THINK TANK REPORT

Empowering communities through citizenship education and lifelong learning

INTRODUCTION

This short, exploratory report from the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL) is the outcome of 'Placing citizenship education within a lifelong learning perspective: From research to action', a think tank meeting held in Hamburg in 2023. The meeting brought together experts from international organizations and academia and was organized by UIL in collaboration with the Asia-Pacific Centre of Education for International Understanding.

The report reflects the inputs of participants while also drawing on the proposals of the International Commission on the Futures of Education (ICFE, 2021); the findings of the *Fifth Global Report on Adult Learning and Education* (*GRALE 5*) (UIL, 2022a); the Marrakech Framework for Action (UIL, 2022b); and the outcomes of the United Nations Transforming Education Summit of September 2022 (UN, 2023a; UN 2023b); as well as UNESCO's *Revised Recommendation concerning Education for International Understanding, Co-operation and Peace* (UNESCO, 2023).

It makes a case for putting citizenship education, interpreted not as a means of reproducing the status quo but as a catalyst for civic and social empowerment, at the heart of efforts to create more equitable, tolerant and just societies for all. It argues that citizenship, so construed, should be woven into the fabric of education, throughout and across the life course, recognizing its role in narrowing social and economic inequalities, overcoming social fragmentation, addressing the climate crisis and tackling the backlash against human rights and gender equality.

This report calls for citizenship education and lifelong learning to be core pillars of a systems-level transformation in education, and provides recommendations for policy-makers, national and local governments, educators and civil society organizations to make citizenship education a priority in their policies and practices.

A WORLD IN TRANSITION NEEDS CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION

We live in a fast-changing world, characterized not only by wicked challenges but also by remarkable opportunities. While significant advances have been made in technology development and gender equality, for example, rising inequalities, conflicts and environmental degradation pose serious

threats to future progress and are, in many places in the world, making people's lives worse. These forces leave individuals grappling with uncertainty, disengagement and confusion as they try to make sense of a divided, inequitable global landscape in which basic human rights are routinely denied, and gender equality is under threat.

Addressing these interconnected challenges requires rethinking education systems in ways that put citizenship education and lifelong learning at the forefront. Education should no longer be seen merely as a tool for social adaptation or workforce preparation. Instead, it must become a powerful instrument for fostering critical thinking, driving innovation and empowering individuals to act upon the world and the prevailing social and political order to actively shape their futures – learning not just to survive, but to thrive.

By emphasizing a lifelong learning perspective, citizenship education paves the way for individuals to continuously develop and renew the skills required to address societal challenges such as climate change, conflict, displacement, inequality and exclusion, and the erosion of human rights, and where necessary resist them (*Figure 1*).

CONCEPTUAL CONSIDERATIONS: A TRANSFORMATIVE APPROACH

Education has long been regarded as a cornerstone of personal and social development and the promotion of human rights. Seventy-five years ago, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights enshrined education as a means to achieve the 'full development of the human personality' and to foster respect for human rights and freedoms,

Figure 1: The multiple benefits of citizenship education

Social justice and human rights	Citizenship education empowers individuals with the knowledge, skills and attitudes needed to combat discrimination and prejudice, promoting social justice and human rights by fostering active and responsible citizenship, solidarity and cooperation at local, national and global levels.
Sustainable democracies	Citizenship education strengthens and sustains democracy by equipping individuals with critical thinking skills, fostering civic participation and encouraging lifelong learning in both formal and non-formal settings.
Inclusion and gender equality	Citizenship education fosters inclusion by addressing systemic inequalities and ensuring that everyone, regardless of gender, ethnicity, age or socio-economic status, has access to the same opportunities throughout their lives, thus empowering marginalized communities and promoting gender equality.
The climate crisis	Citizenship education is crucial for empowering individuals to address the climate crisis, giving them the means to hold leaders accountable and galvanize political will, thus helping to challenge inequality and transform power structures to ensure environmental and social justice.
New technologies	Citizenship education is essential in the digital era, promoting digital inclusion, equipping individuals with essential skills for safe, critical and responsible online participation and helping ensure that new technologies are developed collaboratively and regulated in an ethical and inclusive manner.
Migrants, refugees and displaced persons	Citizenship education is vital for fostering inclusion, intercultural understanding and the social integration of migrants, refugees and displaced persons, helping them to bridge cultural gaps, participate in community life and advocate for their rights and inclusion in society.

emphasizing values such as understanding, tolerance and friendship among nations, races and religious groups (UN, 1948). This vision remains central to UNESCO's educational mission. However, despite the wide acceptance of these longstanding principles, many education systems still fail to prioritize the development of active citizenship, personal freedom and social engagement, treating these as peripheral concerns rather than core goals (UIL, 2022a).

Citizenship education, though described in an expansive way in various international policy frameworks, is narrowly interpreted in most countries. Many states focus on citizenship as a legal status, linked to entitlements and responsibilities, rather than seeking to foster a deeper understanding of human rights, empowerment and active civic participation. This legalistic approach overlooks the broader, transformative potential of citizenship education, which emphasizes belonging to a global community and recognizing our shared humanity.

While there is no single universally accepted concept of citizenship education, it is widely recognized that the term is not limited to legal status or country-specific rights and obligations but can encompass a broader sense of belonging to a larger community which recognizes our shared humanity.

Transcending narrow nationalistic notions, this understanding of citizenship education emphasizes the interdependencies between local, national and global levels, encompassing political, economic, social and cultural dimensions and their interconnectedness (UNESCO, 2015, p. 14).

In this transformative view, citizenship education empowers individuals to actively engage with their communities and societies. It fosters civic responsibility, critical thinking and a global perspective, allowing citizens to address both local and global challenges. Political polarization, nationalism, disinformation and declining public trust in democracy underscore the need for citizenship education to counter these trends and promote more just, equitable and inclusive societies.

UNESCO's 2015 Recommendation on Adult Learning and Education (UNESCO, 2016) emphasizes the significance of citizenship education in adult learning. The recommendation outlines three domains: literacy and basic skills, continuing professional development, and active citizenship through community and liberal education.

The third domain encourages individuals to engage with pressing social issues such as poverty, gender inequality, climate change and social justice. In this way, citizenship education goes beyond knowledge acquisition, cultivating critical thinking, empowerment and civic engagement.

## BOX 1: The place of citizenship education in international agendas

Citizenship education is widely recognized as a key enabler of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4.7 and SDG 16, and as critical, overall, to the realization of the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Recommendations such as the Marrakech Framework for Action (UIL, 2022b), the European Declaration on Global Citizenship Education to 2050 (GENE, 2022), the Bali Manifesto (UIL, 2023) and UNESCO's *Revised Recommendation concerning Education for International Understanding, Co-operation and Peace and Education relating to Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms* (UNESCO, 2023), call for a more developed, human rights-based approach to education and stress the role of citizenship education.

Reports such as *Reimagining our Futures Together: A New Social Contract for Education* (ICFE, 2021), and *Earth for All: A Survival Guide for Humanity. A Report to the Club of Rome* (Dixson-Declève et al., 2022), remind us that education is a public good that should aim to foster critical thinking skills, as well as a commitment to justice and human rights.

Finally, following the 2022 Transforming Education Summit, the United Nations' Secretary-General's Vision Statement on Transforming Education (UN, 2022) made an urgent call to countries to join efforts towards transforming education and creating a global partnership to deal with the opportunities, challenges and threats we face.

Figure 2: Topics covered by citizenship education
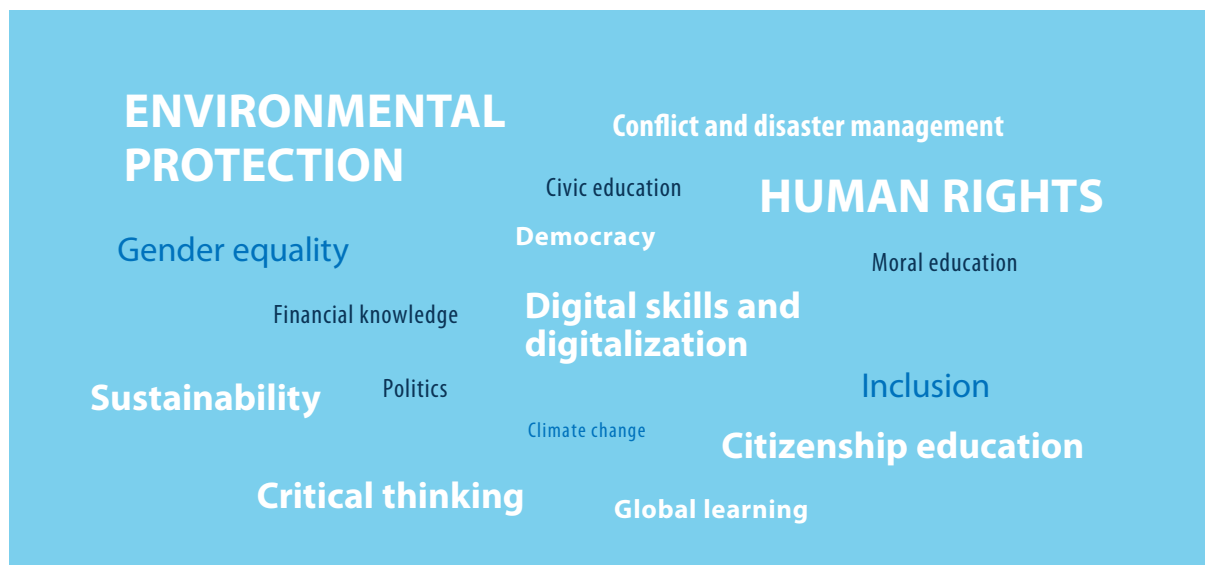
DIVERSE APPROACHES TO CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION ACROSS COUNTRIES

Countries interpret citizenship education in different ways, according to the specifics of their political, cultural, social and historical contexts. The political aspect of citizenship education is heavily influenced by the characteristics of national political systems, policies, power dynamics and the processes involved in public policy decision-making (Tawil, 2013, pp. 1–8), as well as by past injustices and exclusions. Cultural values, traditions and historical events also influence how citizenship is perceived and practised within a society. Some societies emphasize collectivism and communal responsibility, while others give more priority to individual rights and freedoms. Considering these cultural variations is essential if we are to avoid imposing a one-size-fits-all model of citizenship education on diverse communities.

GRALE 5 provided a detailed overview of the topics reported by countries as being covered by citizenship education in adult education curricula (see *Figure 2*). The responses demonstrate the importance of considering citizenship education from an intersectoral perspective, as a dimension of learning across the curriculum, and highlight

the strong links made by respondents between citizenship education, human rights and sustainability. Member States indicated that these topics were embedded in ALE policies in different ways, such as in literacy and numeracy interventions (e.g. Egypt), in education for immigrants (e.g. Belgium,

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BOX 2: Navigating the online world

The pan-European educational initiative, Young Digital Leaders, is a collaborative effort between the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) and Google. It is designed to empower individuals aged 12–16 with essential digital-citizenship, critical-thinking and media-literacy skills beyond traditional classroom boundaries. The programme's comprehensive curriculum, available in multiple languages, addresses crucial issues such as disinformation and targeted abuse. Through an engaging and innovative approach, students learn to assess online information critically, enhance their online communication effectiveness, and advocate for both their own and others' rights, responsibilities and opportunities in the digital realm. Furthermore, the initiative includes a digital citizenship education toolkit aimed at assisting civil society organizations working closely with young people in schools or youth centres. This toolkit equips them to develop and implement their own tailored programmes, considering the challenges and opportunities presented by the online world.

Source: ISD, 2019

Germany, Luxembourg, Norway and Slovenia), in vocational education and training for entrepreneurs (e.g. Greece, Namibia and Oman), in efforts to integrate people not in education, employment or training (the co-called NEETs) into the labour market (e.g. Slovenia), in education for older adults (e.g. Mexico and Slovenia) and in the arts (e.g. Gabon).

The findings highlight the strong link between citizenship and adult learning, and the role of non-formal adult education in promoting inclusion and engagement, particularly for those facing disadvantage or exclusion. Furthermore, they underscore the need to approach citizenship education from a lifelong learning perspective, ensuring it encompasses various themes across different learning modalities and levels. Lifelong learning, in turn, fosters continuous personal and social development, empowering individuals to remain informed, updated, and actively engaged throughout their lives.

BOX 3: Encouraging citizenship through vocational training in Lao PDR

The vocational training system in Lao People's Democratic Republic (PDR) is notable for an increasing understanding that so-called 'soft' skills are relevant to the integration of youth into the labour market. In response to this, a joint project involving DVV International and Lao Youth Union (LYU) sought to integrate soft skills into LYU's vocational training programmes, covering subject areas such as sewing, motor mechanics and computing. The aim was to complement technical training with learning focused on skills such as decision-making, communication and leadership, on the one hand, and personal skills such as emotional intelligence, self-confidence, assertiveness and resilience, on the other. These skills are essential for enabling young people to become active citizens, capable of critical reflection on the world and shaping their future in a self-determined way. Trainers were given intensive instruction in the use of soft skills in vocational education and familiarized with the participatory techniques of adult education. A soft skills manual was developed to support future trainers in developing a more participatory approach that goes beyond preparation for a job.

Source: Schweighöfer, 2022

CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION FROM A LIFELONG LEARNING PERSPECTIVE

International frameworks, such as the SDGs, and high-level initiatives such as Our Common Agenda (UN, 2023b), can serve as the foundation for system-wide change. To realize the potential of lifelong learning, it is necessary to reflect on past successes and failures, identify gaps, and consider how both lifelong learning and citizenship education can better foster critical reflection, dialogue and collaboration, leading to long-term educational and societal transformation. Education should no longer be seen as a self-contained system run by professionals, where changes in one area are counterbalanced by changes in others. Instead, it must be viewed as a cross-cutting concern – an engine of development in which communities are key stakeholders and change agents.

Education policies must integrate formal and non-formal systems, ensuring coherence and inclusivity. Non-formal adult education, with its tradition of active citizenship and engagement with marginalized groups, offers valuable insights and practices that can benefit other parts of the education system. Citizenship education must transcend sectors, promoting understanding of how different societal elements interact. By addressing these issues, citizenship education contributes to building cohesive, peaceful and sustainable societies. Member States must uphold their international commitments and create long-term educational strategies that promote active and responsible citizenship at every level of education, ensuring that the benefits of lifelong learning are accessible to all.

BOX 4: Integrating citizenship education in Ethiopia

Ethiopia has sought to integrate citizenship education into both formal and non-formal education systems to bring democratic culture closer to its citizens. There is general recognition that the participation of all citizens is important in building democracy and in fostering national development. However, the legacy of violent conflict often limits democratic engagement, while civil society engagement and adult education remain weak. A project coordinated by DVV International, the Ministry of Education, regional education bureaus and district offices is addressing this by fostering peace and reconciliation through the promotion of civic education within community learning centres. The initiative covers topics such as ethics, environment, gender, critical thinking, agriculture, health and income generation. It aligns with the Integrated Functional Adult Literacy Framework, emphasizing citizenship education in adult literacy programmes. The project empowers individuals with the knowledge and skills for active citizenship and sustainable peacebuilding. Through collaboration with key partners and alignment with policy frameworks, it contributes to inclusive and peaceful community development.

Source: Schweighöfer, 2022

CALL FOR ACTION: EMBED CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION IN LIFELONG LEARNING SYSTEMS

The following recommendations, drawn from the think tank discussion, offer actionable insights for governments, ministries of education, local authorities, educational institutions and civil society organizations. These insights aim to ensure that citizenship education becomes an integral part of lifelong learning systems, empowering individuals to be active, informed and responsible citizens.

Strengthen citizenship education in lifelong learning policies

To embed citizenship education as a core element of lifelong learning, governments and local authorities should develop comprehensive education policies that integrate citizenship education at all stages, from early childhood through to adult learning. These policies must prioritize inclusivity, ensuring that citizenship education is accessible to everyone and relevant across diverse learning environments – formal, non-formal and informal.

Additionally, these policies should promote collaboration across sectors, recognizing the value of citizenship education in fostering more holistic and inclusive learning experiences that reflect the realities of society. They should also advance an understanding of lifelong learning that is active, participative and transformative.

Increase investment in citizenship education

To meet commitments outlined in SDG 4.7 on sustainable development and global citizenship, countries must allocate sufficient resources to support adult learning, civic engagement and humanities education, often overlooked in favor of basic skills and work-focused education. They should recognize and reflect the importance of a broad educational approach that acknowledges the value of personal and community growth and democratic citizenship, as well as the acquisition of skills for employment. Investment should also target non-formal learning institutions such as libraries and community centres, which play a critical role in reaching learners who may be excluded from formal education and provide a platform for community-based citizenship education programmes, and in connecting education to other services.

Integrate citizenship education into national curricula

Ministries of education, along with other relevant ministries and national curriculum authorities, must ensure that citizenship education is fully integrated into national curricula at all levels and across all learning modalities, including non-formal education. A well-designed curriculum should enhance learners' understanding by addressing real-world issues and promoting critical thinking, social responsibility, climate justice, and ethical decision-making. Additionally, digital and media literacy must be core components, equipping students with the skills to critically evaluate information, identify misinformation, and practise responsible digital behaviour. By embedding citizenship education throughout the curriculum, its relevance to a broad range of societal challenges is reinforced, encouraging learners to engage with both local and global issues.

Provide professional development to ensure democratic methods in education

To deliver citizenship education effectively, teachers and educators require ongoing professional development. Training should focus on equipping them with the skills to teach critical thinking, civic engagement, social responsibility and digital and media literacy. It is essential that teachers and educators can foster inclusive, participatory learning environments that encourage learners to think critically and engage with real-world issues. Democratic methods should be built into education and the training of teachers, who should be prepared to give students (especially adults) a strong say in what they learn. Governments and educational authorities must also improve working conditions and compensation for teachers and educators. Ensuring that they are valued, well-supported and motivated is essential for the successful implementation of citizenship education.

Develop assessment frameworks for citizenship skills

The assessment of citizenship education must go beyond traditional academic metrics and focus on evaluating transversal competencies relevant to citizenship education, such as critical thinking, ethical reasoning and civic engagement. These competencies should be measured across cognitive, socio-emotional and behavioural domains to ensure that learners can apply their knowledge in real-world contexts. National governments and local authorities should develop assessment frameworks that recognize and evaluate these competencies as key learning outcomes, acknowledging the difficulties implicit in such assessment. This ensures that citizenship education is delivered effectively and produces individuals who are well-prepared to contribute to societal transformation and address complex global challenges.

Foster partnerships to resist erosion of democratic values and human rights

Strong coalitions involving governments, educational institutions, civil society and the private sector should be built to resist the backlash against democratic values, human rights and gender equality and to ensure a comprehensive and unified approach to citizenship education. Educational institutes and local governments should establish partnerships with local communities and promote public dialogues and awareness campaigns to provide learners and the wider public with practical opportunities to apply citizenship skills through community service, civic engagement projects and environmental initiatives. Ministries of education and school administrations should foreground political and media literacy in curricula development and create opportunities for student participation in educational governance through student councils and advisory groups and by encouraging participatory approaches to teaching. Involving students in decision-making processes enhances their learning experience, fosters a sense of civic responsibility and ensures that education policies are inclusive and responsive to student needs.

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UNESCO – a global leader in education

Education is UNESCO's top priority because it is a basic human right and the foundation for peace and sustainable development. UNESCO is the United Nations' specialized agency for education, providing global and regional leadership to drive progress, strengthening the resilience and capacity of national systems to serve all learners. UNESCO also leads efforts to respond to contemporary global challenges through transformative learning, with special focus on gender equality and Africa across all actions.

The Global Education 2030 Agenda

UNESCO, as the United Nations' specialized agency for education, is entrusted to lead and coordinate the Education 2030 Agenda, which is part of a global movement to eradicate poverty through 17 Sustainable Development Goals by 2030. Education, essential to achieve all of these goals, has its own dedicated Goal 4, which aims to **"ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all."** The Education 2030 Framework for Action provides guidance for the implementation of this ambitious goal and commitments.

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and Cultural Organization**