

# Report

## of the First meeting of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe Steering Committee on Education for Sustainable Development Ad hoc group on Youth Vienna, Austria (16 - 18 February 2020)

### I. Introduction

1. The first meeting of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (ECE) Steering Committee on Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) Ad Hoc group on Youth was held on 16 to 18 February 2020 in Vienna, Austria.

#### A. Attendance

2. Delegations from 13 ECE member States attended the meeting, the countries included: Andorra, Belarus, Cyprus, Estonia, Estonia, Germany, Greece, Latvia, Norway, Slovakia, Slovenia, UK, Ukraine.
3. A representative of the Regional Environmental Centre for Central Asia (CAREC) participated in the meeting as well as a representative of Virtual Global Education from Italy.
4. From the UNECE ESD Steering Committee the chair, youth focal point and a representative of the Office of the Executive Secretary of ECE as well as the host attended the meeting.
5. In addition, representatives of the following youth non-governmental organizations (NGOs) attended the meeting: Climates, Fridays for Future and Generation Earth

## B. Inputs & Discussion

6. The meeting started with an introduction to the work of three youth organizations in the field of environment and sustainability in Austria.
7. The first organization to present was Climates, an organization active in 30 countries with more than 400 members, all of whom are volunteers. They work in 3 main areas: Research, empowerment and advocacy. In Austria they lead several projects, most notably: Clim'school which involves young schoolgoers who are not necessarily active in climate related issues; LCOY –an event under the umbrella of YOUNGO, the official youth constituency at the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). Its aims are to be a space to boost youth climate action locally and create an input into the international conferences; klimareporter: young people researching, interviewing experts and reporting on climate related issues as well as the Austrian Youth Delegates. The importance of certain misconceptions was highlighted, including: you do not need a lot of money to create change, you need less time than what you expect, it is necessary to allow [young] people to take responsibility.
8. The Second organization to present was Fridays for Future who highlighted the effects of climate change: more floods, draughts, extreme temperature events, etc. Fridays for future is an international movement of school students who take time off from class on Fridays to participate in demonstrations to demand action from political leaders to take action to prevent climate change and for the fossil fuel industry to transition to renewable energy. In Austria they have led actions through referenda to have discussions in the political sphere, such as through the klima Volksbegehren which led to the topic being discussed in Parliament with collaboration of scientists, lawyers, organizations and companies. They highlight the need to take young people seriously and to think outside the box: using each other's' talents and modern tools at our disposal to share best practices and to collaborate more effectively.
9. The third organization to present was Generation Earth which is supported by WWF. The organization started out ten years ago with a small group of young people forming a governing body. Their main areas of work currently are: empowering young people through co-creation trainings under and annual theme and youth-led projects. As the organization grows older so do its members, the role of the organization has also adapted to support young

people's access to the labour market. Finally, the organization aims to engage young people and decision makers at the global level through activities at international conferences – an example is a flash mob held in front of the Waterbodies conference in Vienna which led to a meeting with the then minister of environment. Some core principles that need to prevail in order to ensure youth participation is: engaging young people – giving them freedom and including them in the process under their own rules; respect – taking them seriously, including their concerns; rewarding – not necessarily monetary rewards, also skills and knowledge (or a network for example); safe environments – to ensure young people can feel comfortable and to create a family feeling.

### C. Discussion: best practice youth participation

10. Participants were invited to present and discuss youth participation and the different structures in their countries. Some issues / difficulties that were identified included the fragmentation of youth participation and the fact that many initiatives are repeated within the system without any coordination. Furthermore, not all countries have formal youth engagement mechanisms and overall lifelong learning is not seen as an inherent aspect of the system. To address this several good practices were highlighted, including: the establishment of a youth network / youth working group within institutions, holding regular meetings with youth, ensuring delegation processes to (inter)national meetings are more democratic. Drafting basic TORs and minimum requirements for 'meaningful youth participation', appointing focal points within organizations to work and liaise with your networks and provide (digital) platforms for engagement and sharing of best practices such as mailing lists. Most importantly it is necessary to not create parallel structures to those that already exist but to integrate and improve them. The working and cooperating mechanisms should be continuous and where possible be formalized within the system / organization. Whilst time and money are important factors in enabling youth participation engagement and ideas are the main drivers.

### D. UNECE Steering Committee's on ESD Mission Statement and Goals of the Ad hoc Group

11. The secretariat presented the mission statement and goals of the UNECE ESD Steering Committee as well as of the AD hoc group

### E. Presentation: Youth and ESD

12. The chair of the UNECE Steering Committee on ESD led a discussion on engaging youth and ESD in participants' countries. Examples mentioned included a national forum on ecology & youth, the appointment of a UNESCO Youth delegate to the UNESCO forum and collaborations with communities abroad.
13. It was highlighted that having an equal interpretation of ESD was important. When environmental impacts of current activities are taken into account the underlying and possible consequences must be considered (for example climate refugees)
14. A first discussion round was held on which definition of youth would be used and adopted within the framework of the UNECE ESD Strategy and the Steering Committee. It was however highlighted that without an introduction to the specific role of youth within the steering committee and the strategy this was a very broad question to address. Therefore, this discussion was postponed to the second meeting day.
15. The role of the UNECE Steering Committee and challenges it faces were later highlighted. Taking into account it is a very broad committee (56 member countries + INGOs) its role and working is being reassessed in light of the 2030 agenda. As part of this an ad-hoc group on strategic planning was established to work on the post 2020 strategy and work plan; issues to be considered include citizenship, the green deal, etc. Specific strands include: Whole institution approach, quality education, digital education and entrepreneurship. It was highlighted that education is not only about quantitative knowledge but also about the capacities an individual has. The importance of a basic framework and standards is necessary to monitor this.

#### F. Discussion on the 4 strands of the UNECE ESD post 2020 framework

16. Participants were asked to review and discuss the 4 strands of the new ESD strategy. The following questions were presented to the 4 groups:
  - a. How can youth be actively engaged in the strategic planning?
  - b. How can the role of youth be clearer and more dynamic?
  - c. What is a vision and mission of this strategic planning regarding youth?
  - d. What other issues do you consider relevant within this framework regarding youth?

- e. What other documents can be taken into account to frame this strategic framework?

17. Based on the questions the following recommendations were formulated:

- a. Not to limit the work to focal points as youth work is very vast and involves many different actors – working through (in)formal networks might be more efficient
- b. There should be clear goals and frameworks that are realistic and that actively involve young people within the work at the different levels
- c. Specific attention should be given to the difficulties found by young people from rural areas in participation: focus on digital means for inclusion
- d. There is a need to use ‘youth-friendly’ language, simplifying it so that it is understandable for everyone
- e. Countries should implement checklists for minimal engagement and to ensure a clear strategy exists.
- f. The current involvement and roles of youth at the country-level should be rethought, working with single UN Youth delegates who are responsible for all sustainable development related issues is neither inclusive nor efficient, including the loss of know-how due to the term duration of their mandates
- g. Whatever youth involvement mechanisms are set up they should be more democratic – within existing frameworks (UNESCO Youth Forum, ECOSOC Youth Forum, etc) the process lacks transparency and does not reach sufficient young people
- h. To ensure meaningful youth participation formal and continuous mechanisms need to be worked out that are not based on a single delegate / representative

18. Specific recommendations for the strands were also formulated

*A recurring recommendation is to present the information in a more youth friendly way which could include visual representation and easier language; this could be developed after the adoption of the new strategy with young people.*

I. **Strand 1: Whole institutional approach (WIA)**

- a. The strand should be better explained so that it is easier for people to understand: perhaps introduce a specific introduction to the topic
- b. Youth should be mainstreamed throughout the text, there is also a need to include the concept of informal spaces within the WIA strand

- c. Youth participation within the WIA should not be mandatory, however there should at least be space for feedback – even within non-youth oriented organizations
- d. There should be an inclusion of digital spaces (social media for example) to facilitate WIA, this should include the sharing of best practices
- e. The recommendations in the strand should be broken down to the local level so that they can also use them in their work
- f. Frameworks & working groups should be dynamic and allowed to be rethought as the environment changes
- g. There is a need for the development of evaluation tools which should be included in the strand

## II. **Strand 2: Quality Education**

- a. Youth should be included within the planning process of both formal & informal institutions and within the broader structure (ministries, etc.)
- b. Within the strand youth should be included within the different elements as well as formulating specific outcomes for educators and institutions
- c. It should be made clear that ESD is a mutual process between educators and students – both within formal and informal frameworks
- d. Young people should be empowered and recognised to find solutions which help society become more sustainable – the document should be rephrased through a solution's based approach
- e. Overall qualitative criteria should exist for quality education
- f. The text should be clarified with examples, ie 'some countries have recognized...' – which countries? How was this done?

## III. **Strand 3: Digital Innovation**

- a. Digital Tools should be used to include young people in the planning and implementation phases of the different frameworks
  - i. Examples of dynamic elements that can support participation include social media, online platforms and apps
- b. Specific digital tools should be developed that can help introduce young people to the different concepts (video's, infographics)
- c. The strand should include recommendations from the EU digital education action plan
- d. Access to the digital framework should be ensured – especially in rural areas to promote broad inclusion
- e. A specific mention should be made to the importance of mental health related issues

- f. A focus should be given to bottom-up innovation, allowing school and institutions to experiment and share their best practices

#### IV. **Strand 4: Employment Innovation**

- a. A specific section should be included on young people within the strand
- b. Youth should be more prominent in the document as they are the main group entering the labour market
- c. A definition of a green or sustainable economy should be included and promoted
- d. A list of the different stakeholders should be included in the strand
- e. There is a need to recognize the 3 sectors of education within employment and entrepreneurship as well as their stakeholders:
  - i. Formal education – stakeholders include the government, education facilities and employers
  - ii. Informal Education – stakeholders include the government, employers and NGOs
  - iii. Labour market – stakeholders include employers, governments and institutions recruiting interns and young workers
- f. Young people should be seen as both a target and a stakeholder group within the strand, where possible they should be included in the decision-making structures directly
- g. The skills & competences should be underlined within the strand – especially transferable / soft skills

Other overall recommendations include:

- Young people should be included within delegations, not only as ad-hoc groups
- Focus groups should be established on specific elements of the different strands
- Reducing bureaucracy for youth participation
- National action plans should be created in a participative manner so as to include young people constantly

19. The ad-hoc group on youth also discussed the concept of youth to be used within the strategy and for the work of the steering committee. Some of the issues to take into account were:

- a. When the definition is broader, more people can be included. Young people are not a homogenous group, so meaningful youth engagement cannot be a homogenous concept. Meaningful engagement for a 15-year-old male student living in Bosnia, for example, does not mean the same thing as it does for a 21-year-old entrepreneur living in Paris.

- b. Youth vs. children – for the purpose of representation young people should be considered as those who have agency, meaning the capacity of individuals to act independently and to make their own free choices – a hard age-limit is complex as this definition will differ between young people but also amongst governments

20. Taking these two elements into consideration the following recommendations were formulated:

**I. Recommendations for the strategy**

- a. For the purpose of the strategy and as a target group of the UNECE ESD Steering Committee young people refers to every individual up to the age of 35
  - i. This broad definition is used so as to take into account the varying definitions and aspects of a person's life in their transition towards adulthood. This definition does not aim to refer to young people as a homogenous group but rather as a group that is faced with a specific set of challenges within society
- b. There is a need to develop and strengthen partnerships and joint efforts on ESD implementation among all stakeholders involved in ESD, including UNECE, UNESCO, UNEP and other inter- and national organizations.

**II. Recommendations for youth engagement in the UNECE ESD Steering Committee**

- a. For the purpose of representation in the steering committee young people are represented by:
  - i. Individuals aged between 18 and 30
  - ii. Individuals under the age of 18 where guardianship and national laws make it possible
  - iii. Representatives of youth led organizations up to the age of 35
  - iv. Individuals and representatives should be linked to local / national / regional organizations and mechanisms linked to ESD
  - v. Youth Representatives are expected to seek input from young people in the UNECE region who represent a broad spectrum of individuals
- b. The steering committee should take active measures to involve young people in their work, this includes:

- i. Adding a young person to the national representation of the steering committee and to (inter)national meetings and events
- ii. Ask countries to nominate a young person the steering committee meeting in charge of youth & ESD
- iii. Establish a network of young people & organizations active in ESD which can delegate representatives to the Steering Committee