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The European Association for the Education of Adults (EAEA) is the voice of non-formal adult education in Europe. EAEA is a European NGO with more than 124 member organisations in 43 countries and represents more than 60 million learners Europe-wide. EAEA promotes adult learning and access to and participation in non-formal adult education for all; particularly for groups that are currently underrepresented.



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“The future of our planet requires
immediate action – in real time”

Jean-Claude Juncker – President of the European Commission, 2017

Let's get our hands dirty

Why we are here

Adult learning and education is a fertile ground, not only for the provision of skills, knowledge and competencies for sustainable development, but also to empower **social transformation** as a whole.

Time is moving quickly, and anything around the term sustainability has gained widespread public attention in the past years. With the emergence of the Friday's for Future movement and many other groups around the globe, sustainability has become a topic in every area of life. From the dinner table, to the Sunday night talk show; into our local adult education centres; sustainability, for long ascribed to the conservation,- and environmentalists - is arriving at the centre stage of many European societies.

In 2018 EAEA published a background paper on **Adult Education and Sustainability**. Today, three years later the world has moved substantively. EAEA takes this background paper as an opportunity to bring us onto the same page, establish shared definitions and glance into the most recent policy developments. This paper gives room for in-depth discussion and advocacy. It acts as a call to action on the role of non-formal adult learning and education towards building a sustainable future for all. Time for soil. Let's get our hands dirty.

Why now: our planet, citizens and social justice cannot wait

It is 2021 and the climate crisis is as present as ever. As the water shortages in Europe caused crop and forests loss, many of us think back to the pictures of planes desperately dropping water over burning woods from California to Australia. Europe has also witnessed its hottest summers and coldest winters, leading to forest ecosystems dying and widespread water shortages. The UK experienced record-breaking temperatures that hadn't been seen in over 122 years, with the hottest February in history at 18° C. Lithuania experienced an increase in sea levels and temperatures and in 2018 France was hit by major floods and landslides (IPCC, 2021; BCC,2020).

Are our adults educated to deal with such unprecedented events; rapid changes in our environment?

EAEA BACKGROUND PAPER
ADULT EDUCATION
AND SUSTAINABILITY
SEPTEMBER 2018

COVID-19: no halt to planetary degradation?



Despite the widespread applause for the effects of the COVID lockdown on industry's emission (e.g. temporary halt to car production) and society's behaviour (less flying); it is clear that the lockdown related fall in emissions **is just a tiny drop on the long-term consequences of years of emissions.** (CarbonBrief, 2020; Guardian, 2021). Simple climate models estimate that global temperatures will only be around 0.01° Celsius lower as a result of COVID-19 than if countries followed their original emission pledges (Forster, 2020). This clearly presents that even a year of lockdown and reduced international travel is not a solution to the climate challenges the world is facing.

One major takeaway from the lock-down, however, is the understanding of the power of political will. Societies transformed within weeks under the emergency measurements imposed by governments during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. Major countries have shown that action is possible if there is political will. Government incentives and decisions to affect public life and can/have le(a)d to a standstill of major industries.

How has this crisis changed our view on the government's ability to act on the climate emergency?

The COVID-19 took a toll on all societies, while it also surfaced the importance of solidarity and care. As the pandemic took many lives of loved ones across Europe, it also exacerbated existing inequalities and revealed how important critical literacy and education is – for all.

Finding and digesting important health information and relying on media outlets for everyday behavioural adjustments, requires citizens to think critically and take mature decisions. Decisions on topics such as social distancing, vaccinations and consumer behaviour. The rise in conspiracy theories and illness due to uninformed health decisions revealed the importance of adult learning and education. Health literacy is just as important as we confront the rise in heat strokes, due to increasing temperatures.

A just recovery does not only require the upskilling and reskilling of a wide range of workers but is also an opportunity, if not a central moment in time, to rethink the necessity of lifelong learning: educating citizens of all ages to be resilient and equipped to cope with any crisis'.

Rethinking what it means to return to normal - requires rethinking the importance of adult learning and education in our societies today.



What is at stake?



Sustainability has been on our plates for years. Only recently, however, the topic has made it through to all parts of society. **A just and fair recovery for all includes a sustainability transition.** It is a chance to not only demand the inclusion of sustainability into the curricula of our children but makes it a reality for adult education across Europe. At stake: nothing less than our society's health and its democratic potential.

Without taking this opportunity we lose the chance to build up a society of critical thinkers, collaborative doers and equipped citizens - paving the way into a shared sustainable future.

A future that starts today. A future for generations to come - to live on an inhabitable earth for all.

Education has been on our plate for as long we can imagine. The solution to it all, yet, structurally underfunded; today, education is in crisis as some would say. The inequalities exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic **have showcased large gaps of access, attainment and participation in education** – across all education sectors. How can critical health literacy towards a global pandemic be acquired if the adult learner is preoccupied with taking care of the family at home? Adult education is able to provide information, debating spaces and creativity to adjust to the challenges and develop new lifestyles, new projects, and new approaches necessary for sustainable development (Manifesto, EAEA, 2019).

Adult education is crucial not only to support individual learners but also key for social cohesion and to build resilience among communities. Resilience needed in any crisis.



We are not in the same boat We are in the same storm

International Perspectives on Adult Learning & Sustainability

Adult education is dependent on the country, the context and even the local community. The challenges posed by climate change affect everyone (storm) but do not affect them to the same extent (not in the same boat). Adult learning and education is a fertile ground for social transformation, yet, requires messengers, educators and role models. Seeing ALE not only as a means to but as sustainability itself enables us to see the inherent opportunity of partnership, dialogue and transformation (Schreiber-Barsch and Mauch, 2019). ALE can empower learners to deal with uncertainties, form strategies and mechanisms to deal with risks – necessary to envision a just and fair future.



Education plays a central role across the 17 goals, as a driver, catalyser and companion of sustainable development of any kind. From educating farmers for more sustainable agriculture (Goal 2), to ensuring healthy lives (Goal 3), education is the centre stage for change. Aside of formal education, non-formal learning plays a crucial role in less institutionalised settings. Agricultural development will not only come through formal up and re-skilling of farmers but also rely on structures of non-formal ALE to change the public's awareness and demand for e.g. sustainable agricultural products.

Non-formal education for adults is not only a bi-product of the 17 goals but rather an underlying driver that is crucial to achieving the UN's goals by 2030.

Sustainable Development Goals

The Sustainable Development Goals (nothing new to most of us) set out an ambitious plan, which was signed by the majority of countries across the world. The Agenda 2030 is a blueprint to achieve a better and more sustainable future for all. Adult education providers are not only passive observers of the process but made out as drivers to move the transition.

The Lifelong Learner

Closest to the heart is SDG's Goal 4, which seeks to ensure "inclusive and equitable quality education and [promote] lifelong learning opportunities for all". Who do the United Nations mean when they refer to lifelong learning for all? The statement only indirectly refers to adult learners and therefore it is especially necessary to stress the role and importance of non-formal adult learning on the Lifelong Learning agenda.

Sustainability & Citizenship

The SDGs are very clear on the importance of global citizenship education. Goal 4.7 speaks for itself and outlines that **"all learners should acquire relevant skills and knowledge about sustainable development and global citizenship."** While citizenship education is often not part of formal education, non-formal learning opportunities provide spaces for learning on citizenship and civic duties. What is the citizen's responsibility when it comes to climate change? Non-formal learning can empower adults and equip them with the knowledge and confidence to connect citizenship with sustainability and social justice with climate justice. A mature and well-informed and educated citizenry is at the core of sustainable development, whatever shape it takes.

SDGs & accountability

How can we be mobilised by the SDGs soft power?

The SDGs are soft power. What does that mean? Although the majority of UN member states have signed onto them, the UN cannot enforce or hold countries accountable for the implementation of the goals. Instead, states and their respective populations need to hold themselves accountable. The High-Level Political Forum is a platform for states to measure their progress of the SDGs and hold each other accountable by word, through the presentation of the voluntary reports (Elfert, 2019).

Across the European Union and the world, the SDGs have received widespread attention, influencing policy and projects for sustainable development.

Another challenge to the implementation of the SDGs is the phrasing of the targets. Instead of providing a strategy for financing or an indicator for participation in adult learning, the SDGs merely speak to a "substantial" increase of adult learners. This soft benchmark allows for country-specific measurements **but exerts little or no pressure on governments to push up their targets.** Despite unambitious targets and no direct accountability mechanisms, many countries have followed the guidelines, departing on their own journeys to meet the 2030 agenda.



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A chance to alter the agenda?

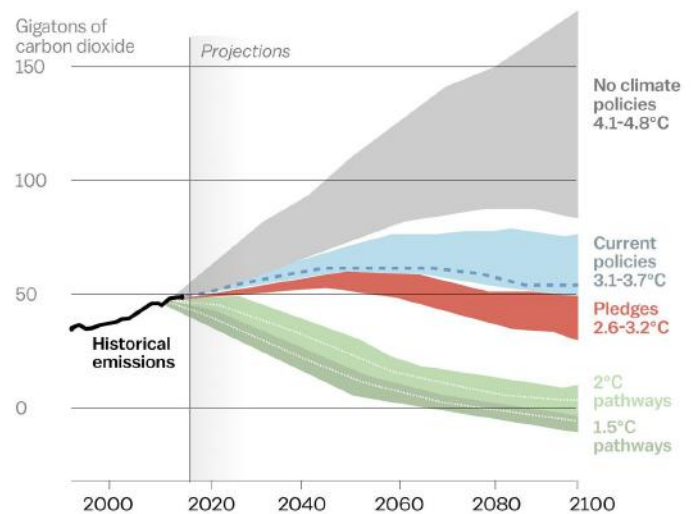
The International Conference on Adult Education (CONFINTEA), due to take place in 2022 in Morocco is focusing on the role of adult education towards the Agenda 2030. The prospective implementation of CONFINTEA's recommendations into the UNESCO's conference might enable more accountability of member states. The Global Report on Adult Learning and Education (GRALE), of which the next edition is to be expected alongside the conference in 2022, is another opportunity to bring sustainability higher on the agenda.

Werner Mauch argues that alongside adult education provision and literacy, citizenship education, the role of ALE dealing with COVID-19, the implementation of ICT, as CONFINTEA's key themes, the conference will stress the role of ALE as a driver for sustainable development (DVV, 2020). UIL's Mauch argues that **ALE needs to be recognised as a driving force for sustainability, enabling citizen to have the "appropriate abilities, skills, and competencies."** "Adult Education in service of the global community" is likely to be the key message of CONFINTEA.

Yet, what role does the planet play, as we are in "service to the global community"?

Effect of current pledges and policies

Global greenhouse gas emissions



Source: Climate Action Tracker

European policy and the SDGs: commitments and achievements

The European Union's latest Green Deal is a great signifier that shows the strong link between the European and the international agenda. The European Union has been on the sustainability track for a while. In 2018 Frans Timmermans and Jyrki Katainen published a reflection on the ways in which Europe can live up to the 2015 Paris Commitments (The Paris Agreement in 2015 sets out global standards, such as the ambition to stay below 1.5° C of global warming).

The paper calls on education institutions to embrace the SDGs as a guide for their activities. Across the paper, education is employed, chapter by chapter **as a driver and opportunity to lead the change**. The concrete role of (adult) education for sustainable development, however, does not surface.



European boats Afloat - navigating the storm

European perspectives on adult learning and sustainability

What has the European Union actually achieved so far, with regard to the SDGs?

By 2018 the EU had reduced the share of leavers from education and training (17% in 2002 – 10.5 % in 2017) and increased the share of the adult population with minimum digital skills to 67%. Although not directly linked to environmental sustainability, the indicators contribute to an overall narrative shift in favour of social, economic and eventually ecological sustainability.

Despite these successes, the EU lags behind with 11% out of the aspired 15% of participation in adult learning.

Today in 2021, we look back at a year of a global pandemic in which participation of adults in online and distance education has further decreased, despite the online provision and reduction in access, mobility and travel barriers (Jeon et. al., forthcoming, 2021). Other major themes of the SDGs, such as inclusivity have been taken up by European policy such as the 2025 European Education Area and the New Skills Agenda. The next chapter will highlight how global targets manifest in European policy.



Forest fires in Portugal

Today, sustainability is a reoccurring topic across European education policy – mostly, however, referring to social or economic sustainability. Environmental sustainability as a theme remains largely tied to renewable industries, agriculture and conservation. **"Greening" has only recently been taken up as a target of education stakeholders.** Seeking to become the world's first climate-neutral continent by 2050, the European Green Deal was launched as a major milestone of Europe's sustainability ambition.

"Europe embarks on its ambitious green and digital transitions in a more unsettled and unpredictable world "(von der Leyen, 2020).

The Green Deal



The European Green Deal is fundamentally a competitive growth strategy to become the first climate-neutral continent by 2050 and to reduce carbon emissions by 50% in 2030. The initiation of the **European Green Deal**, grounded in international ambition, is anchored in legal and political commitments, translated into EU climate law (Sikora, 2021). EU climate law prescribes a collective effort of emission reductions for all member states. Albeit with mixed success, climate law is a stepping stone for ambitious climate action across Europe.

A European Green Deal

Striving to be the first climate-neutral continent

Another aspect European Union's Sustainability Strategy are the Green Investment Plans under which the EU is seeking **to mobilise at least €1 trillion as sustainable investments**. The EU's industrial strategy aims to lead in decarbonising industry and implementing a circular economy in response. Sikora describes sustainability finance as a core pillar and necessity for a success of the European Green Deal. At the same time, she argues that the implementation of the European Green Deal must be anchored in concepts of solidarity and environmental protection (Sikora, 2021).

What does the Green Deal mean for Adult Education?

Overall, the Green Deal includes objectives such as investing in environmentally friendly technologies, supporting the industry to innovate, **rolling out cleaner, cheaper and healthier forms of private and public transport and restoring biodiversity**. Although there is no specific area that targets education, most of the actions include “activating education and training” as a key driver to achieve their respective goals. Education is much more than a driver for reskilling and upskilling. It is a tool for psychological personal transformation and change.

“There is a need to enable a profound change in people’s behaviour and skills, starting in the education systems and institutions as catalysts.

Actions should be geared towards changing behaviour, boosting skills for the green economy, fostering new sustainable education and training infrastructure and renovating existing buildings, thereby creating conducive environments for this change” (Green Deal).



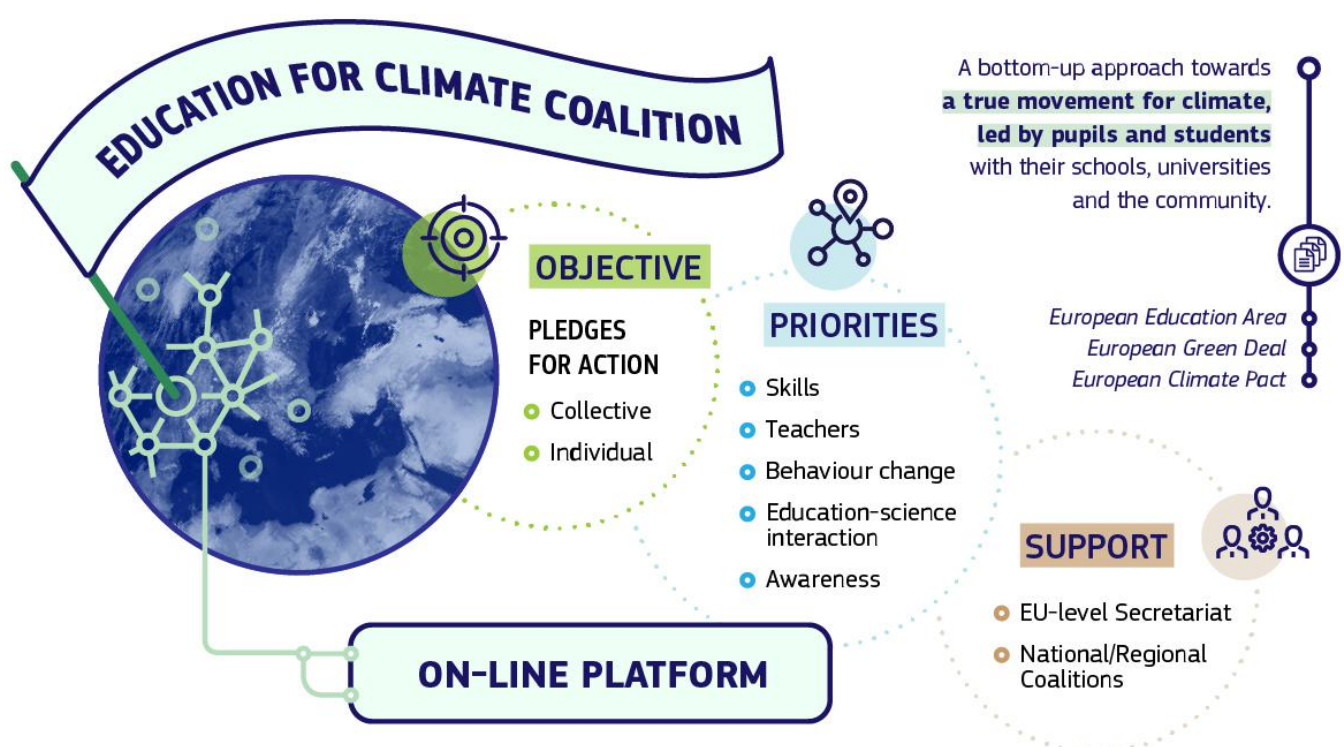
Searching for the green: sustainability in other recent European policy documents

While the European Green Deal might be the European Union's flagship sustainability initiative, other recent policy documents also include sustainability in their framing and initiatives. The European Commission has committed to engage pupils, parents and the wider community across schools, training institutions and universities on the changes needed for a successful transition.

Although not explicitly mentioned, this includes adult learning institutions. The Commission is working on a **European Competence Framework** on Climate Change and Sustainable Development and a Council Recommendation on Education for Environmental Sustainability by 2021.

The Competence Framework can serve as a guideline for national and local adult education institutions for the (re)development of their courses and the forthcoming recommendation can provoke national ESD policies. Further, the Commission launched an Education for Climate Coalition in 2020.

The Commission also announced to initiate **teacher training programmes** and provide financial resources to support educational institutions to operate more sustainably. Leaders of the European Union have realised that achieving the ambitious international goals requires a European Action Plan. Despite this ambitious plan, one wonders: what is the role of adults within these policies if they are rarely directly mentioned, yet indirectly encompassed in them.



European Education Area

Adults play a relatively minor role in the 2020 publication of the Education Area. So does sustainability. Nevertheless, the Area mentioned the need for a stronger educational basis for the transition to the green economy. Alongside the industry's reskilling, ALE can ensure a wider acceptance and understanding of the transition. Another ambition is the reduction in learning mobility, which in some cases can include adult learners' programmes that are delivered across several European countries. The Area announces that the adult education sector should make use of the **Recovery and Resilience Facility** and the newly initiated **Just Transition Fund**.



The reskilling and upskilling flagship action of the Facility urges governments to submit their national recovery and resilience plans to include a minimum of 37% expenditure for **climate and investment reforms**. The European Education Area is a starting point, hopefully manifested into more concrete goals for adult learning and education in the future.

The **Sustainable Growth Strategy** 2021 highlights upskilling and reskilling, but also demands that “**adults participate in programmes tailored to the twin green and digital transition, should be more agile, resilient and future-proof.**” The preamble of the **European Pillar of Social Rights** mentions sustainability and as a core for Europe's future and includes “a high level of protection and improvement of the quality of the environment” towards “sustainable and inclusive growth”.



European Skills Agenda

The European Skills Agenda, published in July 2020, emphasizes the importance of up and reskilling to support the green transition. One of its main objectives is to “strengthen sustainable competitiveness”. Although the Skills Agenda has a strong focus on employability and VET, non-formal adult education has its place. Action 6 aims at defining the taxonomy of skills needed for the green and digital transition and seeks to support the twin transition across sectors. At the same time, Action 6 pushes the investment and support of the delivery and monitoring of the European Competence Framework.

Action 8 focuses on Skills for Life that include non-formal learning, “building quality inclusive adult learning systems.” Green skills can be classified as part of this life – of citizenship skills area, however, it is important to see them as standing by themselves.

Threats & Challenges

Obstacles to greening adult learning and education

The earlier paragraphs depict the lack of mention of non-formal adult education across European and international policy documents. At the same time, they show that although sustainability has reached new levels of importance, it is often not seen as intrinsically connected to education. In most of the examples “green” education is driven by upskilling and growth and **does not include the intrinsic humanistic value of education**. Nevertheless, the anticipation of an environmental education recommendation and the set-up of the climate coalition are positive outlooks towards the future.

Non-formal adult education is structurally underfunded, which to an extent reflects an inadequate recognition of the field at the policy level. ALE has been marginalised in comparison to VET training, which is often connected to enhancing employability.

*“Managing the green and digital transitions and avoiding external dependencies in a new geopolitical context **requires radical change** - and it needs to start now.” Thierry Breton*

Non-formal education that is organised from the bottom up is often not measurable hence, of little interest for data-driven investors. A field (non-formal ALE) that is highly context-specific, often does not arrive at concrete outcomes, necessary to be eligible for outcome/monitoring based funding (Schreiber-Barch, Mauch, 2019).

Drawing a real connection between ALE and sustainability necessitates adequate financial and ideational support. Even though policy makers and investors want clear measurable benefits and outcomes, **there is little to no funding for research into the relationship between ALE and sustainability**, or the benefits thereof. This substantially hinders the European ambition for a green transition for all.





What comes as no surprise for many of you, are the threats to public quality provision of non-formal ALE through the marketisation, privatisation and commercialisation of adult education (Steiner-Khamsi, 2018; Effert, 2019). The human capital model to maximise education's direct utility to generate economic growth and competitiveness is deeply ingrained in our education systems.

While the World Bank stated in 2003 that "lifelong learning is education for the knowledge economy," policy makers have long adopted economic objectives for lifelong learning (Casey and Asamoah, 2016; World Bank, 2003). This approach, however, poses a threat to the humanistic lifelong learning vision, set out to foster the intrinsic benefits of education (Heikkinen, 2012).

Another threat to the implementation of more sustainability themes and projects into ALE is the fluid and generic nature of green competences. While occupation-specific competences are taught on the topic, **ALE institutions can be a space for adults to learn the transversal skills**, which are even more complex to measure – hence, difficult to implement, monitor and transfer across adult education institutions. Several scholars have argued that monitoring indicators might not be able to foster the implementation of SDG 4 (Anderson, 2019; Schreiber-Barsch and Mauch, 2019). These challenges complicate the spread of sustainability programmes within ALE institutions. Furthermore, research reports that there is a general shortage of qualified adult educators, equipped to teach green skills and sustainability in the adult learning community (Gavrilakis et. al, 2021).

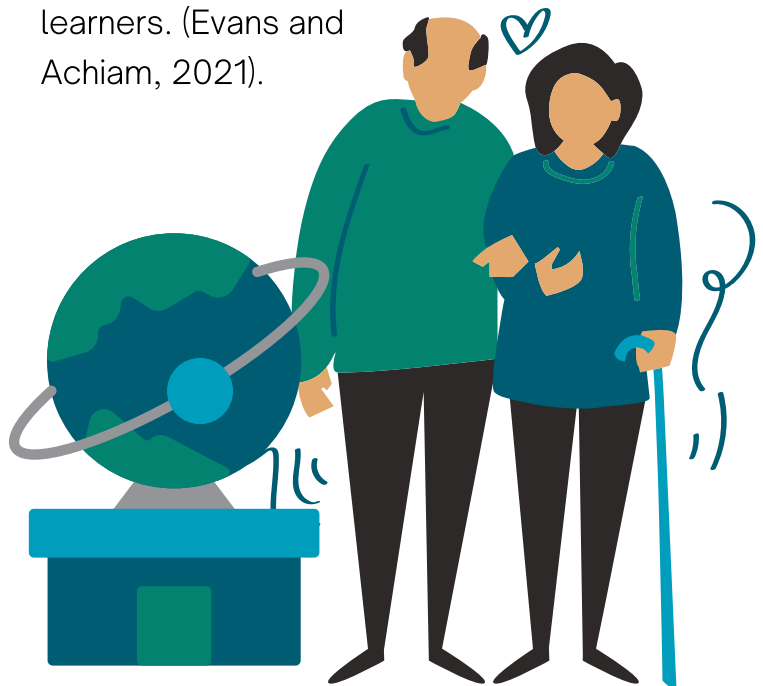
What works: greening realities

Bringing sustainability to live in adult learning communities

The importance and timeliness of adult learning and education is not new; yet, the global pandemic has demonstrated the need for education that builds citizens that are prepared for crisis and resilient. The previous chapters outline the links between ALE and citizenship, health and social justice. This final chapter presents projects and ideas that take the leap towards greening adult learning.

There are few lists of best practices around Europe. Some of them include Lidwien de Waal's observations in the Netherlands, Tknika's circular economy training and adult education centres that focus on ecological learning. In the project **Life Skills** for Europe, EAEA shows the importance of developing environmental capabilities, which include the awareness of daily actions on the environment and how the concept of sustainable development itself affects economic, social and environmental issues. In this project, civic capabilities are closely aligned with environmental ones. EAEA's **Manifesto for Adult Learning** is an excellent guide to affirm and envision further what the future of adult learning can look like. Best practises are yet to be found (recognised below); yet, the important part is developing the ambition and urgency to implement them.

Sustainability and ALE can be closer to us than we think. Recent studies on “out of school science projects and sites” and urban environmental education reveal that bringing a local group into a garden or a kitchen in their close vicinity can rapidly enhance their environmental literacy and action potential (Evans, Achiam, 2021). They foster learning opportunities to foster individual and community well-being and environmental quality in cities” (Russ and Krasny 2017, p. 288). Places like natural history, science and technology museums and science centres can be external spaces to learn, on which adult education centres can draw in return. Thinking about partnerships or visits in these out of school science spaces could be an entry level opportunity for some learners. (Evans and Achiam, 2021).



Seeing these spaces as ESD educative means that sustainability is not about reinventing a curriculum or introducing a course – but using existing access routes to animate adults to further engage with sustainability. Alongside non-formal learning, informal learning in forms of observation, participation and self directed learning – can come alongside the key soft and professional skills, necessary to cultivate a citizenry, equipped to deal with the challenges of the climate crisis.



Pathways to advocacy

Departing into the future, implementing sustainability in adult learning and education should be a key priority for policy makers, private sector actors, local educators and social movements. A liveable planet with a thriving society requires crisis ready and resilient adults, who can make decisions on complex topics such as the climate crisis. Learning from the recent pandemic, we realise that our education needs to be sustainable, fair, holistic and inclusive for all.

Call to action

"Right here, right now is where we draw the line. The world is waking up. And change is coming whether you like it or not." Greta

- 1. Educate yourself and your community** on the topic (think local to global)
- 2. Build a campaign on greening ALE** in your community or organisation.
- 3. Join the global campaign**
 - sign the SDG charter, participate in SDG councils, training models or encourage learners to become SDG ambassadors
- 4. Start a new initiative** or collaborate on a project (sustainability is everywhere)
 - Join a consortium for project application (connect with EAEA)
 - Collaborate with local initiatives (community gardens, repair cafés)
- 5. Connect with local partners**
 - museums, science centres, local farmers, researchers
- 6. Advocate for greater funding** and investment in ALE and sustainability
- 7. Engage in UNESCO processes**
 - Advocate for sustainability & ALE at the upcoming CONFITEA, 2022.
- 8. Promote research** on ALE and sustainability
- 9. Rethink your internal organisation**
 - habits: food, mobility, work, materials
- 10. Don't greenwash - real action is required** - not only rebranding

Green Glossary

On the Same Earth

This section provides an overview of key concepts, definitions and recent developments - to learn, inform and take action.

The Climate Crisis & Sustainability

Incredibly difficult to define but shorty put, “a dangerous and irreversible situation, caused by changes in the world’s weather, in particular, the world’s getting warmer by human activity and their increasing level of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. (Oxford Dictionary). Sustainability has become a buzzword but it is important to remember that it includes an **ecological, social and economic dimension**. Sustainability refers to meeting our needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs.

The Climate Crisis & Effects on Adults

Although young people might be on the streets in the last years, adults are equally affected by the climate crisis today. Alongside the **physical health impacts** (increased cardiovascular diseases and heat strokes especially among older citizen), the climate crisis has severe consequences on the adult population’s **mental health** (Peters and Schneider, 2021).

Air pollution kills an estimate of seven million people each year (WHO, 2020). While increasing sea levels might not directly affect European adults, it has been and will continue to destroy the homes of people living in the Global South (UN DESA, 2017). Thereby, changing migration patterns that will in return affect European adults and increase the need for solidarity and integration. Dealing with uncertainties of the future and prospective disaster relief strategies is a responsibility that rests upon the adults.



Green Economy

A green economy results in improved human well-being and social equity, while significantly reducing environmental risks and ecological scarcities. In its simplest expression, a green economy can be thought of as one which is a **low carbon, resource-efficient and socially inclusive** (UNEP, 2011). A green economy is relevant to all industries, regardless of their sector, size or location.

Green Jobs

Green jobs contribute to protecting the environment and reducing the harmful effects human activity has on it (mitigation), or to helping to better cope with current climate change conditions (adaptation) (Martinez et al, 2010).

Green Skills/ Competences

Green skills are the knowledge, abilities, values and attitudes needed to live in, develop and support a sustainable and resource-efficient society (OECD 2012). Often green skills are distinguished as generic/transversal and occupation-specific skills. While occupation-specific skills are limited to the workplace, transversal skills are needed across all jobs and areas of life.



Occupation-Specific



Transversal

Skills like critical thinking and adapting to uncertainty are life skills that go beyond the learner's employability and job engagements can be thought in adult education institutions. These can also include curricula that focus on the local level, are transformative and involve values and emotions (Walter, 2009).

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Let's find out who we have been talking about

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“Adults keep saying we owe it to the young people, to give them hope, but I don’t want your hope. I don’t want you to be hopeful. I want you to panic. I want you to feel the fear I feel every day.

I want you to act. I want you to act as you would in a crisis. I want you to act as if the house is on fire, because it is.” Greta Thunberg, 2019

“If education were truly a human right, we would not be waiting until 2030 or 2040 to ensure it”

UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education, 2003

Katarina Tomasevski



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