Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on 'Empowering youth to achieve sustainable development through education'

(own-initiative opinion)

(2023/C 100/06)

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	Own-initiative opinion
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(for/against/abstentions)	126/1/1

1. Conclusions and recommendations

1.1. The EESC calls on the Member States to reaffirm the commitment they made at COP26 ([1]) to making climate action and sustainable development a core component in the educational curriculum. It is essential to recognise the need to re-imagine the future together with the youth and devise a new social contract that positively transforms education.

1.2. To achieve a paradigm shift, the EESC stresses the need for a comprehensive cross-cutting approach, ensuring cooperation between the different stakeholders, social partners and civil society organisations. Youth organisations and non-formal education have a crucial role to play in raising awareness about and supporting the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

1.3. The EESC encourages the European Commission to continue focusing on the needs of youth in the European Year of Skills 2023, linking it to sustainable development and the challenges young people are facing in the changing world.

1.4. The EESC welcomes the coordinating role of the Commission in promoting projects, training, exchanges of good practices and communication among teachers to foster the implementation of the SDGs in education. However, education, both theoretical and practical, for sustainable development approaches and strategies should be designed at local, national and regional levels and be based on consistent research and clear action plans; it should include monitoring, enabling continuous improvement and the exchange of experience.

1.5. The EESC emphasises the important roles of social and civic dialogue in integrating the SDGs across education levels, in formal and non-formal education, and in teacher education, to ensure that these include explicit competence frameworks enabling concrete learning objectives and assessment methods.

1.6. The EESC points out that everyone needs the necessary knowledge to fight climate change, especially with regard to all aspects of sustainable consumption and production, making responsible food choices and reducing food waste, as well as the use of sustainable energy. Education of children should be supported by lifelong learning for parents and citizens' education. In addition, outreach to all should be promoted, including by supporting youth-led organisations on this matter.

([1]) Co-chairs conclusions of Education and Environment Ministers' summit at CoP26 'Learn for our Planet. Act for the climate'.

1.7. The EESC calls for EU investment to be better linked to sustainable development education using EU funds, such as the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF), Erasmus+, Horizon, the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), and the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+).

1.8. The EESC calls on all the Member States to provide sustainable and quality public investment in order to ensure that the sustainable development goals are integrated in national education, not only in theory, but also in practice by developing comprehensive curricula for instilling critical thinking skills and informed decision-making.

1.9. The EESC calls on the Member States to provide effective support for teachers to make the profession more attractive. While there is a huge teacher shortage in Europe, education for sustainability needs valued teachers, with decent salaries and good working conditions. To transform the education system, it is essential to ensure high quality initial and continuous training of teachers, equity and inclusion in the education and training systems, and an innovative organisation of schools.

1.10. The EESC calls for youth to be put at the centre of the education and learning process. This can be achieved by reducing the bureaucracy involved in the teaching profession, focusing on innovative pedagogy and close cooperation with students. In this context, it is important to prepare all teachers for an efficient use of new technologies and for new learning contexts, whether in the curriculum or in their own lives. It would be beneficial to assess the feasibility of developing a dedicated online platform or dashboard to exchange best practices.

1.11. The EESC calls on the European Commission to work on introducing a European indicator on reducing poverty and early school leaving, in line with sustainable development education in order to combat inequality. This could be developed in tandem with a global indicator.

2. **Background and context**

2.1. *The need for sustainable development*

2.1.1. Politicians, decision-makers and stakeholders at all levels must acknowledge that the large-scale transformation from a fossil fuel-based, resource-intensive and linear economy to a climate-friendly circular economy is much needed, but brings much upheaval to the life and future plans of citizens, especially the youth and future generations.

2.1.2. Russia's war against Ukraine has also highlighted Europe's unsustainable fossil energy dependence and has put the green transition into a new geopolitical context. To decrease our dependency, speeding up decarbonisation is inevitable and more necessary than ever. In the light of current and future challenges, the 2030 Agenda, its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the pledge to leave no one and no place behind provides a unique pathway to a wellbeing economy, to build back better and to achieve a more equitable, just, inclusive, sustainable and resilient world.

2.1.3. In the near future, the EU should set an example in forging an economically sustainable path towards a green and socially just transition. To achieve this, the EESC calls on the Member States and EU institutions to empower young people and involve them in decision-making, adapting education and employment, and mobilising even more young people. According to the *World Programme of Action for Youth until the year 2000 and beyond* ([2]) adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1995, young people in all countries are both a major human resource for development and key agents for social change, economic development and technological innovation. The EESC points out that young people are the leaders of the future. They need to be supported in accessing progressive innovation, and fully integrated in policy-making in order to enhance sustainable development.

2.1.4. The objective of this own-initiative opinion is to analyse whether and how the SDGs are embedded in the educational curriculum of the Member States and to examine whether the approach by the respective Member States can be regarded as transformative education to promote sustainable development ([3]). In addition, the opinion provides recommendations to support the European Commission and Member States on how to foster opportunities and overcome challenges to further develop youth policies, while ensuring that education for sustainable development is mainstreamed early on.

([2]) UN — World programme of action for youth.

([3]) Various terms are used — the opinion refers to 'transformative education to promote sustainable development'. However 'Education for Sustainable Development' (ESD) and 'Education for Environmental Sustainability' (EES) are used interchangeably in the current context. See also the glossary in the appendix.

2.2. *Policy landscape*

2.2.1. In 2015, the United Nations adopted the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as an ambitious blueprint for the world to address environmental degradation and issues of social and economic development together. The 17 SDGs, with 169 associated targets to be reached by 2030, place education at the centre of their delivery. Education is a human right and education (including education for sustainability) should be accessible to all. However, according to the Unesco report on the implementation of the SDGs, public education is not free for everyone and often not inclusive. Implementing SDG 4.7 has therefore proven difficult. Furthermore, 'many countries are still not fully committed to making the climate action a core component of curriculum' ([4]).

2.2.2. SDG 4.7 states that, by 2030, signatories will be required to 'ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and nonviolence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture's contribution to sustainable development.' The relevant EESC opinion on *Towards an EU strategy for enhancing green skills and competences for all* ([5]) is in line with this recommendation.

2.2.3. In recent years, EU policy has increasingly focused on environmental sustainability. The European Green Deal ([6]), launched in 2019, is the European Commission's plan to make the EU's economy sustainable, marking its ambition for Europe to become the first climate-neutral continent by 2050.

2.2.4. As part of its plan for education and training to contribute to the green transition, the European Commission suggested a range of initiatives: first, the launch of the Education for Climate Coalition ([7]); second, the recently adopted Council conclusions on fostering engagement among young people as actors of change in order to protect the environment ([8]), and a Council recommendation on learning for the green transition and sustainable development ([9]). Third, the development of a European competence framework on climate change and sustainable development ([10]).

2.2.5. On 4-5 April 2022, the Education, Youth, Culture and Sport Council underlined the important role played by sport in education for sustainable environment and it recommended to 'find ways to promote sustainable development education and the construction of a sense of environmental and civic responsibility among sports clubs, federations and other stakeholders in the field of sports' ([11]).

2.2.6. The European Year of Youth 2022 is also intended to promote the new opportunities and possibilities offered by the green and digital transitions. These transitions should be inclusive and give attention to integrating young people with fewer opportunities and vulnerable groups of young people. The EESC calls on the European Commission to continue focusing on the needs of youth in the European Year of Skills 2023, linking it to sustainable development and the challenges young people are facing in the changing world.

([4]) Unesco Global education monitoring report, 2021/2: non-state actors in education: who chooses? who loses?

([5]) Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on Towards an EU strategy for enhancing green skills and competences for all (own-initiative opinion) (OJ C 56, 16.2.2021, p. 1).

([6]) European Green Deal.

([7]) European Commission — Education for Climate Coalition.

([8]) Conclusions of the Council and the representatives of the governments of the Member States, meeting within the Council — Fostering engagement among young people as actors of change in order to protect the environment (OJ C 159, 12.4.2022, p. 9).

([9]) Council recommendation of 16 June 2022 on learning for the green transition and sustainable development (OJ C 243, 27.6.2022, p. 1).

([10]) Bianchi, G., Pisiotis, U. and Cabrera Giraldez, M., GreenComp The European sustainability competence framework, Punie, Y. and Bacigalupo, M. editor(s), EUR 30955 EN, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, 2022, ISBN 978-92-76-46485-3, doi:10.2760/13286, JRC128040.

([11]) Conclusions of the Council and the representatives of the governments of the Member States on 'Sport and physical activity, a promising lever to transform behaviour for sustainable development' (OJ C 170, 25.4.2022, p. 1).

2.2.7. It is important to better link EU investment to sustainable development education using EU funds, such as the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF), Erasmus+, Horizon, the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), and the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+). The fight against biodiversity loss, pollution and climate change is one of the four overarching priorities of the new Erasmus+ programme for 2021-2027, along with inclusion and diversity, digital transformation, and participation in democratic life. The EESC welcomes that online mobility will be also encouraged in the Erasmus programme in order to reduce the carbon footprint.

3. **Youth, education and sustainable development**

3.1. The importance of skills development in the field of climate change mitigation and climate change adaptation, as well as in the circular economy, needs to be taken into account in reskilling and upskilling young people. The social partners (employers' organisations and workers' trade unions) and civil society organisations have a key role to play in defining professional and occupational job profiles and standards and in integrating the sustainability aspects in apprenticeships and employee training. The social partners and civil society help young people to adapt in the transition from school to work in a way that includes sustainable development. The roles of social and civic dialogue are essential and need to be strengthened.

3.2. Young people need digital and social inclusiveness, quality education and training, stable employment, good working conditions, affordable housing, and support in the everyday fight against climate change. More research and data is needed on the impact of climate change on countries, regions and the local level, linking it to forecasting skills and jobs. While acknowledging that there is a major food crisis in Europe and other continents, young people need to learn about all aspects of sustainable consumption and production, reducing food waste and making responsible food choices.

3.3. Inequality should be tackled by introducing a global and European indicator on reducing poverty and early school leaving, in line with sustainable development education. The depopulation of rural areas due to a lack of job prospects and insufficient education opportunities is having a detrimental impact on young families. Early school leaving is a problem in urban and rural areas, therefore, policies dealing with the labour market and fair economic growth must be effective in order to reduce the number of NEETs ([12]).

3.4. Effectively implementing the European Framework for Quality and Effective Apprenticeships ([13]) and enhancing the European Quality Framework for Traineeships are essential in relation to sustainable development education.

3.5. The EESC believes that given the scale, complexity and immediacy of these issues, a strengthened and better coordinated effort by the EU and the Member States is needed, including on improving education for sustainability, which is now critical. This also includes education on the use of sustainable energy. EU and Member State policies on education need to be consistently monitored and mapped, with good practises exchanged among countries and organisations. At the heart of education for sustainable development are humanistic values that focus on the acquisition of knowledge and the formation of balanced, practical solutions, considering environmental and social consequences.

3.6. Teachers and parents play an essential role in education for a sustainable environment. Teachers and trainers need to be supported with quality initial and continuous professional training on sustainability. The EESC opinion *Towards an EU strategy for enhancing green skills and competences for all* ([14]) underlined the important point that everyone needs the necessary knowledge to fight against climate change. Lifelong learning for parents and citizens' education are essential and should be strengthened through outreach to all, including by supporting youth organisations on this matter.

([12]) NEET is an acronym for 'Not in Education, Employment, or Training', and refers to a person who is unemployed and not receiving an education or vocational training.

([13]) Council Recommendation of 15 March 2018 on a European Framework for Quality and Effective Apprenticeships (OJ C 153, 2.5.2018, p. 1).

([14]) Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on Towards an EU strategy for enhancing green skills and competences for all (own-initiative opinion) (OJ C 56, 16.2.2021, p. 1).

3.7. The EESC calls on the Member States to provide effective support to teachers to make the profession more attractive. While there is a huge teacher shortage in Europe, education for sustainability needs valued teachers, with decent salaries and good working conditions. To transform the education system, it is essential to ensure high quality initial and continuous training for teachers, equity and inclusion in the education and training systems, and an innovative organisation of schools, creating a culture of peace and safety. Empowering youth for sustainable development through education requires capable professionals, equipped with diverse and assertive tools. Skilled teachers will know how to make the best use in their day-to-day work of the Paris Declaration ([15]) and the Osnabrück Declaration on VET ([16]) promoting citizenship and the common values of freedom, tolerance and non-discrimination in education.

3.8. Europe's young people constitute invaluable human capital and a source of innovative ideas, with their creative imagination, enthusiasm and energy, and they have the biggest role to play in driving sustainable development in the EU Member States now and in the near future. In this regard, the EU Member States have a large source of untapped potential to act. Youth organisations and non-formal education have an important role to play in supporting sustainable education and learning.

3.9. The EESC calls for youth to be put at the centre of the education and learning process. This can be achieved by reducing the bureaucracy involved in the teaching profession, focusing on innovative pedagogy and on a close relationship with students, and preparing all teachers for a use of new technologies, for new learning contexts, whether in the curriculum or in their own lives. A transformative education requires transformative teachers, transformative skills and transformative citizens. Teachers and trainers need sufficient time, space and resources to be able to implement the 'hands-on' and cross-cutting approach of Education for Environmental Sustainability (EES), based on efficient teamwork amongst stakeholders. This is a cross-cutting subject that concerns all the disciplines of education and vocational training in an interdisciplinary pedagogical approach.

3.10. It is gratifying to note that young people are already contributing to sustainable development in their countries and to international climate goals along the lines of 'environmental friendliness' and, moreover, are actively joining the international networks of youth movements aimed at conserving nature and combating climate change. To complement this, we need to adapt all education systems to provide space for transformative education that will enable more young people to direct their efforts to bringing about the transformative change we need. According to the recent IPCC report, 'transformative learning is critical because it helps to induce both shared awareness and collective actions' ([17]).

4. **Sustainable development must be seen as a continuous and comprehensive learning process**

4.1. It is important to recognise that the sustainable development of the state and society cannot exist without constant learning, and the acquisition and understanding of new experiences. In this regard, sustainable development must be seen as a continuous process through which society must learn to live more sustainably from an environmental, economic and social perspective. Through access to information and by increasing awareness, but more importantly by building people's capacity to innovate and implement solutions, education for sustainability is essential if we are to re-orientate the way we live and work. In order to educate young people to consciously approach the most complex sustainable development issues facing communities and states, it is necessary to develop comprehensive curricula for instilling critical thinking skills and informed decision-making.

4.2. Based on studies and research carried out for the European Commission to prepare the proposal for a Council Recommendation on learning for environmental sustainability, only 13 Member States have a clear definition of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) or Education for Environmental Sustainability (EES). It is regrettable that the term 'Education for Sustainable Development' and target SDG 4.7 are not applied in some Member States even though it is

([15]) Promoting citizenship and the common values of freedom, tolerance and non-discrimination through education Eurydice.
([16]) Osnabrück Declaration on vocational education and training as an enabler of recovery and just transitions to digital and green economies — osnabrueck_declaration_eu2020.pdf.
([17]) IPCC Sixth Assessment Report, Working Group III report: Climate Change 2022: Mitigation of Climate Change, p. 2871.

recognised as an integral element of Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) on quality education and a key enabler of all other Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The analysed country reports did not specifically ask about funding. However, Italy, which has started to make pledges on ESD, clearly mentioned that the lack of funding is one of the main reasons why the implementation of ESD has stalled. When governments are forced to make cuts due to economic, energy and cost-of-living crises, education, like other social areas, is always in the equation. The lack of investment causes different forms of privatisation and asymmetries in the systems, eroding equity and pedagogical and academic freedom.

4.3. What also provides food for thought is whether we need a centralised, top-down strategy to successfully implement ESD, or whether there are other factors determining its success? Denmark and the Netherlands do not have a national strategy for ESD but their schools are actively working on this topic. Finland has a national strategy but fears that education for ESD is fragmented across schools. Italy has already included ESD in the national curriculum, yet experiences some challenges in its implementation at regional level. France has developed a national strategy, which is managed by local educational authorities and implemented in all schools through the national curriculum and pedagogical projects. In this way, every level is involved which, in turn, ensures its success.

4.4. One of the crucial issues is the prioritisation of education for sustainable development. The OECD, in collaboration with the European Commission, recently published research ([18]) mapping the environmental sustainability competence of young people across the EU and OECD countries. This new approach to studies and assessments could provide a good signal towards prioritisation of ESD in the Member States. It could be useful to further explore the relationship between the UN's measures to promote education for sustainable development and the OECD's measures to assist the development of education policy through PISA in order to see if there are any asymmetries in the ways these two sets of measures shape education systems.

4.5. One potential barrier is the implementation of education for sustainable development in countries with a federal system. What we have seen in the national reports is that the degree of coordination between the federal ministry in question and the regional authorities differs between the Member States — Germany is struggling with it while Austria has a network that regulates the coordination. The way in which the Austrian federal government is involved with the bottom-up initiatives is an example that other countries could follow.

4.6. It is essential for present and future societies to reassess, rethink, and redefine education from the perspective of sustainable education and learning from preschool to university and beyond so that it ultimately embraces the principles, knowledge, skills, beliefs, and values associated with sustainability in all three areas: ecology, society and economy. Such a process should be global, interdisciplinary and involve grassroots initiatives as well as the general public, and be supported by the respective governments. However, the implementation in the individual countries needs to take into account local characteristics and specific cultural features.

4.7. Education for sustainable development should disseminate knowledge about the environment and its condition, and show the possibilities that exist for adapting our economy in a way that incentivises giving priority to the well-being of people and the planet, while promoting intergenerational equity and conserving the natural environment. This adapted economy should give increased importance to environmentally friendly methods of management, provide opportunities for nurturing the careful respect of natural and cultural values, and be values-led, based on the ecological ethics of responsibility for the conservation of the environment for present and future generations, and for the sustainable use of natural resources.

4.8. A transformative education for sustainable development should:

— be based on the principles and values that underlie sustainable development,

([18]) Borgonovi, F., et al. (2022), 'Young people's environmental sustainability competence: Emotional, cognitive, behavioural, and attitudinal dimensions in EU and OECD countries', OECD *Social, Employment and Migration Working Papers*, No 274, OECD Publishing, Paris. Borgonovi, F., et al. (2022), 'The environmental sustainability competence toolbox: From leaving a better planet for our children to leaving better children for our planet', OECD *Social, Employment and Migration Working Papers*, No 275, OECD Publishing, Paris. The papers were prepared as background for the forthcoming OECD Skills Outlook 2023 publication.

— affect all three areas of sustainable development: the environment, society and the economy,

— stimulate lifelong and life-wide learning that fosters sustainable, respectful, responsible, proactive, and critical societies,

— stand for an education that is of high quality, actively supported, and holistic in its approaches,

— foster an accessible rights-based education that is respectful, inclusive, and celebrates diversity,

— think globally, but also focus on local issues and cultural characteristics,

— cover formal, non-formal and informal education,

— take into account the evolutionary nature of the concept of sustainable development.

4.9. There are no universal models of a transformative education for sustainability and therefore each country will have to determine with the effective involvement of relevant social partners, organised civil society and other stakeholders, including youth organisations, its own priorities and actions in the field of sustainable development and education. Collaborative school leadership and citizenship education play a key role in shaping schools to enhance sustainability education. Objectives, main lines of action and mechanisms should be determined, taking into account local environmental, social and economic conditions and cultural characteristics.

4.10. Creating an education system for sustainable development involves the transition from traditional education to a sustainability-oriented model, which should be based on broad interdisciplinary knowledge underpinned by an integrated approach to the development of society, the economy and the environment. Such education should involve work at the level of formal (schools, universities, advanced training institutions) and non-formal education (creation of training centres, seminars and round tables, use of the media, etc.) and informal education (peer-to-peer learning through events, youth exchanges, youth-led projects etc.). Education and training programmes integrating education for environmental sustainability need to be accessible and inclusive. Governments need to take into consideration, at an early stage, the reality facing young people from disadvantaged backgrounds and make sure they find ways to include these groups.

Brussels, 15 December 2022.

The President
of the European Economic and Social Committee
Christa SCHWENG