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Education in Polish Development Cooperation

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Assistance in the education sector plays an important role in international development cooperation. The ongoing reforms in the Polish system of development cooperation should pay more attention to this sector, and the next mid-term review of Poland's Multiannual Programme offers the best opportunity to re-establish education as one of Poland's top priorities. Streamlining support for education, including the use of a modern programme of development scholarships, could be the most viable option for Poland to increase its bilateral aid budget and contribute effectively to the eradication of global poverty. It might also be seen as an investment in Poland's long-term interests.

Education Aid in International Development Cooperation. Quality education at all levels is an indispensable condition of development for any country. The achievement of universal primary education by 2015 was established by the international community in 2000 as one of eight Millennium Development Goals. Moreover, many of the poorest countries, especially conflict-ridden or fragile states, do not have enough capacity to provide secondary or higher education for their citizens, thus seriously hampering their ability to compete in knowledge-driven global markets. Not surprisingly, support for education has been the traditionally focal point of aid for many donors. In 2010, aid commitments by members of OECD-DAC for the education sector accounted for 8% of their total aid (\$9.6 billion), and several countries dedicated even more of their share of bilateral assistance to this sector (i.e., Germany, 15%; France, 17%; Czech Republic, 13%). A significant share of this assistance is usually attributed to scholarship programmes to study in donor countries.

Although support for primary education is widely regarded as positive, support at the tertiary level spurs more controversy. Some international evaluations show that the development benefits of scholarships are questionable. European NGOs criticise this form of assistance, along with "tied aid" or support for refugees in donor countries, as "inflated aid." According to critics, scholarships rather serve donor country's economies, have little or no impact on growth in a partner country and may even lead to "brain drain," in which the brightest and most active young people are plucked from developing countries. Nevertheless, aid for education at all levels complies with the current and widely used definition of Official Development Assistance (ODA) and as such is still formally counted as development aid. Despite the criticism, it can be argued that when properly aligned with the development objectives of the poorest states, scholarships may contribute to the empowerment of human capital crucial for the eradication of poverty and the sustained growth of developing countries.

Education in Polish Aid. Poland has significant capacities and decades-long experiences in providing assistance in education to developing countries. Scholarships for students from states in the Middle East, East Asia and Africa were an important part of Polish external cooperation in the 1970s and 1980s. Since the modern system of Polish development cooperation was established in 2004, education has been constantly regarded as one of its top priorities. The majority of this support has been distributed in the form of scholarships and administered by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education (MSHE). For example, in 2011 this kind of assistance amounted to PLN 54 million (€12 million), which was less than 4.5% of total Polish foreign assistance. Last year, scholarships covered the total cost of study of 4,832 students and 421 Ph.D. students and long-term apprentices from 72 states, the majority of whom were from Eastern Europe. Apart from that, several smaller projects in primary and secondary education in Asia and Africa have been successfully implemented

in recent years by Polish missionaries and NGOs (i.e., Education for Peace Association, Polish Humanitarian Action).

The current system of education aid is, however, being criticised by Polish NGOs for its loose relationship with the development needs of partner countries and is regarded primarily as a means to increase ODA statistics. Also, OECD-DAC observed in special review in 2010 that “bringing foreign students to Poland to study can be costly and the development outcomes of this kind of aid are uncertain.” The fact that the scholarships target mostly students from neighbouring countries (many of Polish origin) and that the education is being offered mainly in the Polish language in a wide spectrum of specialties is not necessarily important from the perspective of a partner country, and may indeed decrease their development value. Moreover, the management of scholarships by different ministries creates coordination problems and makes this assistance loosely adjusted to the Polish development cooperation priorities.

Despite these flaws, there are many reasons why Poland should consider education aid as a high priority in its foreign assistance. By enlarging the share of aid spent on education, Poland can visibly contribute to the attainment of the Millennium Development Goals and the eradication of poverty, the most important aims of development cooperation. On the other hand, such modality of aid, especially for a young donor like Poland may seem to be the most viable way to rationally and effectively absorb the additional inflow of development funds while other channels of bilateral aid have not yet been properly developed. The fact that the funds would be spent mostly in Poland may encourage Polish policymakers to agree for sharp increases in aid spending to narrow the gap between the committed level of 0.33% GNI by 2015 and today's 0.08%.

Moreover, a strong argument for Polish Universities, especially when they are increasingly facing the challenge of approaching demographic lows, is that a new scholarship programme can help disseminate Polish educational offerings in developing countries and attract more people to gain their higher education in Poland on commercial terms. Personal links and pro-Poland elites in distant countries could best serve Poland's interests in the long-term, expanding business opportunities for Polish companies, and facilitating political and cultural cooperation. Last but not least, by investing in education, Poland strengthens its soft power and promotes a positive image worldwide

Conclusions and Recommendations. The Multiannual Programme of Polish Development Cooperation for 2012–2015 established two parallel priorities for Polish aid programmes: democracy and human rights, and political and economic transformation, but much more attention should be paid to education. In the geographic dimension, only in two cases (out of 13)—the Palestinian Autonomy and a group of Eastern African countries—was education included among Poland's three priority sectors for its partners. The next mid-term review of the Multiannual Programme may then offer an opportune moment to re-evaluate education's position in Polish aid. It seems reasonable that in order to provide aid in accordance with best international practices and to secure benefits for beneficiary countries, the old system of education support may need crucial changes. Thus, more consultations between MFA and MSHE, together with universities and NGOs, may be necessary.

One idea worth considering is to establish a brand new Development Scholarship Programme, coordinated by the MFA or a special agency (e.g., the International Development Cooperation Foundation's “Know how”). To comply with international best practices, this special scheme should be open to eligible students from Poland's priority countries who are willing to study in Poland in English (rather than in Polish) in traditional sectors explicitly linked to the development objectives of their countries (medicine, engineering, agriculture, environment, etc.). Moreover, to prevent a possible brain-drain, a new mechanism must be introduced to ensure that students will return to their home countries after graduation (such as a legally binding education contract, assistance with re-integration, perhaps through jobs offered with Polish run development projects, and by other means).

Poland should also consider the provision of assistance for education through direct budget support in selected partner countries or by financing individual high schools or universities (i.e., to fund a Polish University in a specific capital, such as Kabul or Tbilisi). Simultaneously, it is important to direct more assistance to primary and secondary education through Polish NGOs and missionaries active in that sector in many developing countries. Such comprehensive education support at all levels, planned strategically and in coordination with partner countries, could strengthen the Polish development cooperation system, allow for the more effective use of foreign assistance, and bring mutual benefits to both the developing countries and Poland.