

Conference Summary



Which education for a socio-ecological transformation?

Conference for activists, educators and researchers

30/11 – 04/12/2016

Krzyżowa, Poland

Date:	30/11 – 04/12/2016
Venue:	International Youth Meeting Centre, Krzyżowa (Poland)
Participants:	Educators of non-formal education in the field of sustainable development, activists, researchers and practitioners from Germany, Greece and Poland
Partners:	Centrum EcoRozwoju (Wrocław), Kean - Cell for Alternative Youth Activities (Athens), Kreisau-Initiative e.V. (Berlin), Krzyżowa Foundation for Mutual Understanding in Europe (Krzyżowa)
Financed by:	German Federal Ministry of Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth

1. Origin of the Conference

The idea for the conference emerged from the need for a socio-ecological transformation of the economy in Europe. In the light of the manifold crises – including climate change, increasing social disparities, large migration movements, an instable financial system and a loss of confidence in political institutions – we, the organizers, believed that we need a more democratic, solidary and sustainable way of living and doing economics in Europe, one that has overcome the growth paradigm and has “good living” at its core.

As international educators, we were convinced that educational activities can play a vital role in this transformation process. However, we asked ourselves which education exactly do we need for a socio-ecological turn? How should non-formal education be designed in order to contribute to a socio-ecological transformation? Which values and competencies should be cultivated in (young) people? What are the principles, contents and methods of such education? Which pedagogic and didactic tools have proved their worth and go along with sustainability? These were some of the questions we wished to address during the conference.

Before starting the implementation process, however, we wished to involve a partner organizations from Greece and Poland with whom we could conceptualize the conference together. We found these partners in “Centrum EkoRozwoju” from Poland and “Kean – Center for Alternative Youth Activities” in Greece. Thus, the conference became a fruitful German-Greek-Polish cooperation. It began with a preparation meeting in Berlin in mid-September.

2. Concept and Target Group

We assumed that in order to answer the above-mentioned questions it was not enough to invite educators only. We much rather believed that it needed an exchange between educators, applied scientists and activists alike, i.e. people who already realize the vision of a post-growth society. In our view, there was much we could learn from each other. Therefore, the goal of the conference was to bring together educators, actors for transition (initiatives and associations) and researchers. The guiding question was: *Which education do we need for a socio-ecological transformation?*



We decided to work process-oriented and to actively involve the participants into the conference program. One of our premises was to avoid a passive consumption of expert knowledge. Instead, the course of the conference was supposed to be determined by the needs and interests of the participants. In addition, it was meant to reflect the principles of a post-growth society on a small-scale. In view of this, we aimed at:

- ✓ Having a diverse group of participants with regards to age, gender and country of residence;
- ✓ Including the perspective of the Global South into the conference;
- ✓ Be as inclusive and participatory as possible in the implementation of the conference;
- ✓ Minimize the ecological footprint of the conference, e.g. by a mobility concept, locally grown food, a vegetarian diet for all, conscious use of seminar materials, and others.
- ✓ Practice non-violent communication and solidarity between privileged and de-privileged people during the conference (incl. a balance in speaking time);

The common language at the conference was English. Whispering interpretation was provided when needed.

3. Desired Outcomes

We defined the following desired outcomes for the conference:

- ❖ Participants get new insights and perspectives regarding their analysis, didactic approaches, political and educational activities concerning the socio-ecological transformation through exchange of best-practice examples. These new insights are fed back into their individual (educational) activities;
- ❖ Participants make new contacts both within and across national borders. New initiatives and project groups are established;
- ❖ Participants agree there is a need for a change of values and lifestyles. They are motivated to get (more) involved in the struggle for a socio-ecological transformation;
- ❖ Participants agree on a follow-up, e.g. a subsequent conference;
- ❖ Participants and organizers have kept the ecological footprint of the conference low and stated a best-practice example with the event.

4. Program and Sequence of Events

The conference started with a joint dinner on the first evening. Afterwards there was a welcome session where participants could learn each other's names and integrate in a playful setting. In addition, the facilitators presented the program and provided practical information.

The second day started with a guided tour around the premises of Krzyżowa Foundation. It introduced the participants not only to the history of the place but also gave them an overview of how sustainable development is practiced in Krzyżowa. The guided tour was followed by a situation analysis. It actively involved the participants by making them experts for their respective home country. The guiding questions were:

- What is the need for change in your country?
- What is the situation in the educational system in your country?
- What are supporting and blocking factors with regards to a social-ecological transformation?



The participants deliberated upon these questions in their country groups and presented their results to everyone.

As a next step, a key note speech by Marta Gontarska from the Institute of Global Responsibility in Warsaw was scheduled. She was supposed to address the core challenges of non-formal education work in Europe. Unfortunately, she was not able to come due to a sudden illness. Her part was substituted with a text work session. The participants read the forthcoming article “Tackling the Roots: (Economic) Education for Social-Ecological Transformations” by Christoph Sanders and discussed its main propositions in a plenum. The session was closed by a spontaneous systemic constellation offered by one of the participants. She asked the group to collectively form a human body and interpret the result. In the evening, there was a “market of opportunities” where participants could present their work and organizations. Some participants later watched the movie “Tomorrow”.

The first half of the program on day 3 was determined by the group. The facilitators collected the different interests of the participants and provided a structure. Ultimately, four parallel sessions were offered: a psychodynamic workshop on “Our Barriers to Change”, a dream journey on “How I would like to have lived”, a discussion of the previously read article and a discussion on the movie “Tomorrow”. The results were briefly summarized in a plenum. In addition, one participant offered a summary of the main findings of the article by visualizing the principles of education in a growth vs. post-growth society.

The second half of the day was dedicated to a project visit. Thus, the group went to visit an agricultural cooperative in Krasków about 20 km from Krzyżowa. The two farmers first showed the participants around their premises, explaining their motivation, their approach and the future plans for their small cooperative and then prepared a wonderful dinner for the whole group. It included only self-made, locally grown products such as bread, cheese, pumpkin soup. In this lovely atmosphere the group was able to socialize more and listen to the farmers’ experience in a question-and answer-setting. Contacts were exchanged, as two of the participants are founders of a vegetable cooperative in Warsaw and wished to establish a cooperation.

Day 4 consisted of an Open Space, i.e. a structured space for the participants to learn from each other, present best-practice examples of social-ecological change or further delve into previously raised topics. The participants came up with the following sessions:

- Food Sharing (workshop)
- Barriers to Change (continued workshop)
- Cultural Diversity as a Right (discussion)
- Deliberative Walk with elements of environmental education
- The Flowers of Trust (storytelling workshop)
- How to Make Democracy Vivid? (discussion)
- Shared Places, Interactive Methods (workshop)
- Common Welfare Economy (workshop)
- Introduction to the internet platform “WeChange” (workshop)
- Participation in Non-formal Education (discussion)
- Flux Challenge (interactive game)

- Introduction to Transition Theatre (workshop)
- Sitting in Silence (individual)

For each session a protocol was written. The protocols were then presented in a gallery. The harvesting of the results was conducted in the form of a silent discussion – each person could comment the protocol, ask questions, or add opinions. As a next step, the facilitators suggested a structured reflection of the learning process which was refused by the majority of the group due to a feeling of information overload. Spontaneous small group activities followed, like a singing circle, meditations and small group discussions. The evening was rounded up by a farewell party with presentations from individual participants and sharing of cultural heritage such as dances.

For the last day of the conference a wrap-up session was planned – which failed, however, as a number of participants caught a stomach flu. The conference was thus closed with an oral feedback round and space for contact-making, networking and connecting on the platform “WeChange”.

After the conference, the facilitators shared all the documentation of the conference with the participants and invited them to provide the organizers a written feedback.

5. Results

The guiding question of the conference was: which education do we need for a social-ecological transformation, i.e. how should non-formal educational activities be designed in order to foster a transition of the economy to be more democratic, solidary and sustainable? The participants deliberated upon this question throughout the conference in small and large group discussions, various workshops as well as informal learning settings. At the same time, the process-oriented and participative structure of the event itself provided valuable insights into how different educational approaches work. Thus, the conference itself constituted a real-life laboratory for a (potentially) transformative education. The participants reflected upon their learning process and their feedback was summarized by the facilitators into the following theses:

1. Education for a social-ecological transformation should be participatory.

One of the positive characteristics of the conference that was repeatedly mentioned in the feedback by the participants was its open structure. The participants were an integral part of the program. They did not merely “consume” expert knowledge but rather shaped the course and content of the conference. The facilitators deliberately left room to host the different expertise and many ideas of the participants. The applied method was first and foremost Open Space. Their task was to moderate and structure the group deliberation and guarantee an inclusive process. In this sense, everyone was actively involved and could inject his_herself into the progression of the conference. At the same time, hierarchies between learners and facilitators were leveled. The mutual learning process empowered the participants and created a stronger sense of belonging for the facilitators. Altogether, a strong feeling of community was achieved.

2. Education for a social-ecological transformation should leave space for individual needs and emotions.

While the program of the first two days was mostly pre-structured, the last three days offered a lot of space for suggestions by the participants. Thus, each participant had the freedom to provide an own workshop as well as to choose from different proposals, i.e. rather than being forced to follow a

particular course of the program, everyone could shape their individual learning process according to his/her interests and needs. As a result, participants were more confident to gain knowledge through experience and curiosity. Also, it fostered the creativity of the group and made discussions livelier. It deserves mentioning, however, that this self-responsibility did not only apply to *what* participants preferred to learn but also to *how much* and *when* they wanted to learn. Together, the facilitators and participants created an atmosphere of trust, empathy and appreciation in which individual needs were taken seriously. For example, participants could leave at any stage of the program and have a break.

3. Education for a social-ecological transformation should be experiential.

The conference involved a mix of methods including group work, theoretical input, small and large group discussions, a dream journey, theatre education, learnscapes, constellations, an excursion, as well as individual use of time. This methodological mix addressed the participants not only at the cognitive but also at the emotional and physical level which made the whole learning experience more profound. To give an example, the participatory format of the conference constituted a learning experience of self-governance, while the joint dinner during the visit of the agricultural cooperative made communal living come alive. Similarly, the theatre education, learnscapes or constellation allowed for the embodiment of theoretical knowledge.

4. Education for a social-ecological transformation should be close to nature.

A core value of any education for a social-ecological transformation is the protection of the environment. Therefore, any pedagogic approach on that matter should take the environment as a learning space into account. It is particularly suitable to reflect upon the social construction of nature and the separation between mankind and other living beings. This type of thinking lies at the core of the exploitation of nature inherent in the capitalist system and necessarily has to be addressed by transformative education.

5. Education for a social-ecological transformation should be systemic in its approach.

Education has the potential of changing individual attitudes and provide individuals with particular action competencies. However, one should not forget that individuals are also part of a larger system with whom they interact. In order to be transformative, education has to reveal causal relations and show the position of the individual within a larger system. Only then different leverage points for change can be understood. The constellation work during the conference triggered strong group dynamics and allowed for valuable insights.

6. Education for a social-ecological transformation should be holistic.

Another aspect of the conference that was much appreciated by the participants was the holistic approach of the facilitators, i.e. their attempt to reduce the ecological footprint of the event by various practical means, such as vegetarian diet, CO² offsetting or encouraging participants to travel by bus or train. Such an approach makes the whole educational approach more credible. In addition, stating a positive example of how enriching and satisfying a sustainable life can be increases the motivational effect of any transformative education.

6. Conclusion and Outlook

In conclusion, the desired outcomes of the conference were achieved. While some participants felt confirmed by the results of the conference in their educational approach, others stated that they

gained a lot of new knowledge and insights, both in terms of content and methodology. They experienced that it is possible to trust in open processes and to feel connected to other people through the creation of a safe and trustful atmosphere and a common vision for change. They furthermore experienced that it is possible to be a valuable part of a community and to be respected as an individual at the same time, to get in touch with nature and to question hierarchical structures – most of the participants could agree that these are crucial base lines of a transformative education. The evaluation of the event also revealed that the participants feel empowered and motivated to continue their activism and educational work as a result of the conference.

In addition, the participants established new contacts and got involved in planning further educational activities across countries. Kreisau-Initiative, for example, is in the process of developing a series of trainings for multipliers of transformative education that is based on the results of the conference. It has also been invited to a joint project on training-the-trainers with other European countries.

Last but not least, the conference was aimed to lead by example and be as energy- and resource-efficient as possible. This aim could be achieved to a large extent but not entirely. For example, it was not possible to provide exclusively local, seasonal and organic produce, as it would have incurred additional costs for the hosting organization. However, the facilitators induced a process of change within the hosting organization that is being increasingly supported by the management. They feel motivated and inspired by the conference to contribute to the development the International Youth Meeting Centre in Krzyżowa into a modern and sustainable education center.

The facilitators wish to thank all participants and helping hands for making this event a success, and the German Federal Ministry of Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth for making this conference possible with their financial support.

