

Education and Empowerment for Life Perspectives

By 2028, children and youth experiencing exploitation, violence, and discrimination enjoy expanded opportunities for quality and needs-based learning and training that foster personal growth, peaceful conflict resolution and decent working and living conditions, with a view to overcoming barriers to economic, social and political participation.

1. Rationale behind this goal

Impact Hypothesis:

IF marginalized and exploited children and youth have access to needs-based quality education and training as well as psychosocial support, and are protected from exploitation, violence and discrimination

THEN this will expand their opportunities to grow to their full individual and societal potential to develop viable life perspectives

BECAUSE children and youth have acquired a solid foundation that enables them to move beyond social and economic exclusion or exploitative circumstances and drive social change and transformation.

Important remark: When using the terms “quality learning” or “quality education” we define “quality” as learning and teaching, which is adaptive to the needs and conditions especially of marginalized and exploited children and youth. The focus of tdh work is less on high level formal and individual education or preparation for traditional business participation. It is not only about preparing youth for a job but shall enable them to create innovative forms of income generation and new job perspectives for groups of marginalized children or youth. In addition, trainings shall consider specific complementing local demands as, for example:

- nurture local cultural activities,
- adapted methods in rural and urban areas,
- intercultural sensitivity training,
- methods of peaceful conflict resolution.

2. Key reasons for supporting and funding education and empowerment for life perspectives

One among many social costs of the global capitalist economy are intra- and intergenerational inequality in all aspects of life and last but not least inappropriate

education systems. Millions of children and young people suffer from hunger and poverty, and are exposed to domestic, social and war-related violence. They are discriminated against and do not have access to sufficient health care and good education. As a result, they often and easily become victims of child labour, child trafficking and violence. In 2023, poverty, inequality, violence, and exploitation are on the rise and affect more children than during 20 years before. While governments struggled to fight the Covid-19-Pandemic, the interests and needs of children were even more neglected, especially regarding education. It has since been established that the pandemic has clearly deepened an existing global learning crisis and has brought into focus the glaring inequalities that characterize the access to quality education. Lockdowns resulted in rising levels of domestic violence, sexual exploitation, school dropouts, child labor and loss of income-generating opportunities, ruining the life perspectives of many children and their families. Rising levels of inflation and prices for basic goods currently fortify the crisis. This situation is exacerbated by the devastating impact of climate crises and environmental degradation as well as armed conflicts worldwide.

A growing number of children and youth face exploitation. Globally, prior to the Covid-19-Pandemic, roughly 160 million children were working; 79 million of them in the Worst Forms of Child Labour as defined by ILO Convention 182. UN agencies estimate that in 2023 even more children than before are drawn into exploitation or engage in harmful strategies for survival. A whole generation is denied their essential rights, including their right to education.

Against this background, quality education and training can be one of the critical game changers - measures, that impact the situation of children very strongly towards positive changes, in the given moment as well as for their future perspectives in life.

The groundwork for this is laid at a young age: Research on early childhood education has clearly demonstrated that laying solid foundations in terms of cognitive and physical development is a prerequisite for children and youth to realize their full potential. Later, literacy enables children to read, learn, express themselves, participate in cultural and political life, understand the world and open their minds. Vocational and life skills training that reacts to young people's individual context lead to both social and economic empowerment. Education empowers particularly girls to fight early marriage, engage in safe and healthy family planning, and stand on their own two feet.

Education and learning are never purely academic: they foster personal growth, peaceful social interactions, and skills to navigate life's challenges. Spaces for learning must include complementary activities that strengthen characters, coping skills, for example through arts and culture, play or sports. Curricula that address issues of diversity, equality, health, wellbeing, and social justice instill capacities for critical reflection.

In this way, education contributes to individual, social, and economic empowerment, and to overcoming marginalization and exploitation and to stimulating transformation towards more just societies.

Today's society is profoundly marked through a dominant careless logic and does not provide enough opportunities and support for quality and child friendly-education,

training, decent work and employment - although children and youth account for more than half of the population in many countries of the Global South. The denial of equal life opportunities perpetuates poverty and socio-economic inequality, resulting in youth without any decent income generating possibilities which would have support their families and communities in the mid- to long-term. Instead, their human potential is disregarded. There is a high level of frustration and mental problems linked to this lack of possibilities for social mobility and for becoming economically self-sufficient, often leading to youth engaging in harmful, exploitative or destructive activities.

3. Approaches and child rights-based frameworks that support education and empowerment

The Right to Education (early childhood development, school, and vocational training) is enshrined in UN CRC §28. UN CRC §29 provides specific criteria: Children’s education should help them fully develop their personalities, talents and abilities. It should teach them to understand their own rights, and to respect other people’s rights, cultures and differences, and to live peacefully. Furthermore, they shall be able to critically analyze their social, economic and political circumstances. Quality learning may also include digital competences and access to digital technologies. UN CRC in its article 32 recognizes the right of the child to be protected from economic exploitation and from performing any work that is likely to be hazardous or to interfere with the child’s education, or to be harmful to the child’s health or physical, mental, spiritual, moral or social development. This is echoed in ILO convention 182 that defines the “Worst Forms of Child Labor” (see above).

The right to education is strongly linked to many other child rights and is a precondition to be able to enjoy such other rights defined by the UN CRC, such as

- The right to be listened to,
- the freedom of forming one’s own view and express it freely,
- the freedom of thought,
- the freedom of association and assembly,
- the right to access to media,
- the right to access to social security measures,
- the right to appropriate living conditions,
- the right to play,
- the right to protection against harmful drugs,
- the right to protection against sexual exploitation.

UN Sustainable Development Goal 4 (<https://www.sdg4education2030.org/the-goal>) strives to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all until 2030 and has seven targets, including equal access to quality education for different age groups and more skilled youth for employment, decent work and entrepreneurship. The achievement of SDG 4 is seen as vital to achieving other SDGs, like 1 (eradicating poverty), 5 (gender equality), 3 (good health and wellbeing), 10 (reducing inequalities among countries), 8 (sustained, inclusive, and sustainable economic

growth and decent work for all), 9 (resilient infrastructure and innovation), 12 (sustainable consumption and style of production in harmony with nature), 13 (urgent action to combat climate change), 16 (peaceful and inclusive societies).

Adding to and based on these international approaches, tdh and partners strengthening education systems, ensuring access, or offering viable alternatives to mainstream education that are highly relevant to the specific situation of participants.

The approach includes participation of children and youth in designing the responses to their situation. It is guided by principles of child safeguarding (including safe spaces), mutual respect, gender equity and cultural sensitivity, and includes psycho-social support services if needed.

4. Outcomes to be achieved by supporting and funding education and empowerment for life perspectives

tdh follows a holistic, empowering program approach on quality learning and training opportunities for children and youth experiencing exploitation, violence, and discrimination. The approach includes different age groups from early childhood, primary school and secondary school age, youth and young adults transitioning from school into the world of work. The respective focus is determined by the age and specific background of participants. Projects react flexibly and appropriately to their regional context.

On micro level, working children and youth as well as children and youth experiencing exploitation or discrimination participate in quality learning and training opportunities tailored to their needs and have access to psychosocial support. Youth retain their job or start and successfully establish their own businesses. These opportunities enable them to grow to their full individual and communitarian potential and to develop viable life perspectives. Depending on the situation and the job market, such concepts may include vocational training for existing businesses, or self-employment and entrepreneurship support.

On meso level, in every region, models to build quality education, vocational training and the creation of sustainable jobs and livelihoods for marginalized children and youth are created that can be replicated by others and can be used to be taken up by government institutions, schools and/or communities. The target group depends on the context (e.g., working children, children in Worst Forms of Child Labor, children at risk, unemployed youth, children suffering from other forms of violence). Generally, the focus is on the most vulnerable groups. Peace education and safe spaces are critical components of delivering education and empowerment for life perspectives.

On macro level, tdh and partners address political and social changes through advocacy at local, regional, national, or international level. For example: closing gaps in national legislation on child labor, enforcing legislation, creating appropriate and culturally sensitive curricula for the respective communities, and scaling up alternative models of education as well as innovative approaches to jobs and other income-generating opportunities for marginalized or endangered youth. In addition, we advocate - if applicable

in coalition with other NGOs - towards relevant institutions and decision-makers, at local, national, regional and international level to include more equality and transformative improvements in political and legal frameworks. Any changes shall align with relevant national and international processes and mechanisms (e. g. on child labor in supply chains, participation/empowerment of working children, changing legislation, contributing to national youth development and training programs, budgeting, shadow reporting to UN CRC or UN HR Council/UPR, etc.).

Creating life perspectives is strongly linked to the working areas of gender equity, right to a healthy environment, and support for children and youth in the context of migration, and can create synergies or reinforce interventions in these fields, such as:

- promoting gender equity, female leadership and innovative approaches for decent work for girls and young women (positive role models),
- vocational training and job creation in the environmental sector, considering new developments (“green jobs” e.g., recycling, circular economy, climate smart agriculture for sustainable livelihoods etc.),
- including environmental education in education programs because a healthy environment is one precondition for sustainable life perspectives,
- targeted education and life skills support for children and youth forcibly displaced, helping to reduce vulnerability, promote social cohesion and strengthening agency,
- using the MHPSS program to inspire the work on psycho-social support and rehabilitation for marginalized and exploited children.

5. Lasting effects envisioned by supporting and funding education and empowerment for life perspectives

The tdh program has contributed to reducing poverty and social marginalization through holistic, flexible, and adapted models of empowerment, education and training for children and youth that go beyond individual growth but have major impact on communities and societies at large.

Participants in these programs have acquired a meaningful and sustainable educational foundation. They can find decent work or start their own businesses and become responsible citizens. By this, child labor and other forms of exploitation and other root causes of violence are effectively tackled (prevention/protection/solutions), family budgets become more resilient against economic shocks, and the level of poverty in participating villages/districts is on the decline.

At a structural level better legislation to protect children from exploitation is in place and gets realized (for example national laws to protect children from exploitation, an EU Directive on Human Rights Due Diligence). Budgets for education and training have increased, related policies have been successfully influenced by tdh and partners, and education systems have become more inclusive.

Institutionally, the tdh program has gained visibility and attracted support from new donors (institutional, private, businesses).

6. Five criteria for supporting and funding education and empowerment for life perspectives

The following supporting and funding criteria define tdh's approach to accompanying children, youth and partner organizations and civil society movements worldwide in their struggles and fight for life perspectives for marginalized and exploited children.

The proposed education and training activities are not focused on formalized programs but would instead include aspects that have a direct bearing on children's and youth lives (as described under 3).

- Support the promotion of personal, social, and professional skill development that give children and youth realistic and sustainable life perspectives in their respective context (including psycho-social support, peace education and life skills).
- Accompany partner organizations, children and youth to develop, implement and upscale quality programs (based on certain standards and criteria) that respond to the demands of their respective context when it comes to fighting exploitation or other forms of violence and providing decent work opportunities.
- Support collaboration among partner organizations, civil society movements as well as businesses (e.g., multi-actor partnerships) that deal with exploitation, discrimination, and violence and work towards meaningful education and decent work.
- Providing and facilitating capacity building, exchange, and leadership support for partner organizations, children and youth involved in the creation and promotion of quality learning and training opportunities.
- Support advocacy (on all levels, from local to global): strengthen collaboration between partners, children, and youth on the ground, national and international activists (inside or outside tdh) to deliver evidence-based advocacy towards relevant decision-makers to influence policies linked to protection from exploitation and quality standards for educational programs.