

# **A greener future: voices of learners and educators in green transition**

**Background paper on  
adult learning and green transition**



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**Layout:** Marina Sakač Hadžić

**Visual identity:** Sanna Lehti

**Photographs by:** EAEA, ASTO and Groot Eiland

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## 1. Why focus on learners and educators in green transition?

“The future belongs to all of us”: such is the opening statement of educators who facilitate workshops in a community setting in the south of the Hague. According to the educator interviewed by EAEA, it is important to emphasise to learners that this is not an opinion, but a fact, and that everyone, no matter their age, gender or background, can have a say in shaping the future. Yet as we discuss major policy agendas, from the Sustainable Development Goals to the European Green Deal or the European Skills Agenda, it is easy to miss the voices of those whose lives and communities are the most affected by the multiple crises that Europe is confronted with.

Concluding EAEA’s thematic work on adult learning and green transition in 2023, this background paper will bring forward the perspectives of adult learners, educators and community organisers in Europe. This is not to say that policy frameworks are irrelevant in the broader discussion about the role of adult learning and education in the process of green transition; far from it. Key EU and global policy agendas that explicitly or implicitly link adult learning and green transition have been extensively discussed by EAEA, most recently in EAEA’s concept paper on [Adult Learning and Green Transition: Preparing the ground for EAEA’s annual theme](#) (2022), and in [Let’s get our hands dirty! – EAEA background report on greening adult learning and education](#) (2021) as well as in multiple statements on adult learning and sustainable development that have been published over the past few years. EAEA has also contributed to the Marrakech Framework for Action (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2022), the outcome document of CONFINTEA VII, which puts green transition high on the agenda.

It is worth pointing out that while several policy frameworks released in recent years highlight also the role of digital transition (often in the context of the so-called “twin” transition), here we will focus on green transition.

To look at the reality of adult learning in a community setting, we will draw from interviews and discussions with adult educators, adult learners and community organisers which took place throughout 2023 in the framework of the core activities implemented by EAEA. More specifically, the paper is based on the results of the EAEA Annual Conference on Adult Learning and Green Transition, which took place on 7 June in Zagreb, Croatia. Several quotes and case studies are taken from the [EAEA podcast “Beyond Learning”](#), which includes conversations with learners and educators recorded in a variety of learning spaces: from community centres to festivals and urban gardens. Finally, the paper is based on the best practices collected for the [EAEA Grundtvig Award on Adult Learning and Green Transition](#) (2023), which showcased adult learning initiatives that fostered sustainable approaches.

The paper is also complemented by the results of EAEA project work in the area of adult learning and green transition, carried out within the framework of Erasmus+ and Horizon 2020 projects. As such, the paper aims to highlight the perspective of those who are often the most affected by the consequences of the climate crisis, or multiple global challenges that are interconnected. We will explore learners’ motivation for learning for green transition, what keeps them coming back to learning, and the change that they have already experienced in their lives and communities. Whenever possible, we will quote them directly.

While the focus of the paper remains on adult learning practice, it does refer to multiple policy and systemic issues that are directly connected to the reality of working the field as an adult educator, or community engagement as an adult learner.

It is also important to note that while the paper frequently specifies the role of the person quoted, referring to them as a “learner” or “educator / trainer”, adult learning in communities is a spectrum in which boundaries can blur: learners take on the roles of educators or community organisers; educators take up learning while working on activist projects. The plurality of roles and identities in the context of green transition is mentioned here in passing but might be worth exploring further in the future.

## 2. Connecting the crises of today - and of the past

Addressing green transition in adult learning is challenging in its complexity. As pointed out by several participants of the EAEA Annual Conference, the challenges of sustainability are interconnected and difficult to address in isolation, and their consequences are affecting groups that are already at risk of exclusion. The current energy crisis and high inflation in Europe are directly linked to increasing poverty levels. The COVID-19 pandemic brought about not only a major health crisis, but also a feeling of profound isolation among various age groups. At the same time, the media controlling algorithms influence what news gets more attention from the audience, which continues to spread misinformation and disinformation, while AI is already starting to affect society, organisations and individuals.

### You don’t always start from scratch: learning from the crises of the past

While the mounting challenges of today might seem like a “once in a lifetime” turn of events, some of the existing community places have been born out of a crisis. In one of the episodes of “Beyond Learning”, listeners are invited to go on a tour of Open Jazdów, a community in the centre of Warsaw, Poland that brings together NGOs and local families. The community was first established in 1945 to house the urban planners and engineers who were rebuilding the city after it had been almost entirely destroyed during the Second World War. It was made up of ready-to-assemble wooden houses ordered by the Soviet Union from Finland. In 2010, when the municipality of Warsaw announced its plans to demolish the houses, local residents joined forces with NGOs and turned the community into a space for activism and adult learning. Today, 18 out of the 26 houses are rented out to NGOs, whose initiatives connect social, ecological and cultural sustainability: from urban gardening, to beekeeping projects, classes on how to cook by the fire, or a Climate Reading Room, which invites visitors to learn about climate action.

**“This place was born out of a crisis. Now we are also in a crisis, or many crises. So how can we learn from the past to make it to the future? Us progressives always want to say that we are creating new paths. But for us, in 1945, they were already common gardens here between the people who are living here. So is it really new? No, it's not. Let's get back to doing things a little bit slower, more together and see the common ground.” - Wojciech Matejko, Open Jazdów Partnership, EAEA podcast [Beyond Learning, Episode 1: Forever Autonomous](#)**





Open Jazdów - community house



Wojciech Matejko

While this is certainly not the first time that Europe is undergoing major crises, there are some differences that should be pointed out. Today, shifts such as climate change, digitalization, and a crisis in democracy contribute to challenges that are more diverse and overlapping, whereas previously they were more sequential.

The multitude of crises brings new challenges for adult learning and education: it calls for more attention to critical thinking and media literacy, for a renewed focus on active citizenship, but also for a need for community spaces that can bring people together.

Professor Arjen Wals, keynote speaker at the EAEA Annual Conference on Adult Learning and Green Transition, sees several new roles for adult education and learning against the background of the sustainability crisis. Adult learning can provide eco-qualification in terms of skills, eco-socialisation, which means taking care of oneself and the world, but also eco-subjectification: supporting people in becoming who they want to be.

**"Education needs to be more responsible and more responsive in today's climate. We need to consider new forms of learning in ALE: transformative, transgressive, and transdisciplinary. And we need to create ecologies of learning: where different types of learning complements each other, issues are framed critically, from knowledge to meaning and wisdom, also intergenerationally"** - Arjen Wals, EAEA Annual Conference on Adult Learning and Green Transition.

### 3. Getting attached to the things that you own - and to your community. Exploring learners' motivation

Looking at what learners, educators and community organisers say about their engagement in green transition, it is clear that their motivations vary to a large extent. In some instances, it is about addressing the challenges of a community and taking collective action. Such was the case at the [Open Jazdów Partnership](#) in Warsaw, Poland, mentioned earlier in this paper, in which individuals and organisations collaborated to save a community from demolition, and established several initiatives that addressed sustainability through adult learning.

Another inspiring example is [ASTO](#), a community organisation based in Patras, Greece, whose representatives spoke at the EAEA Annual Conference. Members of the organisation have established a group that carries out interventions in or around the city which range from cleaning beaches and parks, renovating the square near the association, learning natural farming, creating urban gardens, actions related to recycling and reducing consumption.

"We got to act because we got tired of waiting for people above us, people from the state to do things that are important for us and our community," said Stelios Zografidis from ASTO at the EAEA Annual Conference on Adult Learning and Green Transition.

According to Anna Roditi from ASTO, shared ownership is key and builds a strong basis for commitment.

**"In the beginning, when we started free planting in our neighbourhoods, we would see people stealing the plants. Moving on, we saw that people started themselves replanting and watering them, and our ecosystem is growing. People want to feel part of it because they chose it,"** Anna Roditi, ASTO, EAEA Annual Conference on Adult Learning and Green Transition.



Participants of the We Change it group (photographs by ASTO)



### We change it!

ASTO creates small groups of 15 - 20 people, who participate in the planning and implementation of various actions. There is no strict division between learners and educators and all groups are based on peer-learning. The groups have specific themes and similar goals, debate certain subjects and act accordingly. Its group “We change it” was set up after some of the members of the community volunteered to clean up the local beach. It began as a small initiative and progressively, more people joined in to reclaim ownership of nature. Today, the group is made up of around 50 members who meet regularly, and 200 who participate in the most popular activities. Among the most recent initiatives, the group started building a seed library, and revamped a public square to make it both more green and inclusive.

For many learners, the motivation is more personal. One learner interviewed for EAEA’s podcast mentioned that she had always wanted to learn how to sew, but it was only when she started nearing retirement age that she found the time to do it. She also mentioned her attachment to her clothes and her wish to keep them for as long as possible. Another learner in the same class has been inspired by a television show in which participants made “something totally different from old garments”, and was curious to try it out ([Beyond Learning, Episode 5: Elephant Steps](#)).

Several of the learners who had been interviewed reflected on why they stayed on the course, and what had kept them coming back to the class, or signing up for new courses. The social aspect of learning seems to be key for most of them: being in a space with people whom perhaps they would not have met in other circumstances, joined by a shared interest or purpose. For Wojciech Matejko from the Open Jazdów Partnership, the main motivation is simple: learning is what brings people joy.

**“We can really have fun, you know, also trying to do other things and show the possibilities, which we did not use as a civilisation. Why would you want to stay until 8 p.m. in some small, contained office to work and work for the next credit for your new car, if you can just come to the garden and dance and be with people, and spend less time thinking about about how much energy and effort you need to protect your own family or your own small system” - Wojciech Matejko, Open Jazdów Partnership, [EAEA Beyond Learning podcast, Episode 1: Forever Autonomous](#)**

## 4. Green skills - what skills?

Learners, educators and policymakers who contributed to EAEA activities on green transition in 2023 highlighted a variety of skills and attitudes that adult learning should foster to encourage green transition. For Arjen Wals, developing transformative skills is key, which range from openness, to perspective seeking, sense making, developing an inner compass and compassion. Openness was also highlighted by Eeva Furman, Secretary-General of the [Finnish National Commission on Sustainable Development under Prime Minister’s Office](#).

“Open mindset and unlearning are key skills for the green transition,” she emphasised at a roundtable discussion held at the conference. For Nevenka Bogataj, Senior Researcher at the [Slovenian Institute for Adult Education](#), the local dimension of green skills is particularly important.

**“Green skills must be local and place based, building institutions upon trust,”** Nevenka Bogataj, EAEA Annual Conference on Adult Learning and Green Transition.



Annual Conference workshop on strategies for green transition

One of the workshops at the EAEA Annual Conference was dedicated to exploring how green skills strategies could be developed by adult learning providers. Participants agreed that a green skills strategy called for a needs analysis, targeting both learners and employers. They also emphasised that embedding green skills into existing programmes should be encouraged. The skills of trainers should not be forgotten in the process; they range from the capacity to modify curricula/course descriptions, to co-creation skills to work with the communities.

### Green skills provision in community centres: from Turkey to Belgium

Kirikhan Community Center was opened and operated by [YUVA](#) between 2013 to 2020 to serve Syrian refugees and host communities of all age groups as a multi service provider (livelihoods, education and protection). Currently closed, the centre had meat free Mondays and ecological training programmes, zero waste policy for activities and composting activities. Picnics and cooking workshops have been used for awareness raising on sustainability.

In Brussels, the [Elzenhof community centre](#) brings together local residents around several activities, many of which are underpinned by the principle of sustainability. Examples include a repair cafe, classes on cooking from scraps, or an exhibition on climate justice.



Elzenhof Community Centre

At the same time, it is worth noting that adult learning provision in the area of sustainability can encourage the development of a range of other skills which might not be immediately associated with learning for green transition. An adult learner of a sewing class, who recounted her experience on EAEA's podcast, came to the conclusion that her class explicitly addressed other skills, such as understanding mathematical concepts, including volume, to be able to do geometrical drawings. For another learner, the same class encouraged creativity, while the teacher found that sewing supported the development of mental focus and motoric skills ([Beyond Learning, episode 5: Elephant Steps](#)).

In another example drawn from the EAEA podcast, a Brussels-based architect and educator who works with earth material reflected on how the use of natural materials in her workshops fosters patience and self-reflection ([Beyond Learning, Episode 6: Upside Down](#)).

## 5. The values and principles at the heart of (learning for) a greener future

### Spaces for learning, spaces for action

For learners and educators alike, creating a safe space for learning is key in encouraging a relationship of equality and in fostering an environment in which everyone is free to experiment. EAEA has done considerable work in the area of establishing and maintaining safe spaces for learning, most recently in the framework of an Erasmus+ project [SAFE](#). Looking at the results of discussions of learners and educators who were invited to share their reflections on safe spaces, it is interesting to note that several of them refer directly to nature or being outdoors. When asked to give examples of safe spaces, a few have referred to “community places”, but also to “a park or a garden, somewhere close to nature”, “a forest” or “a beach”. As we explored earlier in this paper, protecting these spaces from damage or destruction can be in itself motivation for community action, and - implicitly and explicitly - for learning. In many cases, the definition of a safe space was less about its spatial or physical dimensions, and more connected to its relational value, focusing on the other people that are part of the space. Again, this recalls the social and interpersonal value of learning described here earlier.

Several of the learners and educators interviewed for the SAFE project have also raised the complexity of online spaces and their safety. For some of them, online spaces had a lot of advantages in this respect, as they could provide more anonymity for people who are closeted e.g. by giving them an opportunity to switch off their camera. Other participants of the SAFE focus groups raised the necessity to establish learners' needs and acknowledge the limitations of online spaces. Importantly, not all learners are able to access such spaces as they require digital skills, which have also become crucial for example to exercise digital citizenship.

### Online course about green transition puts inclusion at the centre

Green Skills for Circular Economy, coordinated by Fenan Consulting, aimed at engaging young adults in the principles of a circular lifestyle. The project has developed an online course designed to raise awareness about circular economy principles with the support of non-formal learning methods, which included incorporating inspirational videos, interviews with local community members, and sustainable recreational activities. Socially disadvantaged groups were actively involved in the project and shared their circular practices in video interviews. The project won the EAEA Grundtvig Award 2023 (Sakač Hadžić M., 2023).

It is also worth exploring how public spaces in their design can support community learning in the context of green transition. This requires the implementation of the Whole Institution Approach to sustainable development which, according to the International ESD Alliances of DVV International (nd), means a holistic orientation based on integrating sustainability in every aspect of the institution, without limiting it to educational programmes.

An architect interviewed by EAEA reflected on her work in participatory architecture, in which members of the community learned how to build the space that they were going to use, as explained in the box below.



## From extraction to extra action: Parckfarm

[Parckfarm](#) is a neighbourhood initiative in Brussels that took over a greenhouse located in the middle of Tour et Taxis, a former industrial site. Part of its development included participation of the students of the Building Beyond Borders postgraduate programme at the University of Hasselt. Organised around the theme “From extraction to extra action”, its main principle was to look at the city as a place where you can find all of the resources, including human resources to carry out the project. During a one-month festival of participatory architecture, researchers and students engaged with the local community at Parckfarm on how to redesign and rebuild the space so that it is closer to their needs. Together with the community, they learned to make shelves with upcycled wood or to build a greenhouse with round earth bricks, fostering a communal way of living architecture and construction. Today, the community hosts a variety of activities that promote sustainability: from permaculture workshops to awareness-raising “labs” on global consumption.

**“We are trying to create inclusive spaces for construction and design where we are not as architects looking at things from a pedestal, putting ourselves in a position of dominance, but we're actually working from a place within the community. So my understanding and my skills as an architect are brought in as skills, but then there are other people that have different skills that are just as important in the development of the project. It's the idea of accepting that whatever we do, we are doing it together.”**  
- Maria Glionna, architect and educator who worked at Parckfarm, ([Beyond Learning, Episode 6: Upside Down](#)).



Maria Glionna

The values explored below can be linked to the very concept of a safe space, and most of them have come up in focus groups with learners and educators organised within the framework of the SAFE project. Here, we will look at those that have also emerged during EAEA's thematic work on adult learning and green transition.

## Building trust and respect

A relationship of equality - between learners, but also between learners and educators - is a key principle in building a safe learning environment. This is important also in the context of green transition, which is often considered to be a topic that mostly engages adults who are relatively well-off. At a social enterprise visited by EAEA, trainees work in a restaurant woodwork workshop, on landscaping projects or in the organic shop, all of which are based on circular economy. The trainees are often from vulnerable backgrounds: they have a criminal record, or have suffered severe psychological trauma. No matter what their profile and personal background is, they can expect a welcoming environment, support of counsellors, and of trainers who have a holistic perspective on learning as a process.

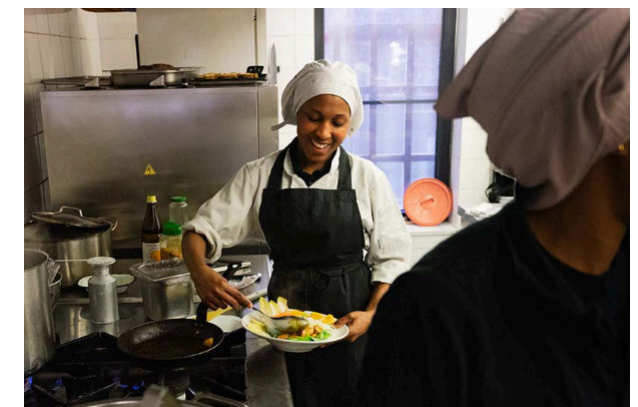
**“Every learning process is a two way process. People come in here with their talents, with their background, with their backpack, also of sometimes really heavy stories. An instructor that I talked to the first days that I worked here told me two things. One thing was: I learned more from these people than I taught them. And the second thing he said: I prefer that people coming out of this training come out with more self-confidence than that they are perfectly cutting vegetables.”** - Patrick de Coster, Groot Eiland, [EAEA podcast Beyond Learning, Episode 4: Growing](#)



Patrick de Coster



The team of Bel Mundo restaurant (photographs by Groot Eiland)



Building self-confidence is another aspect that several learners have mentioned themselves in conversations with EAEA. One learner discussed it in the context of an online course on life drawing that she did with an art school in France. She specified that she was not working with a teacher, but a facilitator, who motivated participants to focus on self-expression and experimentation. “It actually gave me a lot of trust to just explore and see, and to let it go”, she told EAEA ([Beyond Learning, Episode 2: Perfect Imperfections](#)).



## From empathy to agency

Several learners and educators who contributed to EAEA's work in 2023 have emphasised empathy, creativity and agency as key values to support learning for change. One illustration is Museon Omniversum in the Hague, where visitors connect their local context to the global challenges, for example by getting to know the experiences of the people who extract the resources that most mobile phones are made of. At the same time, they are encouraged to reflect on their own practices or to try re-imagining the future in a maker's space dedicated to this purpose, as explored in the box below.

Creativity has also come up as important for [Roscommon Women's Network \(RWN\)](#), a local community project and charity dedicated to supporting women and families throughout County Roscommon in Ireland. RWN established [CycleUp](#), an environmental and training social enterprise which addresses the issue of textile waste. By applying a community development approach to environmental protection, it supports the hardest to reach women and families. At the same time, the initiative trains individuals and groups in the repair and reuse of materials, and produces upcycled items for sale as part of the circular economy. The outcome material ranges from tote bags to homeware. According to Margaret Browning, a learner at RWN, this approach has multiple benefits. "If you can encourage creativity in any way this is always worth it for the people and the environment around them," she said, speaking at the EAEA Annual Conference.



Margaret Browning



## Making meaning: museum as a space for learning

"One Planet" is an interactive exhibition at the [Museon Omniversum](#) in the Hague that explores the 17 Sustainable Development Goals. At the beginning of the exhibition, visitors get a punch card which asks them self-reflection questions about each of the SDGs; they stamp it according to their answers at the corresponding exhibits. During the tour, they get to compare statistics on gender equality across the globe with the Netherlands, explore the value of indigenous cultures, or find out what material their phone has been made of, and how the resources have been extracted. The exhibition combines the collection items available in the museum with interactive elements, and includes multiple personal stories shared through videos or audio recordings. The Museon also has a maker's space, in which visitors can learn more about the consequences of fast fashion, try sustainable cooking at the Future Food Lab, or design their ideal street. Since recently, the Museon has opened a Museum Lab in the south of the Hague, working with a migrant community, in which as part of the activities, participants

were asked to build their ideal community with Lego blocks. Museon Omniversum features in one of the episodes of EAEA's podcast *Beyond Learning*, in which Maarten Okkersen takes listeners on a tour around the exhibition, and shares his reflections about how museums can encourage learning and stay relevant for visitors.



Future Food Lab



Maarten Okkersen

**"I think, maybe even without knowing, a lot of people are looking for meaning in life. They're trying to make sense of what's happening. It's about connecting the past, present and future, but it's also reconnecting science and culture. To make sense of the local historical identity and this whole process of globalisation. What is my position in this and how does it affect me and what can I do? Stimulating awareness and especially agency. I think this is key." - Maarten Okkersen, Museon Omniversum, EAEA podcast [Beyond Learning, Episode 3: Making Meaning](#)**



## Interactivity, dialogue and co-creation: not a “tick off the box” exercise

It goes without saying that all of the approaches mentioned above require an active involvement of the learner throughout their own learning journey. From using experiential learning when working with natural materials, to putting discussion and dialogue at the centre of workshops about the climate crisis, educators in non-formal adult learning use multiple approaches to encourage participation.

Building dialogue around topics that bring about such strong emotions as the climate crisis is far from easy. Several of EAEA members and other partner organisations of EAEA have established tools for adult educators and meeting facilitators on how to establish constructive dialogue or encourage self-reflection, as exemplified in the box below.

### Co-creation and dialogue: Swedish experiences

[Talking Climate](#) is an initiative led by Vardagens civilkurage, a Swedish NGO which developed methods for training in constructive climate conversations. Through role-play and dialogue exercises, they try out various techniques to intervene when people face, for example, climate denial attitudes, greenwashing, despair or distancing oneself from the problem. In collaboration with different kinds of learning spaces, organisations and social movements, the project gave the broader public as well as learners and teachers tools to create constructive climate conversations in everyday life and learning environments.

In another example from Sweden, eight folk high schools have developed [My Story, My Agenda](#): a project which brings forward the participants' own experiences and stories to advance Agenda 2030. In co-creation between participants and educators, the schools explore new methods and tools for telling and owning one's own story and intend to create new paths to engagement; large and small, individual and joint.

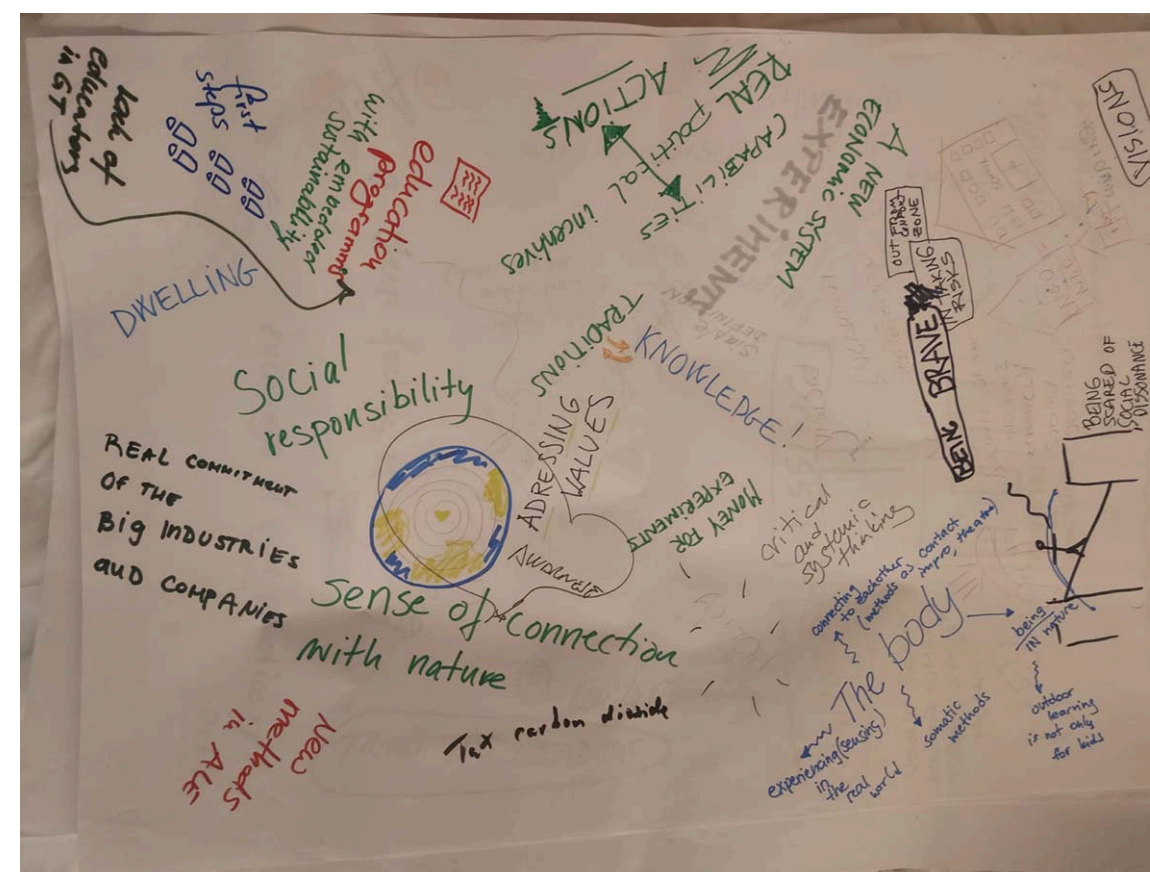
Art-based approaches can be helpful in enabling difficult conversations. One example raised at the EAEA Annual Conference in 2023 was the Climate Capsule, an art installation in Novi Sad, Serbia developed by the [Centre for the Promotion of Science](#), in which local residents could talk to a person from the future about what their world looks like.

While both interactivity and co-creation are terms that are routinely used in adult learning and education, educators interviewed by EAEA have also expressed their concern about whether the concepts are actually put into practice in a meaningful way. According to the educator working at the Museon Omnisversum, interactivity can too easily be reduced to “the touching and the doing”, missing important steps such as relating to another person or self-reflection. Similarly, co-creation can be very superficial, instead of involving learners at each step of the learning process, from design to evaluation.

## Where's nature in it?

For several participants of EAEA activities on green transition in 2023, the connection to nature is key in fostering sustainability, and can happen in multiple ways. A few EAEA members who contributed to the discussions at the Annual Conference raised the bodily experience of connecting to nature. According to them, it ranges from the somatic experience to connecting to others, experiencing the real world, as well as being out in nature.

Some of the educators interviewed for the EAEA podcast have highlighted the healing properties of nature. At [Groot Eiland](#), a social enterprise in Brussels which works with vulnerable groups on a circular economy project, learners suffering from trauma usually work in the garden. The architect with whom EAEA spoke has also referred to the somatic experience of connecting with nature and its benefits.



Flipchart Nature

**“In the end, whatever you do brings you back to this idea of community and the interaction with nature, and the idea of being part of the system. It is continuously evolving and we are not necessarily being separated beings which act from the individual perspective.”** Maria Glionna, architect and educator, EAEA podcast [Beyond Learning, episode 6: Upside Down](#).



## One size does not fit all: where is a “just” transition?

Addressing sustainability and creating meaningful change cannot happen without taking an intersectional approach. According to Solidar, a Brussels-based organisation that leads the [European Alliance for Just Transition](#) of which EAEA is a member, there is an urgent need to unite different struggles: against racism, gender equality, for workers’ rights.

“It is impossible to fight against inequality without addressing the climate crisis and vice versa,” said Andrea Casamenti, Policy Officer for Just Transition at [Solidar](#), speaking at the recent policy roundtable on green transition organised by EAEA and the Lifelong Learning Platform. Casamenti illustrated his point by the fact that the 10% of the richest world population pollutes as much as the remaining 90% (Kozyra A., 2023).

One person interviewed for the EAEA podcast reflected on the fact that community change cannot take place if local residents are too busy trying to make their ends meet. A lot of economic pressure will keep adults from learning, and also from taking action in their own community ([Beyond Learning, episode 6: Upside Down](#)).

Several initiatives across Europe have addressed the need to alleviate the economic pressures that some groups are more exposed to, through initiatives that also encourage more sustainable approaches.

### Sustainable agriculture and women’s empowerment in Armenia

A recent project implemented by Green Lane NGO aimed to uplift the economic conditions of women in Shirak and Gegharkunik marzes in Armenia. The project supported local women by providing knowledge and hands-on experience in the realm of sustainable agriculture, which had a positive impact on their empowerment. One of the pivotal aspects of this project was the series of courses on Sustainable Agriculture attended by the beneficiaries. The courses equipped them with the latest agricultural technologies tailored to the challenges posed by global climate change. [The project won the EAEA Grundtvig Award 2023](#) (Sakač Hadžić M., 2023).

## 6. Recommendations

The recommendations listed below draw from discussions between participants of the EAEA Annual Conference, and the experiences of learners and educators engaged in green transition who were interviewed by EAEA throughout 2023.

**Strategies for ALE and the green transition take a long time to build.** They need to include the communities, the providers, the learners, the educators, trade unions, and decision makers at different levels to have robust foundations.

**“You need to engage with people to have results”** - Stelios Zografidis, ASTO, EAEA Annual Conference on Adult Learning and Green Transition.

There is a sense of urgency that something needs to be done in terms of designing and improving adult learning policy frameworks, but a lack of clear vision on how sustainable ALE policies could look like. **We need more leadership and management training in ALE for sustainable development to make our voices heard.**

There are inconsistencies between what is said or planned, the actual capabilities of the people and organisations involved in the implementation, and the actions/outcomes. **Even when there are inspiring ideas and the implementation works well, there is still a need for more monitoring and quality assurance.**

### Sustainability matrix as a tool for self-assessment and quality assurance

[The Sustainability Matrix for Adult Education Institutions \(SMAEI\)](#) addresses the difficulties that staff and educators encounter in non-formal adult education institutions while attempting to enhance their environmental sustainability. The matrix focuses on five different areas: Environmental Sustainability of the institution; Green skills of trainers and staff; Engagement of learners; Awareness raising and involvement of people and Partnerships for sustainability. The matrix itself provides a self-assessment quiz and the consortium is further developing a plotting scheme with peer mentorship and quality assessment. Additionally, online resources constitute a mix of best practices, theoretical material, experts with webinars and other learning resources.

### European and national quality assurance tools in green transition

National certification system for educational establishments fosters sustainable development in Finland. As part of the Finnish quality assurance system, the whole adult learning and education sector will be certified by 2030, transforming institutions and consequently making an impact on their communities. The national certification is operated by the OKKA Foundation (which includes the teachers’ trade unions) and the certificates have been co-created together with the ALE sector.



**Organisations that aim to address green transition need to accept that they will need to constantly re-imagine themselves.** A forward-looking perspective should include an analysis of not only the broader policy agendas, but also the local context in which their learners are living in.

**Adult learning for green transition can and should be intergenerational:** multiple examples showcase that different generations can learn from each other about community action, but also about traditional practices that are now coming back to the fore, such as mending one's own clothes. **Adult learning also needs to be intersectional** and recognize the different struggles that learners are facing in their own lives and communities.

**Learning needs to be strongly connected with the reality and lived experience of the learner and their immediate community, and foster a sense of belonging.** When possible, adult learning providers should reach out to the communities that are not included in learning to make sure that their voices are heard.

Adult learning providers and educators should address and encourage sustainability in all its dimensions. **It is a spectrum that is not just reduced to environmental sustainability, but also social sustainability, and the importance of keeping meaningful relationships.**

**Practise what you preach.** A whole institution approach to sustainability should be encouraged when possible. Multiple adult learning organisations have taken steps to address it, as illustrated in the box below.

### Walking the talk

Volkshochschulverband Baden-Württemberg e.V. is the regional association of adult education centres in the German Bundesland Baden-Württemberg (BW). Volkshochschulen offer a wide variety of courses in the field of continuing education for all groups of the population. As one of its strategic goals, vhs BW currently aims at exploring its full potential to implement sustainable development goals in its organisation. One of the examples is “vhs goes green” including 15 adult education centres, reflecting both on organisational development, addressing management as well as staff of schools, and on educational content addressing learners.

Similarly, the Finnish Lifelong Learning Foundation (KVS) and its adult education centre foster sustainability by renewing its curriculum. The centre will be updating all course descriptions (approximately 300 courses) to incorporate green transition and sustainable development into their content. It is currently preparing to open a new campus in 2026-2027 that operates entirely on the principles of sustainable development. Residents of the area, communities, architects, and construction workers are all already involved in the planning process. The residents of the new 'green' block represent all age groups: young adults, families, and seniors. Learning environments will utilise urban gardens, parks, courtyards, as well as accessible art and ceramics workshops. Courses will be implemented according to the preferences of the area's residents, and the institution already has about 900 adults participating in the “learner council”.

**The decision to engage in green transition is a necessity for adult learning providers, but it is also a political choice.** It requires advocacy at different levels to both raise awareness of the urgency of the climate crisis, and to highlight the role of adult learning and education in addressing it.

**Learning spaces should be diverse, bringing together communities of all walks of life in a safe environment.** As illustrated by the examples cited in this paper, they can range from classrooms in adult learning centres to museums, libraries, urban gardens and online spaces.

In many countries and communities, bottom-up initiatives and grassroots projects remain greatly underfunded. **Community spaces cannot run solely on the motivation of their members, and need funding and coordination that will support sustainable action without taking away the autonomy of the initiative.**

## 7. Conclusions: From small steps to “elephant steps”

Addressing the climate crisis can seem insurmountable in its scope, both at the individual and at the community level. Yet the richness and diversity of examples that adult learners, educators and community organisers have shared with EAEA demonstrate that a lot of grassroots efforts are already taking place. While the local contexts or personal motivations for action might diverge, the values of agency, empathy and dialogue are visible across the board. From an external perspective, signing up for a sewing class or learning to cook from scraps might seem insignificant, but for many learners just showing up at the class will be a major step, an “elephant step”, as described by a teacher of a sewing class interviewed for the EAEA podcast.

Sometimes small steps can reverberate beyond the community. One example of that is the Open Jazdów community in Warsaw, whose experiments with urban beekeeping and gardening soon spread to other places in the city, including the municipality, and led to the establishment of a gardening school.

While small steps matter, it is important to contextualise them against the complexity of global power relationships. Adult learning and education has a key role in encouraging global solidarity especially with migrants and the communities in the Global South, who are the ones most affected by the climate crisis. As we explored in this paper, it can also support adults in Europe in making closer connections between local actions and their global impact, or making informed decisions as citizens. Adult learning and education, including global citizenship education, has a major role to play in the process of green transition, which should be reflected not only at the community level, but also in national, European and global policymaking.



Learners of the sewing class

**“Reasonable small steps go a long way. So drive but take other people with you, don't disregard change because you can't do the most.”**  
Daiana Huber, CPIP, participant of the EAEA Annual Conference on Adult Learning and Green Transition.



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# EAEA the voice of non-formal education in Europe

Mundo-J, Rue de l'Industrie 10, B-1000 Brussels

Tel. +32 2 893 25 22, [eaee-office@eaee.org](mailto:eaee-office@eaee.org)

[www.eaee.org](http://www.eaee.org)



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