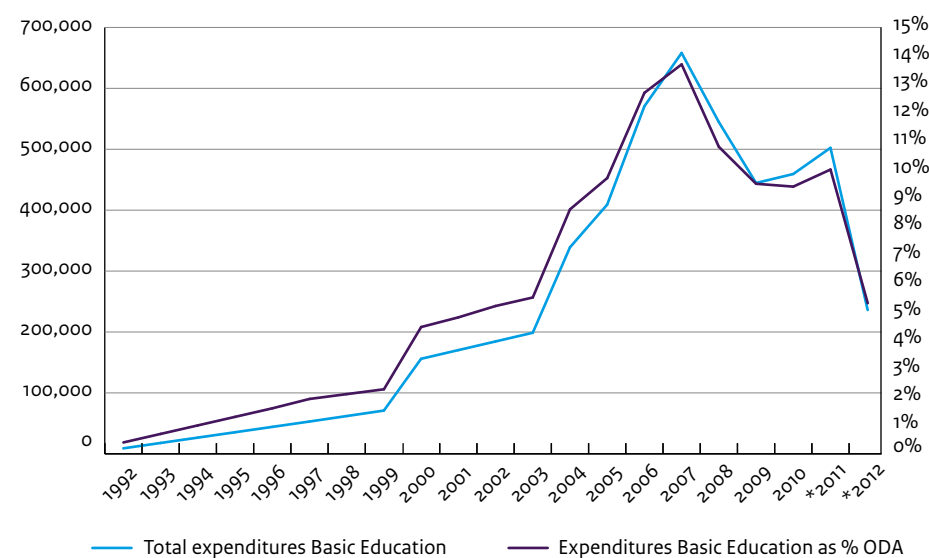
One disadvantage of the sectoral approach may be its top-down character and emphasis on central authorities. However in general, the Netherlands pursued a two-pronged approach: besides bilateral support, funding was also channelled through Dutch and local NGOs and multilateral organisations such as UNICEF. In Bangladesh, 75% of educational aid was distributed through NGOs. Cooperation with local and Dutch NGOs often led to alternative and innovative strategies for reaching specific target groups.

Final remarks

Although basic education is no longer a priority for the Netherlands, it is still key to achieving the government's most recent priorities, in particular with regard to sexual and reproductive health and rights, and peace and security.

Based on its findings, IOB recommends that the Netherlands should focus its aid more sharply in the future, particularly on improving access to quality education for children from the poorest and most excluded groups in society. This requires more targeted forms of support from the Netherlands, in close cooperation with national authorities, other donors, multilateral organisations and the NGO sector in the Netherlands and its partner countries.

Figure 1 Total expenditure on basic education between 1992 and 2012 (in thousands of €)



* Projected disbursements