

OUR KEY POINTS

- **Include a clear link to the broader 2030 Agenda** and point towards a holistic SDG strategy still to be developed by the European Commission
- **Ensure adequate, long-term funding at European, national, regional and local level** for environmental sustainability education, using different funding programmes in ways that create synergies and complementarity, especially investing in teacher training
- **Address the need for equity, diversity and inclusion** for all levels of education, including access for learners in peripheral and rural regions
- **Fully acknowledge the role of civil society and non-educational institutions** such as youth organisations, NGOs, employers and **provide support to scale up their innovative practices**
- **Develop data on existing practices** with for example a mapping exercise that covers all sectors (formal, non-formal and informal) and levels (from early childhood education to adult learning) of education and training
- These approaches should be promoted:
 - **Break down silos between different education levels and sectors while maintaining autonomy for individual institutions.**
 - **Interdisciplinary approaches and remove obstacles to institutions wanting to develop interdisciplinary learning**
 - **Experiential learning** with outdoor activities and considering nature as ‘co-teacher’
 - **Learning for active global citizenship**
 - **Learner-centred and transformative learning** developing cognitive and non-cognitive skills, such as critical thinking and competences for collaboration, understanding and thinking systemically, and empowering to take responsible action
 - **Fostering synergies and collaborations between different levels** (from early childhood education to adult learning) **and different modalities** (formal, non-formal and informal)
 - **Intergenerational learning** where learners of different ages and generations to support and learn from each other

Context

In the autumn of 2021, the European Commission is due to present its proposal for a Council Recommendation on education for environmental sustainability, aiming at mainstreaming an environmental sustainability perspective in education and training that promotes the topic at all levels of education. This is a welcome step that could help the European Union and its member states to be frontrunners in adopting and implementing policies for sustainable development. With the present paper, SDG Watch aims to provide input to the European Commission for the preparation of its proposal.

This initiative touches on an important part of the sustainability agenda: education is part of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG4), and it is by itself an essential tool and enabler for the transformation of society, as expressed in SDG Target 4.7: *“all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including among others through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture’s contribution to sustainable development.”* For this reason, it is positive that the EU member states want to take up this topic together. There are a large number of initiatives across Europe to further education for environmental sustainability; teachers and students alike are deeply committed to this cause. Promoting a whole-institution approach is very helpful and will allow institutions to scale up existing initiatives and develop strategic, long-term prospects, where this does not already exist. For instance, in Italy the Education Ministry launched in June 2021 the School ReGeneration Plan, that aims to introduce in a structural and integrated way teachings on the 2030 Agenda in Italian schools of all levels, with the aim of forming new generations conscious of the planetary boundaries. The Plan was formed thanks also to the contribution of civil society networks and other key stakeholders.

Beware of a siloed approach

Education for environmental sustainability covers a fundamental aspect of the Agenda 2030, but should also be seen in the context of a broader approach of education for sustainability, encompassing - in addition to environmental protection in light of planetary boundaries - aspects of social equality, prosperity and well-being. **These aspects need to be seen with their interlinkages, which requires system thinking, and inter- and transdisciplinary learning.**

Promoting education for environmental sustainability should entail initiatives to **break down silos between different education levels and sectors while maintaining autonomy for individual institutions.**

Bridging the formal, non-formal and informal sectors will be crucial to achieve the Council Recommendation and the Agenda 2030 goals. Learning can happen anytime, anywhere. In this sense, **lifelong and lifewide learning must be at the centre** of the debate on achieving sustainable societies and all learning sectors should have a voice in this debate. Cooperation between these sectors is therefore key to unlocking the innovation required to tackle the related environmental, economic and social challenges. This cooperation can support institutions in the process of

transforming learning and training environments and the integration of sustainability principles into all education and training settings (from early childhood to adulthood and into old age).

Despite the positive relationship between education and the achievement of the SDGs, education remains an under-financed and under-prioritised sector. Supporting institutions, teachers, trainers and learners, innovating novel hybrid forms of learning or introducing new sustainable practices will require resources. **Ensuring adequate, long-term funding at European, national, regional and local level is necessary** in order to unlock the full potential of sustainable development education across all learning sectors. At the European level, **using different funding programmes in ways that create synergies and complementarity** will also be very helpful to create concrete tools supporting cooperation, dialogue and good practice exchange between relevant actors, as well as upscaling and broadening existing good practice.

The overall goal must be to kindle a transformation from a growth-based model towards a model of society that aims to foster well-being and respect both for the planet and the people in unison. This cannot be done in a piecemeal manner but needs a holistic strategy by the European Commission and the member states, to implement enabling frameworks and investment for sustainable development.

Therefore, while the Council Recommendation may take a focus on education for environmental sustainability, **this should include a clear link to the broader 2030 Agenda and point towards a holistic SDG strategy** which is still to be developed.

This would be important with regards to educational institutions and providers that are already addressing the SDGs. For example, a recent survey by the European University Association showed that very few HEI address environmental aspects only, whereas the majority embraces more holistic approaches considering the SDGs.

Elements of education for environmental sustainability and how to promote them

Education for environmental sustainability should be seen as a tonic for enhancing learning and teaching in Europe. **Learner-centred approaches to learning, with different pedagogical practices aiming to activate learners, is a proven method to enhance learning and is very well suited to increase awareness about sustainability** as well as learning sustainable practices. This includes transformative learning, as recognised in the General Affairs Council conclusions on SDGs from 22 June 2021. It is also important **to promote interdisciplinary approaches and remove obstacles to institutions wanting to develop interdisciplinary learning** - for example rigid programme accreditation for higher education. **Experiential learning is a powerful tool** in this respect. There is evidence suggesting that for example outdoor learning has positive effects on children's pro environmental attitudes in adulthood as well as on their health, well-being and overall competence development. This kind of experiential learning is a key component of several non-formal education approaches. Moreover, academic literature and pedagogical practice are growing around the notion of **nature as 'co-teacher'** where the natural environment is no longer only a backdrop upon which learning happens but an active agent in teaching and learning processes. The ability to **revise our relationship and interdependencies with the natural world is thus an important green skill** which learning in its various forms can help us to develop.

Learning for active global citizenship should be a pillar for raising awareness about sustainability as a common global project. A very well documented spillover effect of taking this global citizenship approach to promote sustainability is that it has the potential to influence people's behaviour in other areas of life and benefit all human activities. Such awareness can also be created through institutional practices, for instance through healthy and sustainable food in education institutions.

These initiatives must address the need for equity, diversity and inclusion for all levels of education, including access for learners in peripheral and rural regions. Commitment to these principles from EU member states would be a positive signal.

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought the lack of investment in training for educators sharply into the spotlight as many lacked the tools and competences needed to adapt to remote, online and blended teaching and learning on such a huge scale. This reinforces the **need for investment in institutions, enabling them to develop teacher training and continuous professional development as a crucial prerequisite for developing curricula that are sensitive to sustainability** and that can promote a sustainability-driven mindset in and through education. Likewise, institutions need support to develop comprehensive learning and teaching approaches, from strategy to curriculum and services, which consider sustainability. The provision of lifelong learning opportunities for educators will be essential to deploy pedagogies and androgogies suited to education for sustainable development through analogue, digital or blended means, keeping in mind the fact that digital tools only bring added value if incorporated in a carefully planned and purposeful way. This kind of support should be available to all educators and trainers, including in non-formal and informal sectors where civil society organisations have a wealth of experience and expertise in facilitating learning about sustainability-related issues.

Lifelong learning and the interlinkage between different kinds of education will also be essential for achieving the ambitions of education for environmental sustainability. All kinds of **learner-centred and transformative learning should enable learners to develop their cognitive and non-cognitive skills, such as critical thinking and competences for collaboration, understanding and thinking systemically, and empowering them to take responsible action as global citizens.** It is also important that both non-formal and informal learning are recognised and valued respectively. Facilitating the recognition of diverse forms of prior learning should happen by either using existing instruments or – when creating new ones – ensure that there is coherence with what already exists. This also applies to any new competence framework for education for environmental sustainability.

Fostering synergies and collaborations between different levels (from early childhood education to adult learning) and different modalities (formal, non-formal and informal) helps to promote a holistic, long-term view on learner development that goes beyond specific environments or age ranges. Thus it is laying the ground for more innovative and inclusive approaches to teaching and learning, and to achieve more coherent policies on lifelong learning and its contribution to the sustainable development agenda.

It is equally important to support intergenerational learning as a part of cross-sector cooperation, a strong catalyst for mutual learning relations. **Opportunities should be provided for learners of different ages and generations to support and learn from each other,** sharing their knowledge, skills and experience. More initiatives and projects with mixed age groups between educational institutions and local communities are needed, such as opening up schools and higher education institutions to non-traditional publics. Enabling such learning directly contributes to the sustainable development agenda in light of its promotion of solidarity between generations.

Engage civil society and empower stakeholders

As education for environmental sustainability must happen in all parts of society through lifelong formal, non-formal and informal learning, it is crucial to **fully acknowledge the role of civil society and non-educational institutions**. Youth organisations, NGOs, employers and many others have crucial roles to play. **Civil society organisations have a wealth of experience and expertise in facilitating learning about sustainability-related issues. Therefore, providing support to scale up their innovative practices will bring about benefits for all stakeholders.**

Support to stakeholders must be done in a way that enables them to make their own strategic choices regarding education for environmental sustainability, suitable to their societal context and for their community. They should have the capacity to set their own frameworks for reaching the commonly agreed goals.

Need for evidence

While the goals of education for environmental sustainability are shared throughout many different groups of stakeholders, it is important that **decisions on tools and investments are made on the basis of evidence**. **More data on practices** and what is already implemented for education for environmental sustainability will be needed, and **a mapping exercise that covers all sectors (formal, non-formal and informal) and levels (from early childhood education to adult learning) of education and training** could be a valuable first step.

Signed by the steering group of SDG Watch Europe

And the following member organisations:

European Environmental Bureau

Lifelong Learning Platform

SLOGA, Slovenian NGO Platform for Development, Global Education and Humanitarian Aid

European University Association

Eurogroup for Animals

Italian Alliance for Sustainable Development

Cooperatives Europe