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Practical guidelines for trade unions on addressing environmental issues and sustainable environmental development in the education sector

1. Introduction

The climate emergency and environmental issues require a drastic social change, including individual and collective changes to our mentality, behaviour and lifestyle. Education is a crucial tool for ensuring that this pressing sustainable development of environment can be realised to avoid a climate catastrophe. Education trade unions have a key role in ensuring that not only education about sustainable environmental development is integrated into all levels and aspects of education systems, but also that it is accompanied by sustainable and adequate technical, financial and staff resources and that education staff receive the sufficient professional support to do so.

The ETUCE Resolution [For a sustainable future of Europe: the role of education trade unions in Europe in addressing education and environment for social change](#) (2021) underlines that education trade unions need to secure their place in the design, assessment and implementation of national and European climate strategies and demand social change for a sustainable and green future, through social dialogue and collective bargaining at all levels. The Resolution also asserts the commitment of ETUCE member organisations to developing trade union policies and strategies that address the topic of education and environment for social change and a sustainable future.

These practical guidelines have been developed as an outcome of the ETUCE [project](#) “Education for Social Change: The role of Education Trade Unions in addressing sustainable environmental development”. Throughout the project activities, which included an online survey among ETUCE member organisations, a Kick-Off Conference and two training workshops, a number of concrete and practical strategies were developed for education trade unions to:

- address education and environment for social change and the impact of climate emergency on education;
- support teachers, academics and other education personnel in implementing environmental sustainability education; and
- secure their place in the design and assessment of the implementation of national and European climate strategies.

In order to stimulate discussion on the topic of education on sustainable environmental development within the Social Dialogue in Education, the guidelines seek to promote concrete trade union measures and practices in addressing environmental issues and sustainable development in education. It further looks to address social dialogue and collective bargaining at all levels as well as the impact of environmental problems on education institutions and teachers, academics, and other education personnel.

The practical guidelines also prepare the social partners in education to enforce the implementation of the European Green Deal and UN Sustainable Development Goals. Additionally, it introduces the topic of education on sustainable environmental development as one of the education priorities of the European Semester and the Country Specific Recommendations, with the view to ensure a coherent and robust integration of learning about sustainable approaches to the environment in education policies, national curricula, initial teacher training and continuous professional development for all education levels. Finally, the guidelines contribute to the priorities and activities of the European Sectoral Social Dialogue in Education (ESSDE) [Work Programme 2022-2023](#) by preparing education trade unions to address the discussion on the role of education social partners in contributing to the transition to green, sustainable, quality education capable of addressing future challenges.

2. Situation in the ETUCE member organisations

The online survey carried out in the frame of the project helped ETUCE and its member organisations to identify national findings related to addressing the environmental issues and sustainable development in the education system and relevant professional and other needs of teachers, academics and other education personnel. This includes in curricula, assessments, extra-curriculum activities, initial and continuous professional development of education workers, infrastructure of education institutions, and other elements of the education system. The survey also identified the key elements of the role of education trade unions in addressing education and environment for social change and sustainable development as a social partner in education. It discovered that while there has been an increased interest among trade unions in alleviating these challenges, there is often a focus on traditional thematic areas (e.g. pay, health etc.) rather than revitalised discourse topics and education reform. Developing comprehensive policies on environmental sustainability and collective bargaining priorities for this purpose are not common. The results of the survey show that only half of the respondent ETUCE member organisations participate in social dialogue on environmental sustainability, and collective bargaining is the least common among the types of social dialogue. Most of the measures ETUCE member organisations carry out are taken by working alone on the topic and through information-sharing. The actions of education trade unions in Europe on the topic of environmental sustainability have only just begun in many countries, and there is a need to further increase the number and frequency of actions in order to have more influence in this area. This does not have to be done quickly and needs to be carried out alongside the development of expertise within education trade unions to bring about convincing actions. Therefore, several respondents stated that they are in the explorative phase of trade union policymaking on how to deal with the climate emergency in education and that they would have devoted more resources to it if the trade union had more funds, dedicated staff and time available.

3. Aim

These practical guidelines aim to carry out further strategic discussions and decisions on education trade unions' capacity to address education and environment for social change. It further looks to

explore the impact of climate emergency on education; support teachers, academics and other education personnel in implementing environmental sustainability education; and secure their place in the design and assessment of the implementation of national and European climate strategies. Striving for quality education, the guidelines assist education trade unions in developing concrete policies and strategies on addressing the topic of education and environment for social change and a sustainable future.

This document does not provide a master plan for every country. Instead, these guidelines should be understood as a supporting tool to be assessed and adjusted to meet the conditions at national/union level as regards the education for environmental sustainability and the impact of climate emergency on education.

4. Guidelines

Following the results of the online survey among ETUCE member organisations and the discussion in Kick-Off Conference and two training workshops (in Italy and Denmark), these practical guidelines suggest specific actions for education trade unions at a national and European level to effectively address the topic of education and environment for social change and a sustainable future.

At national and regional education trade union level it is important to:

- Set common goals for the education trade union to assert that the sustainable development topic becomes a priority on its agenda and in collective bargaining, reflecting the global objectives highlighted in the SDGs and ensuring the consistency of message;
- Develop a trade union strategy (e.g an action plan) to engage effectively with environmentally sustainable development and influence 'green deal' debates at all policy levels, promoting professional development, actions at the level of education institutions and partnerships with other stakeholders;
- Ensure a working policy on the environmental sustainability suitable for all levels of the education trade unions (national, local, etc.), as well as provide a monitoring system for the implementation of this policy and a regular review to adapt it to the changing context;
- Explore various ways to connect the topic of environmental sustainability to the traditional issues addressed by education trade unions (e.g. working conditions of education personnel, health and safety linked to education institution infrastructure, workload, contractual issues, pay and cost-of-living crisis, etc.) taking into account the complexity of the matter and that measures taken might not always be cost-efficient in the short term;
- Encourage a movement for environmental sustainability among affiliates by providing the concrete and down-to-earth information about the impact of climate change on their work and their lives including that it might threaten their fundamental human right to an environment that is adequate for their health and wellbeing, and to train them to address this topic in teaching, as well as ensure that trade union's leadership takes up the environmental sustainability measures in their work;
- Push for including environmental development priorities in the social dialogue and collective bargaining negotiations, in order to change the rules at the decision level while analysing the topic of climate change topic from a variety of perspectives: biological, energy, economic, and political, in order to create a social dialogue of proper quality;

- Adopt a holistic view (all dimensions - economic, social, cultural and environmental) of sustainability and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) while concentrating on education for sustainable development and environmental sustainability;
- Demand to raise the status and attractiveness of the teaching profession to ensure the provision of high quality and inclusive education for all with a view to preparing committed, responsible, critical-thinking and active citizens who are ready to live sustainably;
- Advocate for sufficient public funding at national and European level to support the development of necessary green skills and knowledge on environmental sustainability and ensure a long-term vision in education for environmental sustainability with meaningful social dialogue and collective bargaining at national and European level;
- Promote an understanding that the process of a just transition requires re-skilling and up-skilling in many employment sectors and teachers and other education personnel are crucial to this transformative process;
- Following the [Council Recommendation on learning for the green transition and sustainable development](#), demand from education authorities and governments to ensure adequate guidance and support to teachers and other education personnel through accessible and free of charge initial and continuous professional training in accordance with teachers' professional needs and the objectives of sustainability in education, as well as an adequate compensation for the teachers' additional efforts;
- Demand to reform the curricula to ensure the holistic approach to education for environmental sustainability and sufficient time and space within the teaching schedule including the possibility to mainstream environmental topics in all subjects, with particular attention to democratic citizenship, and respecting academic freedom and professional autonomy of teachers, academics, and other education personnel;
- Demand the inclusion of education on the topic of environmental sustainability for teachers and other education personnel in the initial teacher training curricula, recognising that pedagogy that addresses the overlap between climate justice and social justice is a crucial tool for teaching on the climate emergency and biodiversity loss;
- Demand from education authorities, governments and regional institutions to commit to taking concrete measures to mitigate the impact of education institutions on the climate (e.g. through building green infrastructure or retrofitting education institutions to meet the needs of the present without compromising the needs of future generations) and report on the success of the actions taken;
- Seek alliances between actors (education trade unions, teachers, students, parents, non-governmental and civil society organisations) at various levels to support climate education for citizens, create common goals and to collaborate with other trade unions across industry sectors, as well as with people with the interest and expertise in the area in order to provide trade union's members with the relevant knowledge on the topic;
- Network among the education trade unions by sharing successful experiences and challenges on how to support teachers and educators to integrate SDGs and environmental issues with a view to successfully achieve education for sustainable development in education institutions;

- Promote lifelong learning opportunities for education trade union members on the topic of the environment and sustainability, allowing members to lead by example by promoting green actions/policies within the trade union itself (e.g. promoting the use of alternative modes of transport and event organisation, recycle, subsidizing sustainable modes of transportation for members, etc.);
- In several cases, the topic of environmental sustainability is driven by industrial trade unions while education trade unions are on the periphery. Therefore, it is important that education trade unions are co-creators of the union movement's response to climate change. This must occur through adapting the priorities of education trade unions and by building the capacity of affiliates on this topic;
- Raise awareness on the importance of education on environment and climate emergency for sustainable development in the wider society while taking the lead in the narrative: in the media, in the public profile, in the social media, etc. and using the key moments (e.g. elections);
- Have a strong representation in the education institutions to take on the issues of environmental sustainability (e.g. 'delegates for environment') and build the capacity of these representatives on this topic while seeking a legislative provision to make a 'Green Representative' a statutory-based position;
- Encourage a cooperation between undergraduate and graduate tertiary programmes and other education sectors to ensure the exchange of knowledge, research and expertise between education practitioners, academics and teacher training providers;
- Use various opportunities to examine the needs and views of education trade unions affiliates on the environmental sustainability (e.g. conducting surveys, organising regular working groups, etc.).