



European Education Area Strategic Framework  
**Working Group on Schools, Sub-group on  
Learning for Sustainability**

Networking of non-formal and formal education programmes: strategies  
at national and municipal levels

Key messages



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# **Networking of non-formal and formal education programmes: Strategies at national and municipal levels**

Key Messages

European Education Area Working Group Schools

*Learning for Sustainability*

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## 1. Networking formal and non-formal education for learning for sustainability in the local context

These key messages were developed during the peer-learning activity which took place in Hamburg (3-5 June 2024) on the topic of formal and non-formal education in learning for sustainability. The key messages are inspired by the lessons learnt from good practice examples from Hamburg as well as examples presented by participants.

Non-formal education providers (e.g., non-governmental, youth and community organisations, nature associations and clubs, local businesses, public institutions and knowledge centres, etc) play an important role in the attainment of more sustainable futures by offering learning opportunities to learners of all ages and from different walks of life. In addition, they can support schools by **hosting learners on visits** to centres and venues of non-formal education (e.g., environmental centres, museums, libraries, natural parks, sport venues and cultural sites) and by **offering or contributing to** learning for sustainability in schools.

Non-formal education extends learning beyond the school gates and brings experiences that strengthen whole-institution and community-based learning. It can help build a sense of belonging and connection to the physical and socio-cultural environment. Increasingly, education authorities are assisting schools to make connections with non-formal education, helping to **build learning landscapes<sup>1</sup> for sustainability in cities and municipalities** (Tilbury, 2024). Local municipalities can also actively bring stakeholders together for this purpose.

## 2. Values and opportunities of connected learning for sustainability

Despite their distinctive roles and features, non-formal and formal education should not be considered separate tracks but instead as two sides of the same coin that can complement each other and strengthen the overall learning experiences on sustainability.

- Non-formal education centres and venues act as **'connecting spaces'**, connecting people, spaces and learning content. These centres convene learners from different strands of the community and across age groups, engaging in learning activities that can **improve inter-generational relationships** and **lifelong learning**.
- Non-formal education can help **connect head, heart and hands-on learning experiences** by offering practical and **relevant** activities in a local or regional context. This can complement the academic expectations of schools and formal curricula.
- Non-formal education providers bring **innovation, creativity and experimentation** to learning for sustainability and provide learning opportunities for students that appeal to their emotional intelligence and connections in ways that help deepen commitment to and action for the environment (Gonçalves and Tilbury, 2024; Wals, Mochizuki, and Leicht, 2017).

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<sup>1</sup> Learning landscape is a specific term used in the German context. The term refers to long-term, professionally designed learning offers, aimed at joint, planned action, actualised through local politically desired networks that – starting from the perspective of the learning subject – include formal educational places and non-formal learning worlds and refer to a defined local space. Only if all these factors are met is it possible to build a learning landscape in which sustainable, long-term changes can be achieved through professionally reflected, planned, action-oriented collaboration between various actors and the support of the community.

- The multi-disciplinary, real world inspired and hands-on learning experiences that non-formal education bring, can help learners develop sustainability competences and transversal skills such as collaboration and communication.
- When formal and non-formal education networking is maximised and connected to the overall strategic visions of cities and municipalities on sustainability, this partnership can transform and foster a **culture of lifelong and inclusive learning** for sustainability in every sector and across education levels. Hamburg, a city of bridges, demonstrates the concept of a learning city as an integrated learning ecosystem.

### 3. Existing challenges to overcome

In order to maximise the values and opportunities that networking of formal and non-formal education brings, critical structural and mindset challenges need to be overcome:

- **Connected policy-making sees education as an integrated learning ecosystem:** Inter-governmental collaboration and alignment is necessary to be able to support the development of a learning landscape for sustainability that links related topics and agendas in education and beyond (e.g., digital, energy, climate change).
- **The whole community needs to be involved** in order to have a transformative and long-term impact. This requires a **search for complementarity and problem-solving**. The goal is not to impose work and straitjacket approaches on anyone but to co-develop, co-design and work 'with' rather than 'expecting from'. Strong communication and openness between formal and non-formal actors and key community stakeholders (e.g., parents) is critical to enable this transformative mindset.

### 4. Support mechanisms to strengthen collaboration

Stakeholders active in formal and non-formal education and the broader community can be supported in a range of ways to break down barriers and change mindset.

- Close **multi-level governance collaboration** and **political support** between administrative levels (e.g., state and city) can help channel expertise and resources for achieving common goals on sustainability and networking formal and non-formal education.
- **Frameworks that map out all parties, roles and responsibilities** (e.g., local authorities, municipalities, youth, parents, experts, NGOs, industries, unions, etc) in the local area can support **consultation and collaboration on sustainability**.
- **Placing the whole-institution and whole-community approaches at the heart of such strategic frameworks helps encourage** community collaboration on sustainability. The whole-institution approach encourages educational institutions to collaborate with the community around the school. Guidelines could be coupled with training for school leaders and education personnel on how to create, implement and communicate the whole-institution approach plan and strategy.
- **Planning and providing funding with a longer timeframe help ensure structural impact.** Formal and non-formal education providers across Europe face budget cuts and shorter timeframes for their project-based work on sustainability. This weakens the quality of the educational offers and the time available for networking. It would be beneficial if public tenders and funding opportunities for civil society organisations had a longer and more secure timeframe. This would strengthen the ability of the non-formal

education and formal sector to be more strongly involved, support non-formal learning for sustainability, and take part in city-level consultations on how to build the integrated learning ecosystem.

- **Formal and non-formal education providers need support and guidance regarding logistics, funding, and quality assurance** to incorporate high-quality non-formal learning for sustainability. The learning city approach can provide a space for peer-to-peer learning between stakeholders, but this is insufficient. National and regional level support, especially regarding direct funding, incentivises non-formal and formal education providers to be involved and implement a community-focused whole-institution approach. Overall, teachers need flexibility, time and support from their leaders and management to achieve a good integration of formal and non-formal education in their lessons.
- **Stronger integration and prioritisation of learning for sustainability in the curriculum** will indirectly help strengthen the collaboration between non-formal and formal learning for sustainability. A curriculum that does not clearly reflect learning for sustainability can prove challenging for teachers seeking to promote non-formal education experiences. Schools and teachers would benefit from clarity and guidance on how sustainability can be prioritised in both formal and non-formal contexts given curricular frameworks and expectations.
- **Strengthen professional standards and competence-based initial and continuous teacher education to ensure educators and school leaders are prepared to mobilise and partner effectively** to enhance sustainability. Teacher education can include a stronger focus on the multipliers-participatory approach needed for networking formal and non-formal learning for sustainability in schools. In the non-formal education sector, professional development opportunities should also be strengthened to support the nurturing of competences needed to network sectors and stakeholders.

## 5. Quality assurance of non-formal learning for sustainability

Quality assurance frameworks and processes constitute another crucial support for ensuring high-quality and effective learning for sustainability. This involves reviewing non-formal education provisions to maintain and improve quality, equity, and efficiency. Setting benchmarks that identify minimum standards of quality in learning for sustainability would help advance this agenda in the non-formal sector. Approaches to quality assurance in formal education cannot be entirely copied to the non-formal sector but can serve to inspire and guide the non-formal education sector. It is important, however, that rigorous quality standards do not quash innovation in the non-formal education sector.

- **National/regional accreditation** can provide quality assurance and encourage educators and school leaders to take up community-based learning opportunities and transition towards a whole-institution approach to learning for sustainability. To include collaboration with non-formal education and other stakeholders could be a key indicator of quality of learning for sustainability.
- **Quality and certification labels and awards** for non-formal education provide **recognition, motivation and external visibility** for non-formal education providers to improve pedagogical and educational outcomes as well as encourage educational institutions to collaborate to extend experiences beyond the schools walls. The labels and awards also support further quality development and securing of funding.

- **Self-evaluation that combines qualitative and quantitative indicators and perspectives from students and teachers** could be helpful in improving provision of non-formal learning for sustainability.
- **Learning from errors.** There must be a recognised time and space for exploration and making 'mistakes' to foster genuine learning. High-quality whole-school learning for sustainability can often involve trial and error, and this applies to both formal and non-formal education.

## 6. Good practice examples

During the peer-learning activity, participants learned about initiatives in Hamburg and in other examples that showcase excellent collaboration between formal and non-formal education for learning for sustainability.

- In Germany, there is a strong focus on supporting the work of regions and local municipalities on education for sustainable development at the national level too. The [national network for education for sustainable development](#) includes network and expert committees for local authorities. Between 2021 and 2027, the Federal Ministry of Education and Research funds the development of an education management system for municipalities that serves as a digitised and interconnected landscape for lifelong learning. The ministry also provides other support structures such as a network of expertise and funding for a competence centre on education for sustainable development.
- [The education for sustainable development competence centre](#) is a joint project operating from four locations (Halle, Leipzig, München and Bissendorf). It promotes action on local level in the UNESCO-programme 'education for sustainable development for 2030' to support 46 local authorities nation-wide with the integration of education for sustainable development at all levels of learning in local communities. It provides professional and methodological expertise, information and shares good practice, holds training and peer-learning activities and conducts science-based process evaluation on education for sustainable development.
- The Federal Ministry of Education and Research and the German Commission for UNESCO jointly award the 'National Award – Education for Sustainable Development' and the 'National Prize – Education for Sustainable Development' to recognise exemplary educational initiatives that integrate education for sustainable development holistically in their learning and teaching programmes. [The National Award](#) focuses on structural implementation and the whole institution approach, and is awarded several times yearly. [The National Prize](#) is awarded every other year to ten exceptional initiatives in four different categories with an endowed prize of 10.000 euros each. All award winners and their profiles are listed on the interactive [ESD-Map for Germany](#). Community events are held regularly to connect award winners and educational stakeholders for peer learning and networking at the national and international levels. Both award schemes are embedded in the UNESCO-framework 'Education for Sustainable Development: Towards achieving the SDGs (ESD for 2030)'.
- The city of Hamburg is a leading example of collaboration between formal and non-formal education on sustainability. The city recognises that learning for sustainability is a collaborative effort with each player contributing their specific expertise, learning location, and pedagogical approach, and places formal and non-formal education on an equal footing in this effort. Policy makers representing education ministries, urban

planning, and environmental and energy policy areas work together to create integrated policy making and integrated learning opportunities for sustainability in the city.

- The ambitious '2030 Masterplan', led by Hamburg's Ministry of Environment, Climate, Energy and Agriculture involves more than 100 stakeholders and 70+ institutions connecting different parts of the education system. The Masterplan aims to integrate education for sustainable development into all areas and levels of education and to encourage networking among non-formal and formal education stakeholders. Work is divided into six strands: early childhood education and care, schools, higher education, VET, extracurricular education, and districts (municipalities), each led by formal education and civil society/NGOs representatives. The plan is based on a thorough stakeholder mapping and clear partnership guidance, and is supported by a communication and cooperation platform and the education for sustainable development competence centre.
- Schools that can demonstrate their efforts to reduce energy consumption and integrate climate education into the curriculum are eligible to apply for a climate label. This program, administered by [Hamburg's Centre for Teacher Education](#), provides schools with toolkits, teaching materials, and teacher training. The Teacher Training institute also provide professional development courses for teachers (30 hours per school year) on ESD focusing on content, didactical and methods orientation to ensure teachers are ready to implement ESD in an interdisciplinary and project-based way.
- The city also funds several state of the art learning centres that bridge formal and non-formal learning for sustainability. Two examples are worth mentioning:
  - [MINTarium](#) – a STEM education centre (located in an economically deprived area) where schools can attend hands-on workshops in science, engineering, maths and computer science with a focus on sustainability. The centre has cutting-edge, industry-standard technology that allows students to gain hands-on experience in fields such as genetics, ship building, aviation, and robotics from a sustainability perspective, all the while guided by seconded teachers and higher education students/teacher candidates. It promotes interest in green-related studies, careers and job opportunities relevant to the Hamburg region.
  - [Gut Karlishohe](#) - Hamburg's green oasis for sustainable development, is an outdoor learning centre on the outskirts of the city where students of all ages can participate in hands-on workshops in nature learning about biodiversity, the environment, and sustainability. A teacher training programme is also available.
- UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning presented its [Learning Cities initiatives](#) which brings together 350+ cities worldwide working on education, including on climate and sustainability. It defines a learning city as one that effectively mobilises resources in every sector for inclusive learning across education levels, families and communities, workplaces, through modern learning technologies, with a focus on quality, excellence and lifelong learning. The initiative supports and improves the practice of lifelong learning in the world's cities through policy dialogue, partnerships and peer learning. The network holds thematic meetings and tailored guidelines and knowledge exchange on education for sustainable development in learning cities. In terms of quality assurance, it should be highlighted that UNESCO courses on ESD and courses supporting the learning cities initiative are officially approved and recognised.
- [ECO-UNESCO Ireland](#) is a leading Irish environmental education and youth organisation that educates, empower and inspire young people to conserve the environment and take positive environmental action. It does so through a direct environmental youth programme, annual young environmentalist award and by providing training and upskilling programmes and resources.

- [Good Planet Belgium](#) is a Belgian NGO that aims to inspire and support lifelong learning and action for sustainability through education, innovative solutions-oriented actions and partnership building. The NGO runs a diverse range of non-formal programmes on sustainability/environmental education in schools, community centres, for companies, organisations, local authorities and the general public.
- [The National Environmental Education Action Plan for Sustainability in Spain](#) (PAEAS), operating for the period 2021 to 2025, aims to promote a cultural change for sustainability. It does so by prioritising and coordinating initiatives in the formal, non-formal and in-formal education fields and providing guidelines and tools on how to address climate and ecological crisis and a socially-fair transition. The Action Plan has six key areas of action: ESD in public policy, innovation in education programmes and activities, ESD in education and training, professionalisation of ESD, spaces for ESD and citizen action.
- [Horizon Europe Levers for Climate project](#) presented their work on climate education involving schools, NGOs and other community groups in seven European regions. A representative of LATRA, an inclusion/education NGO working in Lesbos, Greece, presented their work on raising awareness of the need for climate action through the medium of theatre. Their non-formal education offer is based on collaborative and youth-led pedagogy and aims to connect the ideas of learning adventures with entrepreneurial ventures. The project highlights the need to understand carbon neutral schools in the specific local context linking sustainability objectives with European values and history, solidarity and agency.

## 7. Suggested further readings

- European Commission, 'Why Is Quality Assurance in School Education Important?', n.d. <https://education.ec.europa.eu/education-levels/school-education/quality-assurance>.
- Gonçalves, S., and D. Tilbury, *Harnessing the Potential of Non-Formal Education for Sustainability, EENEE Report*, European Commission, 2024.
- Heimlich, J., 'Non-Formal and in-Formal Environmental Education', *Oxford Bibliographies Online*, 2024.
- Tilbury, D., *Local Learning for Sustainability: Places, Partners and Participation, European Education Area Working-Group for Schools: Learning for Sustainability*, European Commission, 2024.
- Tilbury, D., and C. Galvin, *European Commission Input Paper: A Whole School Approach to Learning for Environmental Sustainability. Expert Briefing Paper in Support of the First Meeting of the EU Working Group Schools: Learning for Sustainability.*, European Commission, 2022.
- Wals, A., Y. Mochizuki, and A. Leicht, 'Critical Case-Studies of Non-Formal and Community Learning for Sustainable Development', *International Review of Education*, Vol. 63, 2017, pp. 783–792.

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