



# EDUCATION and INTERNATIONAL GENEVA PERSPECTIVES FROM THE FIELD

## POLICY BRIEF

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Is International Geneva a key actor in international cooperation, specifically in the education sector? Beyond the perception by the actors directly involved in the city,

it is also essential to understand how actors representing International Geneva on the ground, specifically in the Global South, perceive the entity's influence. This policy brief highlights the main trends of a **study** conducted in 2022, emphasizing the challenges regarding substantial impact, North-South relations, and coordination of actions while pointing out the positive experi-

ences. From these research findings, some recommendations are made for International Geneva to improve the effectiveness of cooperation.



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## **Influence to be determined in the education sector**

**A**ccording to the academic literature\* it is difficult for an international entity, however “powerful” it may be, to have an impact – what is more, a positive one – on national education systems. Indeed, the latter’s activities are subject to dynamics (role of States, diversity of international organizations, adversity contexts...) that disrupt the mechanisms and objectives initially set by this global entity. What about the role of International Geneva within this complexity of influencing the education sector on the ground?

Some interviewees in the field, including those whose organizations are well established in Geneva, may be unfamiliar with or do not explicitly understand the concept of “International Geneva.”

// “[International Geneva] didn’t refer to anything specific to me. I wasn’t really aware of the structures, the objectives, or the working methods.

For those who understand the concept, the specific impact of International Geneva remains abstract, particularly in the education sector and on the ground.

Places such as New York, Washington, or Paris are best known for essential decisions or discussions on the operationalization

of activities. There is also some confusion between International Geneva and the Swiss bilateral cooperation, whose participation is recognized as significant and relevant by several field-based organizations. Furthermore, in an era of growing delocalization of international cooperation activities, institutions may have their headquarters in Geneva, but their actions, particularly in education, are located elsewhere. This complicates the understanding of the concept of “International Geneva.”

// Advocacy is where Geneva has added value because of its location, not only between the different organizations but also because most of the donors, country missions, and so on are there.

Despite the ambiguity of the term “International Geneva,” particularly for the education sector, many actors emphasized the critical role played in the humanitarian field. It has a growing influence, specifically on the issue of education in emergencies.

Furthermore, to consider the absence of substantial influence on the ground, advocacy is mentioned as a possible means of impacting the field of education.

This advocacy can focus on increasing funding, particularly in the field of education in emergencies. It is a matter of mobilizing influential actors on the ground who will then relay messages during their visit to Geneva. These activities are particu-

larly appealing because the interviewees consider this location a neutral and stable zone.

Finally, academic institutions based in International Geneva are recognized as influencing international cooperation in education, both in terms of research and training.

## **A counterproductive top-down approach**

**H**aving faced significant criticism, international cooperation is trying to evolve toward more inclusive practices of “Southization,” which will consider the populations at the heart of its actions.

For an international entity’s influence to be fruitful, the orientations must not be perceived as exogenous and must be owned by the actors in the education system who will put them into practice.

// Generally, people tend to believe that all these decisions or proposals from above are dictated to them. (...) So, I think it’s always important not only to start from the grassroots to understand the issues, but also to involve the local actors.

However, although decried for years, international cooperation, including International Geneva organizations, continues to operate on a top-down basis.

\* The methodology of the study is based on a literature review and semi-structured interviews with senior officials from regional institutions representing the International Geneva organizations in Dakar, where there is a concentration of international organizations in the West Africa region.

Indeed, the orientations come primarily from headquarters: they are not elaborated (or not very much) with the actors on the ground who are actually intimately familiar with the realities.

And at the end, this approach is counterproductive because there is no support from the affected populations and, thus, no will to implement the policy orientations.

Conscious of this need, some International Geneva organizations tend to constantly decentralize the design and implementation of actions at the national level. In this case, the country offices have an actual room for maneuver.

## **Intersectorality under construction**

Intersectorality, particularly between education and other fields, is considered one of the strong points of International Geneva. However, coordinating the actions of international organizations on the ground, specifically by pooling the efforts of organizations from other sectors (health, labor, among others), constitutes a historical challenge.

Our interlocutors recognize this intersectorality as a potential added value for improving international cooperation actions in education. However, the in-

terviews revealed a need for more interaction between the organizations of the International Geneva on the ground.

// [Intersectorality] comes up against a systemic approach that is already highly rigid and rooted, and that comes from the UN... That is to say; the UN has its own approach to intersectorality.

We noted a few positive experiences, particularly during the COVID-19 period in which organizations in the field of education and health worked closely together (for example, hand hygiene awareness).

## **Recommendations**

### **Areas of influence**

- ▶ **Prioritize advocacy, especially for increased resources in favor of education in emergencies**
- ▶ **Enhance academic cooperation, especially in research and training**
- ▶ **Clarify and distinguish the added value of International Geneva compared to Switzerland in general**

### **Ownership**

- ▶ **Decentralize decision-making on education policies to the regional/national level**
- ▶ **Listen to the voice of local actors for actions to be taken, especially in terms of advocacy**

### **Coordination and intersectorality**

- ▶ **Promote interactions between organizations, setting aside the personal interests of each**
- ▶ **Facilitate intersectorality through more flexible cooperation mechanisms, particularly at the level of the United Nations system**

## **Further information/contact**

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