

NON-FORMAL LEARNING: INTERVIEW WITH JULIUS GRUND



How is ESD characterized in the area of non-formal learning?

Non-formal learning is an essential pillar of ESD practice and thus contributes considerably to sustainability-related educational processes. This was already the case in the UN decade 2005-2014 and has its roots in the strong decades-long civil-societal advocacy for environmental protection and justice. Of particular use here are, among other, overlaps between non-formal and sustainability learning. For example, both understand education as participative,

both are oriented toward the lifeworld and everyday life of the learners and both tend to utilize problem-oriented and self-regulated learning forms.

What are the main findings of the ESD monitoring in the area of non-formal learning?

Against the backdrop of this high level of relevance, it is not surprising that ESD actors from the non-formal sector are on average highly qualified and can implement ESD to a great extent and with a variety of methods. Moreover, they cooperate with various actors, for instance from the educational sector, civil society and in politics.

What challenges and development possibilities can you observe in the area of non-formal ESD?

The non-formal area is confronted by significant challenges. Our study and others illustrate that the actual educational work takes place in the middle of diverse administrative and organizational tasks, in addition to networking: on average, these actors only have just about half of their work time at their disposal for practical educational work. Yet one area that this sector can put more work into is orientating all educational work toward principles of sustainability. The Whole Institutional Approach not only refines the profile of non-formal education, it is also directly effective in education: learners experience what they are learning first hand. That being said, here as in other educational areas, there is room for improvement in the implementation of the Whole Institution Approach: in particular when it comes to cooperation agreements with schools, this approach, as central as it is for ESD, is far too seldom linked to educational programmes.

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What does a glimpse into the future of non-formal ESD show us?

In our survey with educational practitioners from the non-formal sector, we asked what would be vital for future non-formal ESD. These actors mentioned the need for ESD to concentrate more on the solution of sustainability problems and, in view of a higher level of knowledge among target groups, to go deeper into the subject matter. Moreover, they expect that the confrontation with sustainability – and thus also ESD – will become more politicized and deal more extensively with fundamental questions for all of society, such as how we run our economic activity. The same survey does also leave room for optimism concerning the positive effect of Fridays for Future on their educational work: three fourths of the study participants spoke of positive effects both in their private and their professional lives. The greater visibility and relevance of sustainability brought about by FFF has given them new hope for reaching common goals. Here, there seems to be positive interplay between non-formal educational practice and the engagement of young people, which can be utilized in the future.

What do these findings mean for the actors who would like to advocate for the strengthening of ESD in non-formal learning?

One main goal should be for the non-formal educational landscape to remain free and able to act autonomously, because only then can the special strengths of this educational area really be cultivated. For this to be possible, it is crucial to dismantle the structural hurdles, an issue for decades, such as a large administrative burden and financial uncertainties. At the same time, the chance should be seized to gain the quality and expertise of more educational practitioners for the support of formal educational sectors by means of continuous cooperation and reliable financing. Yet to establish and simultaneously maintain the balance between collaboration and autonomy poses challenges: on the one hand, state ESD actors rely on the expertise and engagement of non-formal institutions; on the other hand, the independence of content and with it the self-regulated control in this sector represent an important fundament and quality. To some extent, this leads to both symbiotic and tense collaboration for state and non-state actors.

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