



Raising Awareness Together: How Can the EU Engage with Civil Society to Promote Sustainable Lifestyles?

Ekaterina Vladimirova

Abstract

Individual behaviour plays a key role in resolving the climate change problem. The main obstacle for such behavioural change is often poor public knowledge about the ethical dimension of climate change and about the practical solutions available to individuals in order to make informed choices. Promoting sustainable lifestyles should top the political agenda in Europe. In this light, this paper suggests how the EU could engage with civil society to promote sustainable lifestyles through joint media campaigns, by establishing local sustainability centres and by working together to change educational standards. This collaboration would benefit from knowledge and expertise exchange, lower transaction costs and, most importantly, it would increase public trust in the quest for sustainability.

Keywords: *European Union / Climate change / Sustainable lifestyles / Public awareness / Environmental Education / Environmental Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) / Civil society*

Raising Awareness Together: How Can the EU Engage with Civil Society to Promote Sustainable Lifestyles?

by Ekaterina Vladimirova*

Introduction

The role of states in tackling climate change has recently been compromised. The failure of the Kyoto protocol and the broader stagnation of international climate negotiations do not bode well for a state-based global climate deal.

Some argue that a global deal is not what is needed to resolve the climate problem.¹ Rather than seeking a far-fetched global agreement, what is necessary instead is to concentrate on domestic energy policies and regional collaboration. In this vein, this paper also assumes that a global deal is not the be-all-and-end-all solution to the climate problem.² The most important challenge at the level of regional cooperation and domestic policy lies in changing people's attitudes and preferences in order to achieve the highest level of sustainable societal behaviour. Changing people's lifestyles is an underlying condition for resolving climate change. People's choices are what drives and shapes the economy, and if people's choices turn green, the economy would have to adapt and turn green, too.³

In this light, civil society plays an important role. Environmental non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have been participating in climate negotiations since the Rio Earth Summit in 1992, and their numbers and involvement since then have steadily grown. Yet rather than devoting time and resources to unfruitful international climate talks, this paper suggests that civil society should reorient its efforts to the domestic level. In particular, civil society should focus on promoting sustainable lifestyles and increasing public awareness and involvement into sustainable daily activities.

In this endeavour, civil society is not alone. The European Union (EU) is a world-recognized leader in most areas of environmental action. It has been concerned with energy efficiency⁴ and sustainable consumption and production issues, as well as with other aspects of sustainable lifestyles such as transport preferences. European civil society, for its part, has also been quite active in promoting sustainability at different

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¹ Gwyn Prins et al., *The Hartwell Paper: a new direction for climate policy after the crash of 2009*, London, Institute for Science, Innovation & Society and LSE Mackinder Programme, May 2010, <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/27939>.

² Ibid.

³ This claim does not exclude that action should be taken by the private sector, too.

⁴ Éva Csobod, Matthias Grätz, Péter Szuppingner, *Overview and Analysis of Public Awareness Raising Strategies and Actions on Energy Savings*, INTENSE Project, July 2009, http://www.intense-energy.eu/uploads/tx_triedownloads/INTENSE_WP6_D61_final.pdf.

levels. However, the most influential NGOs have focused their attention on shaping European environmental policies,⁵ for which the European Commission has created a transparent platform.⁶

The aim of this paper is to suggest ways to enhance collaboration between the EU and civil society to promote concretely sustainable lifestyles at the local level.

1. Defining sustainable lifestyles

Before proceeding to detailed policy recommendations, it is essential to define what is meant by sustainable lifestyles or sustainable living. There is no single definition adopted by all stakeholders, and different definitions exist, which are often relevant to specific contexts.⁷ For the purpose of this paper, we turn to the definition selected in the UN background paper on this issue,⁸ as part of the Marrakesh Process:⁹ “Sustainable lifestyles are patterns of action and consumption, used by people to affiliate and differentiate themselves from others, which: meet basic needs, provide a better quality of life, minimise the use of natural resources and emissions of waste and pollutants over the lifecycle, and do not jeopardise the needs of future generations [...] Sustainable lifestyles should reflect specific cultural, natural, economic and social heritage of each society.”

Embraced by this definition are many actions, habits and choices, which cannot be reviewed here. Of this panoply of actions, five main areas stand out: diets, transport habits, household energy efficiency, recycling, and water management. Each one of these areas is huge, however, and should be reduced to a limited number of practical recommendations which can be easily understood by the general public, poorly informed on average. The list¹⁰ could vary in length and depth, allowing people to

⁵ See the Green 10 website: <http://www.green10.org>.

⁶ See European Commission website (“Civil Society”, http://ec.europa.eu/transparency/civil_society) and communication *Towards a reinforced culture of consultation and dialogue. General principles and minimum standards for consultation of interested parties by the Commission* (COM(2002) 704 final), Brussels, 11 November 2002, <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=COM:2002:0704:FIN:en:PDF>.

⁷ For more information see Åke Thidell, *Sustainable Consumption and Green Lifestyles: Definitions and Concepts*, background paper for a workshop held by the Nordic Council of Ministers and the Danish Environmental Protection Agency, Copenhagen, 24-25 November 2010, <http://www.mst.dk/NR/ronlyres/76FB72A5-9687-421B-8411-632F31D9D058/0/BackgroundpaperASession1.pdf>.

⁸ United Nations, *Sustainable Lifestyles and Education for Sustainable Consumption*, March 2008, <http://esa.un.org/marrakechprocess/issuessuslifestyles.shtml>.

⁹ The Marrakech process is a global multi-stakeholder process coordinated by the United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP) and the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA). It was launched in order to support the development of the 10 Year Framework of Programmes on Sustainable Consumption and Production. See Oksana Mont, *The EU and UN Work on Sustainable Consumption and Green Lifestyles*, background paper for a workshop held by the Nordic Council of Ministers and the Danish Environmental Protection Agency, Copenhagen, 24-25 November 2010, <http://www.mst.dk/NR/ronlyres/7C96B3EE-DDC5-4378-BE90-94003E480E7C/0/BackgroundpaperDsession5.pdf>.

¹⁰ It is not the purpose of this paper to provide a list of recommendations for sustainable lifestyle. However, this should be the next step following the underlying idea of this policy paper. The recommendations should be written in a simple, understandable manner, and should make reference to sufficient and clearly

choose their level of commitment. In other words, the first necessary step in promoting sustainable lifestyles hinges on raising public awareness of what such lifestyles entail, allowing for an increased involvement of local civil society and the general public in a collaborative effort to decrease the human impact on the environment.

2. Ways to engage

Following the 1998 Aarhus Convention¹¹ which entered into force in 2001 and by 2009 was signed and ratified by the European Union, EU member states committed to granting the public rights to access information and justice, as well as participation in environmental matters. It was a key step that acknowledged the importance of public involvement, awareness and environmental education, and opened perspectives for collaboration and information exchange among states, businesses, civil society and the general public.

In line with this commitment and with the decision to add environmental dimension to the Lisbon process of employment, economic reform and social cohesion¹², the EU could engage with civil society to increase public awareness (1) by conducting joint media campaigns; (2) by creating local sustainability centres; (3) by changing educational standards in schools. EU and civil society collaboration in these domains could multiply their respective impacts given the public trust enjoyed both EU institutions and large environmental NGOs, the cumulative knowledge and experience of both actors, and the reduction of transaction costs (i.e., administrative and operational costs of implementing decisions) by relying the existing connections of the EU and civil society.

2.1. Joint media campaigns

The first way in which the EU and civil society could raise public awareness of sustainable lifestyles¹³ is through a joint media European Campaign for Sustainable Living. Campaigns play an important role in informing and changing public opinion about environmental matters. Campaigns vary in scale, duration and kind of action required, depending on the conducting agent. In general, official actors tend to have the necessary resources to ensure and maintain national coverage using most media outlets, such as television, radio, printed and online media, among others. Large

explained scientific data. The list and accompanying explanations should also be modified according to the target group. For children, for instance, there should be a special format and list.

¹¹ The Aarhus Convention, which was signed by 40 primarily European states and ratified by the European Community, entered into force on October 30th, 2001. The Convention “grants the public rights and imposes on Parties and public authorities obligations regarding access to information and public participation and access to justice”. See United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE), *Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters*, Aarhus, 25 June 1998, <http://www.unece.org/env/pp/treatytext.html>.

¹² European Council, *Presidency Conclusions*, Göteborg, 15 and 16 June 2001 (SN 2001/01 REV 1), http://ec.europa.eu/governance/impact/background/docs/goteborg_concl_en.pdf.

¹³ One of the studies that confirms that available level of public awareness is not sufficient to result in behavioural changes: European Environment Agency, *Public Awareness and Behaviour*, Fact Sheet Indicator, 18 October 2004, http://www.eea.europa.eu/data-and-maps/indicators/ds_resolveuid/0a25fa8b5056e3454dbe1a872f3d2a5a.

NGOs, such as Greenpeace, WWF, or Friends of the Earth also have budgets which are large enough to organize large-scale campaigns, but these are generally smaller than state-led campaigns and are confined to a more limited set of media outlets. When it comes to smaller civil society groups, campaigns are even smaller and generally local in nature, in view of their more limited budgets.

Media campaigns can be organized independently by states and civil society groups. But joint action versus separate campaigns could greatly enhance synergies and thus impact. Specifically, by joining forces, the EU, through its resources, could increase the scale, duration and media instruments employed in a campaign. Civil society, and in particular large environmental NGOs, would contribute their extensive experience and vast networks of media contacts, which could be mobilized for the achievement of a common goal.

A particularly arduous task regards public awareness through campaigns on climate change issues. This is because of contrasting scientific data in this field, which gives rise to public uncertainty and scepticism. This uncertainty snowballs onto other dimensions of the environmental crisis, which have nothing to do with climate science, making the public generally more sceptical about all other environmentally-friendly actions, such as recycling or the use of renewable energy. To stem this dangerous spillover effect, an information media campaign is urgently needed. An effective media campaign would seek to bring down the barriers of confusion and uncertainty by clearly explaining to the public the consequences of their daily routines for the environment.

An example of a successful state-led campaign is the *Let's Think Green!*¹⁴ campaign launched by the Israeli government in January 2011. The campaign “aims to spearhead a conceptual and behavioural change in the public” and “highlights the economic and environmental profit that goes hand in hand with environmental conduct”. The purpose of the campaign is to raise public awareness of the environmental damage and financial loss caused by wasting coal-generated electricity and fuel through improper and unnecessary transportation use, by discarding food due to excessive buying, and by excessive use of paper. The campaign utilizes all media forms such as billboards, press, television, radio and internet. This experience could be valuable in devising an all-European Campaign for Sustainable Living. The *Let's Think Green!* campaign is entirely state-led, but its lessons could be applied to a joint EU-civil society action.

The suggested joint EU-civil society media campaign would be comprehensive, alarming and regular. This means that it should carry a clear message and leave no room for confusion regarding the ethical assessment of sustainable versus unsustainable practices. The list of actions identified as sustainable should be communicated in a simple manner to be understood and remembered by the general public. The campaign should be carried out through various media sources, including TV, radio, printed media, billboards, and internet. For example, one out of five short TV advertisements in breaks between programmes could be dedicated to sustainable action (in a simple cartoon form, for example). Also, following the Israeli example, one

¹⁴ More information on the Campaign available in the Israel Ministry of the Environment website: http://old.sviva.gov.il/Environment/bin/en.jsp?enPage=e_BlankPage&enZone=green_campaign.

could imagine a Smartphone application to measure one's sustainability by recording daily actions. Another dimension of such a campaign could be the sponsorship of public events, like festivals or competitions on best sustainable practices.

The basic set of lifestyle recommendations disseminated through the campaign should be supported by interviews and reports on TV, radio and in the printed media, and should be backed by an online platform containing further information (e.g., exhaustive reading lists and internet links), interactive tools (like a carbon footprint calculator) and a public feedback zone.

2.2. Local sustainability centres

The second way to raise public awareness is through the creation of local sustainability centres. The main idea behind this proposal is that people need a trustworthy source of information about sustainable living that could give detailed and face-to-face explanations beyond media campaigns. Media campaigns are limited in their outreach due to the simple reason that the message needs to be short and condensed in order to attract attention. Those whose interest is raised can seek further information online. But this too can leave questions unanswered and lacks the benefits of face-to-face learning.

Local sustainability centres (LSCs) can become the point of reference, the local source of information where people can learn more about sustainable practices, both on a walk-in basis and through a system of training activities. LSCs can also organize events at the local level which would raise public awareness and grassroots involvement.

With regards to their organizational structure, LSCs could be part of the local municipality or an independent structure. Either way, they would involve local municipality and civil society experts. Alternatively, the municipality could participate by providing funds or administrative support. In this case the operating core of the centre would consist of civil society experts and activists.

The structure of LSCs would vary from place to place. LSC activities would be tailored to local realities and existing civil society initiatives, and, therefore, might significantly differ from one another. To increase their effectiveness, each LSC should not cover an area of more than 50,000 inhabitants. In large cities, there would thus be various neighborhood LSCs. While linked, LSCs would function as a decentralized network, in which knowledge and experience exchange among centres would be ensured by regular yearly meetings.

LSCs should become the source of information, clarification and inspiration for local citizens. Their activities would include three components. First, an educational component would be developed through a series of on-going trainings and seminars, aimed at elucidating the different aspects of sustainability, from a general ethical framework and climate science to the most basic practical steps needed to alter one's day-to-day behavior and environmental impact. Courses would be free and vary in depth. Second, LSCs would organize and participate in local events such as fairs or concerts to raise funds or simply attract people, and traditional cultural events, in which

LSCs would promote sustainable living through public assembly. Third, LSCs should simply “be there” for local citizens. They would be available for walk-in consultations and for providing material (library-based or printed handouts), as well as bringing together and hosting local civil initiatives aimed at sustainable living.

An example of a civil society initiative that could contribute to LSCs’ activities is the Eco-schools climate initiative which operates across Europe. In 2003 Eco-Schools were identified by the United Nations Environmental Program (UNEP) as a model initiative for Education for Sustainable Development. The Initiative, run by HSBC and the Foundation for Environmental Education, aims to empower students to reduce carbon emissions through Eco-School’s seven step change process.¹⁵ Schools are supported by trained volunteers, teacher training, guides and other material. Participating schools can take part in a competition or apply for seed-funding.

A way to engage with this kind of initiative at a local level through LSCs would be to invite teachers participating in Eco-schools to collaborate with LSCs to share their experience and develop together new programmes and actions to promote sustainable living to school children. LSCs could facilitate competitions among local schools for the most sustainable yearly performance or most interesting school project on sustainability topics. They could also organize joint activities for schools and representatives of local governments, businesses or civil society initiatives.

2.3. Educational standards

Finally, EU-civil society collaboration to promote sustainable living would concentrate on educational standards as reflected in school curricula. Childhood and adolescence is the time when our attitudes and ideas about the world are shaped, and this is the period when introducing a new concept (i.e., sustainable living) would meet less resistance than later on in life when views and habits are already fixed. Environmental education should start from an early age, and schools play the key role in promoting sustainable ideas and educating future citizens.

Education is largely a member state competence. Each EU member state is responsible for the organization and content of its education and training systems. There are, however, important ways in which the EU as such contributes. First, the European Commission is responsible for the functioning and financing of the Comenius programme. This programme funds projects that promote school exchanges, school development, education of school staff, school assistantships, and other. The Commission also works closely with national policy-makers to help them develop their school education policies and systems; it gathers and shares information and analysis and encourages the exchange of good policy practices. As such, the EU has strong tools to influence educational policies and standards in member states.¹⁶

¹⁵ More information available in the initiative website: <http://www.eco-schools-hsbc.org/The-Climate-Initiative-p2.html>.

¹⁶ More information available in the European Commission website: “Lifelong Learning Policy: School education”, http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/school_en.htm.

Alongside this the Aarhus Convention, which was signed and ratified primarily by European states, stresses the desire of the signatories to “promote environmental education to further the understanding of the environment and sustainable development and to encourage widespread public awareness of, and participation in, decisions affecting the environment and sustainable development”¹⁷.

Notwithstanding, EU action in the education field indicates a lack of attention to environmental issues. Its 2008 Communication on “Improving Competences for the 21st Century: An Agenda for European Cooperation on Schools” makes no mention of environmental or sustainable education for school children. The Action programme in the field of lifelong learning (2007-2013), which includes programmes such as Comenius, Erasmus, Leonardo da Vinci and Grundtvig, refers only generally to “protecting environment for future generations” as a general objective, without further elaborating on how this goal would be promoted. Also, the final assessment report for the Sixth Environment Action Programme of the European Community for 2002-2012 only vaguely mentions the role of environmental education in moving towards a green economy.¹⁸ Therefore, although the need to improve environmental education is clearly stated, there is not coherent EU strategy to pursue this objective.

The role played by civil society with regards to environmental education in schools is minor. However, there are at least two important civil society initiatives in this field: the Foundation for Environmental Education (FEE), and ENSI (Environment and School Initiatives), “an experienced and recognized network on education for sustainable development”.¹⁹ FEE is a non-profit organization promoting sustainable development through environmental education and its most relevant aspect for the purposes of this paper is its initiative on Eco-Schools discussed in the previous section.

ENSI is an international government-based network that emphasizes school development in the field of Education for Sustainable Development. ENSI is a government-based network, therefore, “only governments, or non-governmental organisations, institutions or associations with a mandate from their government can become full members of ENSI on behalf of their countries. Institutions, associations or non-governmental organisations can become associate members of ENSI”.²⁰

The Association “aims at supporting educational and pedagogical developments that, via research and international exchange of experiences, promote insight into learning for sustainable development, environmental studies, active forms of learning and teaching, as well as education for citizenship”.²¹ ENSI exists since 1986 and, as part of its activities, also makes policy recommendations to governments. ENSI is a specialized network which includes governments and, as such, can only partly be considered as a civil society group. However, precisely because of this, its

¹⁷ UNECE, *Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters*, cit., p. 3.

¹⁸ European Environment Agency, *The European Environment: state and outlook 2010 (SOER 2010)*, October 2010, p. 168, <http://www.eea.europa.eu/soer>.

¹⁹ More information available at network website: http://www.ensi.org/About_ENSI.

²⁰ “Definitions & rules”, ENSI website, http://www.ensi.org/Members/General_information/Definitions-rules.

²¹ “Constitution”, ENSI website, http://www.ensi.org/About_ENSI/Constitution.

competences would be crucially important to any joint action between the EU and civil society in this field.

The EU should concentrate its efforts on adjusting school educational standards to promote desired sustainable living and on educating environmentally literate and concerned citizens. To do this, it is first necessary to conduct an in-depth analysis of the gaps in national education systems with regards to environmental education. Based on this analysis, a list of recommendations could be formulated, which could bring educational standards in compliance with sustainability norms. Achieving *sustainable* development is impossible without changing underlying preconditions, such as educational standards.

ENSI, or any other civil society initiative to promote environmental education in schools, should participate in developing those recommendations. All available information about good practices,²² as well as innovative solutions for the future that have been compiled by civil society groups should be reflected in recommendations that the Commission makes to member states. This dialogue could happen through public consultations via on-line submissions or in meetings in which representatives of civil society groups and Commission experts could exchange views and experiences and come up with optimal strategies. Considering the limited number of actors involved on both sides, these meetings most probably would be small- or medium-scale and easy to manage.

With regards to the content of new educational standards, it should certainly be in accordance with the concept of sustainability and should aim at promoting caring attitudes towards nature and awareness about the place of humans in it. Of particular importance is the role of individual behaviour and sustainable lifestyles. As argued above, it is necessary to have a list of comprehensive standards, rules for day-to-day individual activities. And this list should be introduced to children as soon as they can understand it. A list of what is good and what is bad in our behaviour from the perspective of sustainable living should be explained repeatedly throughout school years, opening new dimensions of explanations as soon as children are ready to appreciate them.

Knowledge about sustainability could be taught as a separate subject or integrated in the curriculum of existing subjects. Most importantly, it should not be a one-time piece of information but rather a framework for all school years, a system of (also extra-curriculum) activities which would allow a repeated interaction with different dimensions of knowledge about sustainability.

²² A platform to exchange and gain knowledge about developments in environmental education is the World Environmental Education Congress established in 2003. The latest, 6th Congress in 2011 indicated the main concerns as climate, youth participation, context variety, partnership and networks, role of universities and attracting attention of decision makers to environmental education. See the 6th Congress conclusions in the WEEC website: <http://www.environmental-education.org/en/networks-news/159-laustralia-passa-il-testimone-al-marocco.html>.

Conclusion

Domestic and local level action is crucial to combat climate change. However, official actors should not take decisions and fulfil them single-handedly but should rather engage with civil society actors in joint activities. This collaboration is warranted by the potential synergies which exist between official and civil society levels in terms of increased trust, knowledge and experience, and reduced transaction costs.

This paper proposes a programme of EU-civil society action to promote sustainable living through joint media campaigns, creating local sustainability centres and improving school educational standards. The first two actions are more short to medium-term in nature: the impact of media campaigns can be expected relatively soon after its execution, while the effects of sustainability centres could only be seen after the establishment of these new structures. The impact of educational standards, instead, could only be assessed after the first generation of school children makes its way into adulthood and starts making its own informed choices. Of the three, from a strategic perspective instilling sustainability norms within the education system is the most critical of the three actions insofar as it would make the former two unnecessary in future.

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