



Ministry for Foreign
Affairs of Finland



Sustaining Excellence: Finland's Commitment to Education Worldwide

Background and Rationale

In 2015, at the United Nations Sustainable Development Summit, Member States formally adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development with its 17 goals. Sustainable Development Goal 4 aims to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all. **Finland is deeply committed to advancing education globally.** Education is one of the current development policy priority areas for Finland and the 2023 Government Programme maintains its centrality in the Finnish development policy and cooperation.

In 2018, the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland commissioned a review of Finland's global role in the education sector, resulting in the report *Stepping up Finland's Global Role in Education*.¹ The recommendations and action points have been discussed and agreed during various phases since the publication of the report. The key areas of follow-up action can be summarized as: 1) strengthening collaboration between government sectors, 2) strengthening multilateral engagement, 3) intensifying bilateral support, 4) enhancing Finland's vocational education and training profile, 5) improving research capacities in partner countries, 6) making strategic investments in new partnerships, and 7) building the pool of education sector.

Advancing the global education development agenda includes close collaboration among relevant ministries and institutions, including the Ministry of Education and Culture, and the Finnish National Agency for Education. These collaborations have been institutionalised to enhance policy alignment with SDG 4.

The evaluation of Finland's development cooperation in the education sector informs the Ministry for

Foreign Affairs of its efforts, done in collaboration with various actors, in advancing Finland's education development cooperation. The evaluation provides insights into the performance of education sector development cooperation during 2019-2022 and gives recommendations on Finland's future endeavours in this critical area.

The main users are the Ministry for Foreign Affairs, the Development Policy Committee, different partners and stakeholders. Other potential users are the Ministry of Education and Culture, the Finnish National Agency for Education, and the Coordination Group for Education in Developing Countries.

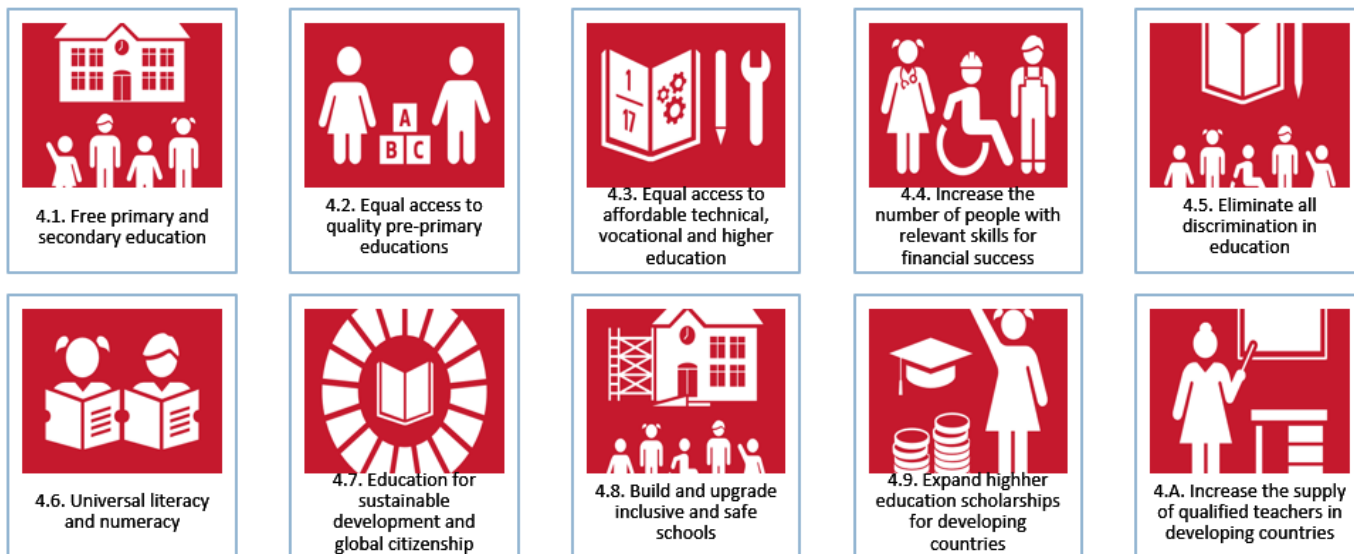
In this brief, the Development Evaluation Unit of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs highlights some of the findings and conclusions reached by the Evaluation Team.

Finland has demonstrated a solid financial commitment to education development...

Finland's engagement in education development cooperation demonstrates a long-term commitment, with annual contributions and disbursements fluctuating between 40 million and 60 million USD over the last two decades. Finland has consistently succeeded in committing and disbursing increased funds to the sector. Although an exceptional year, Finland achieved its goal of disbursing EUR 100 million in 2021. In the face of budget constraints, ensuring continued funding for education and establishing flexible financing mechanisms for diverse partnerships is essential.

To optimise the utilisation of its limited Official Development Assistance (ODA) funds, the Ministry should adopt a

¹ <http://hdl.handle.net/10138/310306>. The report was one of the starting points of this evaluation.



more strategic approach to resource allocation. This strategic allocation should prioritise bilateral cooperation with partner countries, selected multilateral organisations, and the coordination efforts by the Finnish Centre of Expertise in Education and Development (FinCEED).

...But Finland's continued and increased commitment is vital and its image may suffer if funding decreases

Recognising the growing challenges faced by partner countries, Finland's continued and increased commitment to education sector development cooperation is vital. This long-term dedication is essential for enhancing the resilience of education systems and addressing the evolving needs of partner countries. Ongoing learning crises and challenges require sustained attention. Finland's global leadership in advocating for increased investment in education is recognised, but its image as an education excellence model and a credible problem solver may suffer if funding cuts take place.

Finland's response to the global learning crisis remains highly relevant

Finland's contributions have positively influenced its partner countries. Achievements include the advancement of inclusive primary and secondary education, improved teaching and learning practices, and substantial policy influence at both national and global levels.

Overall, Finland's progress in the action areas is notable

Finland has made significant advancements in education sector policy improvement, expanded bilateral support, and improved multilateral engagement. The establishment of education as a distinct policy priority within Finland's development cooperation and the formulation of a comprehensive theory of change have considerably enhanced the significance of education in Finland's development cooperation.

Education development cooperation commitments have surged, fostering collaborative initiatives with the European Union and various multilateral partners. These advancements not only reflect Finland's dedication to global education but also create opportunities for strengthening education development cooperation expertise and garnering support from civil society organisations and EU initiatives. The areas where least progress has been made are in vocational education and training and investment in new partnerships. The role of civil society organisations in Finland's concerted efforts has been limited, while their collaboration with their partners is effective. Formalising coordination by establishing the Coordination Group and FinCEED has enhanced coherence, but challenges remain, especially in state-private sector collaboration. Since the launch of FinCEED, concerted efforts have been made to build Finland's pool of expertise.

Inclusive education, girls' participation, policies, teaching practices and school environments improved

Finland's distinctive contribution and main value lies in its commitment to assisting partner countries in reforms, particularly in teacher education, inclusive education at basic and secondary levels, early childhood development, well-being services, and learning assessment. Another outcome of Finland's efforts has been the notable increase in girls' participation in education.

Regarding progress made in addressing the key areas of action, and the thematic areas and sub-sectors of education, the results vary from 'good' to 'unsatisfactory'. Good progress has been made towards the overall de-

velopment policy goals, particularly at the secondary education level. Education systems have gradually become more inclusive, and barriers preventing the participation of children with disabilities have been reduced.

Teaching and learning practices and educational environments have improved. Institutional capacity to improve learning outcomes has been enhanced through policy influencing at country and global levels. The results in vocational education and training have been unsatisfactory, and access to vocational training for women and girls with disabilities remain limited.

To magnify its global impact, Finland should focus on further expanding its pool of experts, enabling the sharing of knowledge and best practices.

Examples of results

The education reforms supported by Finland have improved the status of teachers, increased the number of female teachers and principals and developed teacher continuous professional development and support systems. (Afghanistan, Mozambique, Myanmar, Nepal, Palestine and Ukraine)

The Global Partnership for Education helped to organise distance education and to support the safe reopening of schools in 74 countries. (Global)

Finland's support in developing education sector policies and introducing the first-ever education law resulted in inclusive quality education emerging as a stated policy priority for the Palestine Authority. (Palestine)

Finland's support enabled to school meals to 275,514 children (46% females) in regions affected by conflict, and recurrent drought, while scaling up the national school feeding programme in four out of eleven regions in the country. (Ethiopia)

Bilateral sector co-financing yielded teaching-learning materials to 25 million students and 674,000 teachers; continuous classroom assessment in over 10,000 schools. (Ethiopia)

UNICEF's Girls' Access to Education programme provided 110,000 self-learning materials, trained 3,200 teachers on psychosocial support, and provided individual student kits to 5,800 adolescent girls. (Nepal)

In 2019-2021, education projects funded by Finland in conflict and crisis situations reached nearly 1.1 million children and young people, of whom 48 per cent were girls. (Global)

Finland strengthened inclusive education in the World Bank and the programming of Education Cannot Wait. (Global)

Cooperation with civil society organisations resulted in pre-primary and basic education for 780,000 children and young people, of whom 1,800 were children with disabilities and 48% were girls. Their programmes have improved learning conditions and strengthened the competence of teachers and principals to adopt more pupil-centred practices. (Global)

3,722 teachers completed a teacher training programme, including 50.4% (1,877) of female teachers, which exceeded the gender-balance target (3,450) set for the year in 2021 (Mozambique)

Through its participation in the multi-actor initiative, Finland has contributed to the increase of relevance of vocational education and training in terms of labour market needs. The number of institutions and enrolled students increased from 235 institutions and 11,118 students in 2020 to 240 and 12,380 respectively in 2021. Also, the number of companies taking part in VET rose from 710 to 1,376 in 2021. (Ukraine)

Bilateral cooperation is the cornerstone of Finland's success

The three most effective cooperation modalities or instruments are bilateral cooperation (the core of Finland's work), multilateral cooperation and FinCEED. Civil society organisations and higher education institutions have delivered commendable results and are important partners in this sector, yet their potential in providing a concerted Finnish effort remains underutilised, and their relationship with the private sector lacks enablers and remains uncertain. While the innovative initiatives by UNICEF and Global Partnership for Education aim at disrupting traditional education development, doubts about their transformational impact persist. Private sector instruments have added little value to education development cooperation from the results perspective.

At the country level, effective synergies between state and non-state actors are limited, partly due to the absence of a clear multi-actor approach and partnership-building guidance to enhance teaching and learning quality at primary and secondary levels.

Finland relies on a strategic blend of cooperation instruments for effectiveness

At the global level, factors that enable effectiveness include promoting 'creative' and strategic mix of financing modalities and constructing 'synergic portfolios' to work different angles of the result areas with a mix of organisations that complement each other and can work in remote areas. Bilateral and multilateral cooperation are two sides of the same coin. Building public sector capacity to implement interventions also facilitates greater effectiveness.

At country level, ownership of the programme by the Government and other partners was a crucial driver of effectiveness, particularly for Finland's country programmes. Using a strategic selection of cooperation instruments, and adaptive management were important enabling factors. Having the right kind of sectoral expertise as well as engagement in policy dialogue were also keys to success.

The multi-actor approach requires refinement, a shared vision and unlocking of the full potential of different actors

While Finland's multi-actor approach has potential, further improvement is needed in its implementation. This includes addressing the need for a clear concept of a multi-actor approach, guidance and a plan to its operationalisation, and overcoming practical coordination challenges to enhance efficiency. Finland currently lacks a clear and unified policy vision that harmonises the expanded role of education sector development, and clearly defines the role of private sector involvement and education export. Unlocking the potential of underutilised actors and reconsidering the role of the private sector is essential for more effective delivery. In order to ensure coherence and coordinated support, more explicit coordination and alignment with partner governments are also essential.

Education across the sectors of sustainable development as an update to the 'PISA brand'

The decline in domestic education system performance suggests that to remain relevant, Finland needs to update the premise of its global role in education sector. This could be done by spotlighting education as integral element across multiple sectors of sustainable development. In a rapidly evolving global landscape, embracing this 'multi-sector nexus thinking' approach is crucial for relevance and effectiveness. The interdependence of education and sustainable development in other sectors has been increasingly highlighted in global dialogue. There are significant international expectations that, based on its track record, Finland will play a central role in resolving the global learning crisis.

Focusing on education system resilience and innovation

Given the increasingly fragile contexts of partner countries, stakeholders assert that Finland needs to continue with a strategic focus on building education system resilience and supporting sector-wide reforms, particularly in inclusive education and teacher development. Education in emergencies and implementing the guidance on triple nexus are relevant, as is climate resilience (green education).

Finland is well-positioned to lead the way with its expertise and innovations in educational technology, particularly in the crucial domain of teacher education. Finland should further strategise how to use education technology in the medium to long term to enhance education quality, particularly focusing on the transformation of teaching methods, schools, and education systems in partner countries. By adopting innovative strategies, Finland ensures its enduring influence in the global educational landscape.

Prioritisation and alignment needed in order to remain relevant

Finland should prioritise supporting basic and primary education, with an immediate focus on rights-based inclusive access. Instead of dispersing scarce funds across cooperation modalities and several interventions, a more strategic approach is required. This involves prioritising three crucial partnerships and enhancing synergy among them: partner country governments, multilateral organisations, and FinCEED. By capitalising on effective instruments, refining cooperation approaches, and adopting innovative strategies, Finland can continue to play a pivotal role in advancing global education and addressing the learning crisis. Reinforcing relevance and coherence involves aligning priorities and jointly designing development co-operation programmes with partner governments.

Further coordination and follow-up needed

The formalisation of the Education in Developing Countries Coordination Group and the establishment of FinCEED have brought about better coordination in Finland's education development cooperation. However, the coordination group lacks authority, a clear plan, and defined roles, which hinders its impact on partnerships. Furthermore, evidence-based decision-making is chal-

lenging without a budgeted sector-specific plan and a clear portfolio, and corresponding systematic monitoring of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs' education sector development cooperation. In addition to maintaining current staff, the Ministry could address staff shortages by building skills and capacities through continuous learning, buying or borrowing additional skills from other ministries, and outsourcing.

Evaluation Methodology

The evaluation was conducted using a theory-based contribution analysis. The macro-level theory of change drew from the Ministry's sector theories of change and provided a strategic foundation. The micro-level theories were developed based on the drivers of change identified in Finland's Country Programme and were embedded within the macro framework.

The evaluation included a desk review, key informant interviews, 52 at global and 49 at country level, in-depth country case studies in Ethiopia, Nepal and Palestine, desk-based thematic mini-case studies of vocational education and training in Ukraine and teacher education in Mozambique, and the Delphi method with a panel of 27 national and international experts to gain insights into the future and alternative courses of action.

Acknowledged limitations

- Focus of the evaluation is at policy and strategic level, not at project or programme level
- Absence of a clear sector portfolio
- Limitations caused by the selection of the intervention sample and the Delphi panelists
- Limitations in monitoring and reporting data available and their consistency



Ministry for Foreign
Affairs of Finland

For the full evaluation report and other materials:

<https://um.fi/development-cooperation-evaluation-reports-comprehensive-evaluations>.