

# INFORMAL COMPETENCE DEVELOPMENT OF VOLUNTEERS OF SUSTAINABILITY GROUPS IN ECUADOR AND GERMANY

## Rationale

Today, humanity is facing a range of global social, economic, cultural and ecological changes which in the long term threaten the survival of the human species. The necessary transformations in terms of sustainable development require a far-reaching change of consciousness in individuals. In order for individuals to be in a position to engage with sustainability-related issues, a change of perspective in education is required, a reorientation towards “Education for Sustainable Development” (ESD). In this context, all educational institutions – from preschool to higher education – can and should consider it their responsibility to deal intensively with matters of sustainable development and to foster the development of *sustainability-relevant key competencies* (UNESCO, 2005). However, also the significant contribution of *informal learning* to ESD and competence development has to be recognised (UNESCO, 2009).

## Theoretical Framework

### Competencies and Key Competencies

Competencies may be characterised as *individual dispositions to self-organisation* which include cognitive, affective, volitional and motivational elements; they are an interplay of knowledge, capacities and skills, motives and affective dispositions. Competencies facilitate self-organised action in various complex situations, dependent on the given specific situation and context. They are acquired and developed during action – on the basis of experience and reflection (Weinert, 2001).

Key competencies can be understood as *multifunctional and context-independent competencies* which are considered to be particularly crucial for implementing societal goals important in a defined normative framework (e.g. sustainability) and which are *important for all individuals*. They require a high degree of individual reflexivity (Rychen, 2003; Rychen/Salganik, 2003; Weinert, 2001).

### Sustainability Key Competencies

Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) aims to develop (key) competencies that enable individuals to participate in socio-political processes and hence to move their society towards sustainable development (de Haan, 2006; Hopkins/McKeown, 2002). During the last years, different approaches for the selection and definition of key competencies required for sustainable development have been developed (cf. Wiek et al., 2011). In an international Delphi study, Rieckmann (2011) has identified the following key competencies to be important for sustainable development: competency for systemic thinking and handling of complexity; competency for anticipatory thinking; competency for critical thinking; competency for acting fairly and ecologically; competency for cooperation in (heterogeneous) groups; competency for participation; competency for empathy and change of perspective; competency for interdisciplinary work; competency for communication and use of media; competency for planning and realising innovative projects; competency for evaluation; competency for ambiguity and frustration tolerance.



Members of the student group SNEEP, Germany



Student involved in voluntary sustainability activities, Ecuador

## Research Objectives

The future research project will analyse the impact of volunteering on developing sustainability key competencies. In this context, at least three questions are of interest:

- Which *sustainability-relevant key competencies* are developed by volunteering in sustainability groups?
- In which way *informal competence development* takes place and how can it be facilitated?
- Which impacts have *different socio-political and cultural contexts* on informal competence development?

## Methodological Approach

The empirical design of the study is related to an *explorative case study* to allow in-depth analysis of the impacts of voluntary activities on the development of sustainability key competencies (cf. Cresswell, 1998). Acquiring competencies is not only based on individual processes, but is always achieved in social contexts and, at least in part, collaboratively. In order to reproduce such group processes parallel to individual ones, it is necessary to use an approach which is suitable for adequately reproducing cross-individual opinions. Analysing *focus group discussions* considers that subjective meaning structures are frequently integrated in social contexts, which can only be surveyed in group situations (Denzin/Lincoln, 1998).

Focus group discussions will be carried out with *members of different sustainability groups and initiatives*, such as student eco-clubs or local environmental groups, for instance. The sample groups will be *from Ecuador and Germany* in order to make possible a comparison of informal competence development in different socio-political and cultural contexts. Furthermore, a *questionnaire* may be used to get detailed individual feedback about motivational aspects as well as the overall satisfaction with the volunteering. The *qualitative analysis of the data*, oriented to the understanding and reconstruction of the processes of individual informal competence development, will be carried out based on the coding paradigm of the qualitative content analysis developed by Mayring (2000).

## Informal Learning

Informal learning has to be differentiated from formal and non-formal education. It is “any activity involving the pursuit of understanding, knowledge or skill which occurs without the presence of externally imposed curricular criteria” (Livingstone, 2001: 4). Referring to Schugurensky (2000) three forms of informal learning can be differentiated: self-directed learning, incidental/experiential learning, and socialisation. Informal learning in all its forms, but particularly *experiential learning*, contributes to developing competencies, because it is integrated in activities. Experiential learning especially facilitates the *development of action competencies*; e.g. in the context of volunteering. Some explorative case studies indicate that voluntary involvement in sustainability-related groups and initiatives can be characterised as a process of informal learning which facilitates the development of sustainability key competencies (cf. Rodemann, 2009; Barth et al., 2007).

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