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White paper on integrating education for sustainability in formal and non-formal education

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Deliverable information

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Version history

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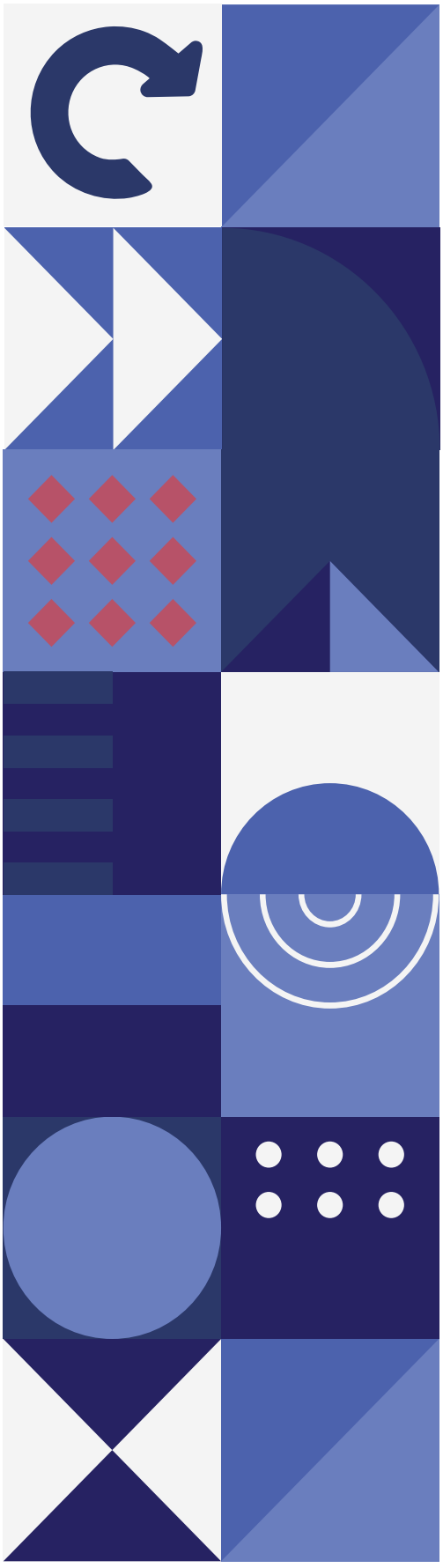

Summary of the Project

AELIA - Advancing Education for a Sustainable and Inclusive GreenTransition

The AELIA project responds to the call for a more sustainable world, highlighted by the COVID-19 pandemic effects. Aligned with the Sustainable Growth Strategy 2021 and the European Green Deal, AELIA aims to equip citizens with the skills for a green transition through innovative education. This comprehensive initiative brings together formal and non-formal education stakeholders, businesses, civil society, and the public sector.

The project AELIA is co-funded by the European Education and Culture Executive Agency of the European Commission (Partnerships for Innovation – Forward Looking Projects) and the Erasmus+ program. It is implemented by 8 partners and 1 associated partner in Implemented in Austria, Cyprus, Greece, Romania and Serbia.

Key Components:

1. **INNOVATION:** AELIA pioneers sustainable teaching methods using digital tools and non-traditional techniques, tested in four countries, with potential for broader adoption. It also supports sustainability planning in education systems.
2. **COOPERATION:** Diverse stakeholders collaborate with expert guidance to ensure project success through workshops and strategic planning.
3. **IMPACT:** AELIA empowers educators to teach sustainability and produces a guide for sustainability plans. A White Paper aids policymakers globally.

Objectives:

- **Promote** sustainability in all education sectors through tested guidelines for sustainability plans.
- **Support** educational institutions' leaders in implementing sustainability plans through capacity-building.
- **Enhance** educational resources with inclusive stakeholder input.
- **Empower** educators to integrate sustainable development and green practices.
- **Empower** citizens to take climate action through knowledge and skills.
- **Promote** education for sustainable development and enhance policy learning through transnational cooperation.

Main Results:

AELIA's results include a guide to promote Education for Sustainable Development, a co-designed educational framework with resources, webinars, and a white paper on education for sustainable development. AELIA leads the way towards a sustainable and inclusive green transition.

Contents

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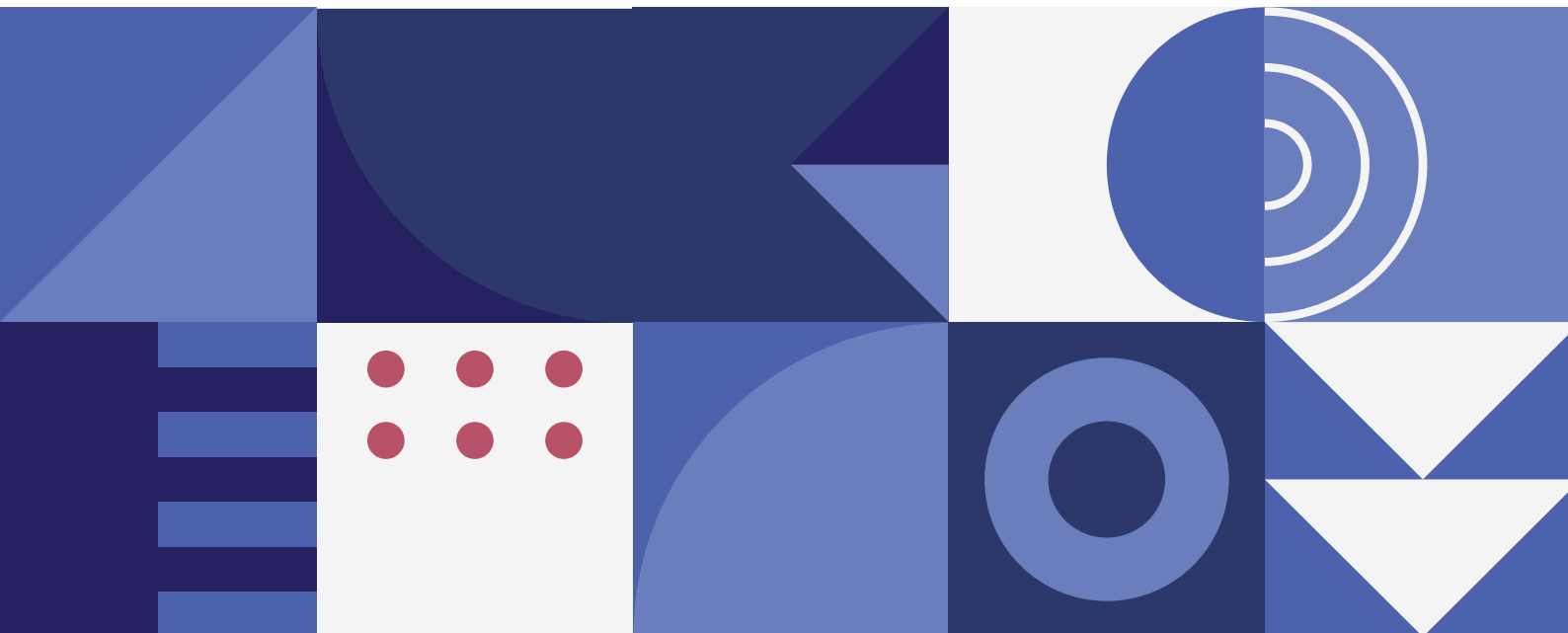
List of abbreviations

Acronym	Description
EEC	Environmental Education Centres
ESD	Education for Sustainable Development
EU	European Union
ISO	International Organisation for Standardisation
NGO	Non-government organisation
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
SEEP	Sustainable Environmental Educational Policy
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation



1. Executive Summary

This **White Paper** presents a comprehensive examination of the challenges and opportunities for integrating Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) into formal and non-formal education systems across five European countries: Austria, Cyprus, Greece, Romania, and Serbia. Developed under the AELIA project, it reflects a collective effort to identify key structural, institutional, and pedagogical barriers to ESD and propose actionable policy recommendations for national and European-level decision-makers.

Why this White Paper Matters Now?

Education systems stand at a crossroads. As societies face mounting environmental, social, and economic pressures—from climate change to widening inequalities—the role of education in shaping resilient, informed, and responsible citizens has never been more critical. This White Paper speaks directly to that urgency, demonstrating how sustainability must become a guiding principle across all forms of learning. It responds to international and European agendas, including the **2030 Sustainable Development Goals** and the **European Green Deal**, and highlights the pressing need to equip learners not only with knowledge, but also with the skills, values, and agency required for the green and just transition. The COVID-19 pandemic further revealed structural weaknesses in education systems, underscoring the necessity of resilience, innovation, and inclusivity. Against this backdrop, integrating ESD is no longer an aspiration—it is an imperative.

Why the Timing is Right?

This White Paper emerges at a moment when both political will and practical opportunities align. Across Europe, policy frameworks are being redefined, with countries revising curricula, introducing climate legislation, and investing in digital and green infrastructure. Youth mobilisation on sustainability is at its peak, demanding educational systems that support agency, leadership, and transformative action. The AELIA project, through extensive research and consultations[1], provides a robust and comparative evidence base that policymakers can act upon immediately. Taken together, these conditions create a unique window of opportunity: change is not only necessary, but possible.

1 https://www.aelia-project.eu/results-outputs/

Key Gaps Addressed

Despite momentum, systemic barriers continue to hold back the full integration of sustainability into education. Many countries lack binding national strategies for ESD, resulting in fragmented governance and uneven implementation. Schools often operate without the resources or infrastructure to model sustainability, while educators—key agents of change—remain under-supported, with limited training, recognition, or incentives. Young people, though increasingly vocal, are too often relegated to symbolic participation, excluded from shaping the very policies that determine their futures. At the local level, fragile school–community connections limit opportunities for experiential and place-based learning, while rural and under-resourced areas are disproportionately left behind.

Using the **UNESCO ESD for 2030 framework** as its guiding structure, the paper analyses gaps across five Priority Action Areas:

Advancing Policy **Transforming Learning and Training Environments**

Building Capacity of Educators **Empowering and Mobilising Youth**

Accelerating Local-Level Action

The findings reveal common challenges across all countries, including the absence of binding policies, fragmented governance, insufficient educator training, limited youth participation, and weak school-community linkages. These gaps are often amplified by budgetary constraints, lack of coordination, and the dominance of traditional pedagogical models.

The **White Paper** draws on multiple evidence sources:

- Desk research and fieldwork from the early stages of the AELIA project
- Inputs to the AELIA Green Paper
- National consultations with educational leaders in project partner countries
- Internal reviews by national project teams

These findings are primarily descriptive and exploratory, with insights mostly reflecting the state of ESD integration up to April 2025. Urban settings are more prominently represented in the consultations, which may limit the extrapolation of findings to rural or underserved areas.

Based on the identified gaps, the paper proposes detailed policy recommendations tailored to each country. These include the following:

- Establish binding national ESD strategies and legislation to make sustainability a core principle in curricula, teacher standards, and education law.
- Develop green and resilient school infrastructure through comprehensive plans for energy efficiency, safe facilities, outdoor learning spaces, and eco-standards.
- Embed capacity-building for educators, including mandatory ESD training, peer-learning networks, digital resources, and career incentives.
- Empower young people through student climate councils, youth charters, and funding for student-led projects, supported by digital collaboration platforms.
- Promote a whole-school approach, embedding sustainability in pedagogy, governance, and culture.
- Strengthen school–community partnerships with grants, local hubs, and collaboration models linking education with municipalities, NGOs, and businesses.
- Enhance international collaboration and knowledge exchange, leveraging EU programmes and regional networks to scale up effective practices.

This document is intended as **a strategic tool** for policymakers, education authorities, and institutional leaders, offering a roadmap to embed sustainability meaningfully within education systems. The recommendations aim to support the transition toward a more sustainable, inclusive, and resilient future, in line with the **European Green Deal** and the **Sustainable Development Goals**, particularly **SDG 4.7**.

2. Introduction

This White Paper has been developed as part of the AELIA project, a collaborative European initiative aimed at strengthening the integration of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) across both formal and non-formal educational settings. Its rationale is rooted in key policy frameworks that collectively define Europe's path toward a sustainable and inclusive future. The **European Green Deal** calls for a profound transformation of societies and economies, placing education at the centre of the green transition. The **UNESCO ESD for 2030** framework provides a global roadmap for equipping all learners with the knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes necessary for sustainable development. At the same time, the **European Education Area (EEA)** sets the vision of a shared space where learners and educators are empowered to drive innovation, resilience, and sustainability across Europe's education systems.

Within this policy landscape, the AELIA project aims to mobilise multi-stakeholder partnerships and whole-institutional approaches that can translate these frameworks into practical action. By aligning education with sustainability principles, AELIA supports not only the achievement of **SDG 4.7** but also Europe's broader objectives for climate resilience, social inclusion, and lifelong learning.

The AELIA project operationalises key dimensions of ESD policy through piloting in 4 countries, stakeholder consultations, and co-creation processes. Hence, the purpose of this document is to present **a strategic and evidence-informed action plan** that addresses the structural, contextual, and institutional gaps hindering the integration of ESD. Building upon the findings generated throughout the project lifecycle, this paper **identifies critical obstacles and proposes practical, policy-oriented solutions** for embedding sustainability more effectively into education systems of project partner countries and beyond. It is particularly intended for policymakers, educational authorities, and other decision-makers who have the mandate and capacity to influence systemic change.

In that regard, the White Paper is both **timely** and **relevant** as it responds to national and European-level priorities by offering a structured framework for reflection and action, grounded in the **UNESCO ESD for 2030 framework** and its five **Priority Action Areas:**

- *Advancing Policy*
- *Transforming Learning and Training Environments*
- *Building Capacity of Educators*
- *Empowering and Mobilising Youth*
- *Accelerating Local-Level Actions*

The analysis presented here is based on a multi-step methodology combining extensive desk research, structured consultations, and stakeholder engagement. Initial insights were drawn from earlier phases of the AELIA project, including the Green Paper (AELIA Consortium, 2024) and accompanying fieldwork (AELIA Consortium, 2024), and were further validated through national-level consultations with educational leaders in project partner countries (Greece, Cyprus, Romania, Serbia, and Austria). Internal team discussions within each national consortium ensured alignment and coherence across findings.

While the analysis offers valuable insights, it is important to note certain methodological limitations. The research employed descriptive, non-representative sampling methods and focuses predominantly on urban settings, which may underrepresent challenges in rural areas.

Finally, this White Paper also serves as a key preparatory resource for the upcoming Policy Learning meetings of the AELIA project. By consolidating evidence, mapping gaps, and outlining preliminary recommendations, the document provides a common knowledge base that will guide discussions among policymakers, educational authorities, and stakeholders. The Policy Learning meetings will use the insights presented here as a foundation for dialogue, comparison of national contexts, and the co-creation of actionable strategies for embedding Education for Sustainable Development across Europe.

Structure of the White Paper

To provide a clear pathway from evidence to action, this document is structured into the following sections:

The **Executive Summary** offers a concise overview of the document as whole.

The **Introduction** outlines the background, purpose and methodology.

The section **Mapping the Gaps: Structural and Contextual Barriers to ESD Integration** identifies national-, institutional-, and educational-level barriers to ESD integration, structured according to the UNESCO ESD for 2030 Priority Action Areas, based on **inputs** from **project partners** and **stakeholder consultations**.

The **Policy Recommendations** translate the gaps identified into actionable guidance for policymakers and education system stakeholders.

The section **From Insights to Action** offers concluding remarks and final reflections on the urgency and feasibility of transforming education through sustainability.

By first diagnosing the current landscape, this structure ensures that recommendations are context-sensitive, needs-based, and strategically aligned with both national education systems and broader sustainability goals.

The following section, Mapping the Gaps: Structural and Contextual Barriers to ESD Integration, presents a comparative overview of challenges identified across the five participating countries, namely Greece, Cyprus, Serbia, Romania and Austria, highlighting specific barriers and laying the groundwork for informed policy action.

3. Mapping the Gaps: Structural and Contextual Barriers to ESD Integration

This chapter provides a comparative analysis of the key barriers that hinder the effective integration of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) across five project partner countries: Greece, Cyprus, Serbia, Romania, and Austria. Organised around the five Priority Action Areas of the UNESCO ESD for 2030 framework, the analysis captures challenges at the national, institutional, and educator levels.

Drawing on desk research, national consultations, and project findings, the chapter highlights both common and country-specific constraints—ranging from fragmented policies and funding gaps to limited educator training and youth participation. These insights form the basis for the policy recommendations that follow, offering a grounded understanding of where and how targeted action is most needed.

Advancing Policy

Goal: Integrate ESD into education and sustainable development policies

Greece

At the national level, progress toward Education for Sustainable Development (hereinafter: ESD) is hindered by the absence of a dedicated strategy, fragmented political commitment, and legal ambiguities that leave ESD initiatives inconsistently implemented. Financial constraints further exacerbate these challenges, as schools lack stable funding and must often rely on temporary external support. Despite these obstacles, there are promising developments, such as the nationwide integration of environmental and civic themes into the primary and secondary education curriculum through the introduction of skills workshops and active citizenship initiatives. Institutionally, weakened regional coordination and unsystematic application of monitoring and evaluation frameworks limit meaningful progress, while at the educator level, awareness and statutory obligations related to ESD remain minimal, placing the onus on individual initiative rather than providing resources, guidance and support at a systematic level. Understanding these multifaceted gaps and enablers at every level is essential to crafting effective, cohesive strategies that can bridge policy and practice.

Cyprus

Cyprus has taken notable steps to embed ESD in pre-primary and primary education in advancing ESD, particularly through the pioneering Sustainable Environmental Educational Policy (SEEP) implemented in primary schools. This model has garnered international recognition for its effective integration of sustainability principles in early education. Yet, despite this commendable progress, systemic challenges remain across the broader educational landscape. The absence of mandatory ESD policies beyond primary edu-

cation, limited cross-sectoral coordination, and the optional nature of ESD in secondary schools have led to fragmented and inconsistent implementation of ESD at this educational level. At the educator level, a gap persists in specialised training and motivation to adopt innovative sustainable practices, compounding the difficulty of embedding ESD meaningfully across curricula. Addressing these multi-layered gaps is critical to ensuring ESD's continuity and impact throughout all levels of education in Cyprus. For this reason, in March 2025, the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Cyprus approved the Renewed Strategy on Education for Sustainable Development and the Green Transition 2030. A key objective of the Strategy is the systemic and coherent implementation of the Whole-Institution Approach (WIA) across schools at all educational levels.

Serbia

In Serbia, the advancement of ESD faces challenges at various levels. Nationally, the absence of a dedicated, comprehensive ESD policy coupled with non-binding legal frameworks results in a lack of systemic prioritisation and enforcement. Economic limitations further hinder progress, as most ESD efforts rely on external funding rather than sustainable national investment. At the institutional level, limited coordination among regional governance bodies and pronounced resource disparities—particularly affecting rural and underdeveloped areas—undermine consistent implementation and accountability. Educator engagement is similarly constrained by limited familiarity with key sustainability agendas and the absence of mandated responsibilities, leaving ESD largely dependent on voluntary initiatives. These intersecting gaps highlight the need for integrated strategies that align policy, resources, and capacity-building to embed sustainability more firmly within Serbia's educational system.

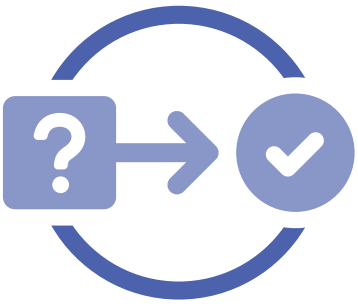
Romania

In Romania, the integration of ESD is constrained by limited political and legal frameworks that offer only broad references to environmental education without clear mandates or effective monitoring mechanisms. At the institutional level, schools often lack the autonomy and encouragement necessary to foster interdisciplinary sustainability initiatives, hindering the development of cohesive ESD practices. Meanwhile, educators face significant challenges due to the absence of dedicated ESD training and incentives, resulting in a reliance on individual motivation rather than systemic support. Addressing these intertwined gaps is essential to create an enabling environment where sustainability education can flourish across all levels.

Austria

Austria exhibits a formal commitment to ESD through strategic documents like the Austrian Sustainability Strategy. However, this political intent often falls short of consistent engagement and is weakened by the absence of robust monitoring frameworks. Legally, there is no binding requirement to embed ESD into curricula or teacher training, leaving integration largely voluntary. Economically, ESD efforts depend heavily on short-term, project-based funding rather than stable financial planning within core education budgets. At the institutional level, leadership and strategic direction for ESD remain underdeveloped, with many schools and higher education institutions lacking sustainable funding mechanisms. For educators, limited awareness and perceived irrelevance of ESD within their disciplines, compounded by the absence of legal mandates for ESD training, further impede progress. Bridging these multifaceted gaps will require a concerted effort to embed ESD structurally across Austria's educational system.

Transforming Learning and Training Environments



Goal: Make education settings conducive to sustainability practices

Greece

Despite some promising developments, systemic implementation of ESD in the field of learning environments continues to face considerable constraints across Greece's educational landscape. At the national level, efforts such as the "Αθηνά" (Athena) Recovery and Resilience Facility brought some fresh funding for energy upgrades and digital infrastructure. However, these initiatives remain limited in scope and impact, with no comprehensive programme for sustainable school infrastructure or national standards to guide operations. Central resources like the Photodentro repository provide open-access ESD materials, yet integration into everyday teaching practice remains inconsistent. Institutionally, municipalities often lack the funds or capacity to co-finance green upgrades, while infrastructural inequalities—from unequal access to technology to co-housed campuses—complicate the path to sustainable school environments. Moreover, renovation efforts often lack transparent criteria or holistic planning. Environmental Education Centres (KEPEA) in Greece play a key role in Education for Sustainable Development, offering experiential programmes, workshops, and teacher training that promote ecological awareness, active citizenship, and responsible engagement with the environment. However, they face persistent challenges, including limited funding, staff shortages, and difficulties in updating equipment and educational materials. Still, EU-funded pilot programmes and infrastructure mapping offer a foundation for more strategic interventions.

Cyprus

Despite growing recognition of the importance of sustainability in education, the integration of outdoor and experiential learning across Cyprus formal education system can be further advanced. While the Ministry of Education, Sport, and Youth supports non-formal sustainability learning through its Network of Environmental Education Centres (EECs), meeting the growing demand for these centres can sometimes be challenging. At the institutional level, many schools continue to prioritise indoor instruction, relying heavily on external centres rather than developing in-house outdoor learning programmes. Furthermore, schools face challenges in establishing meaningful partnerships and adopting a whole-institution approach that embeds sustainability into all aspects of school life. At the educator level, teachers often feel unprepared or unsupported in shifting from traditional teaching models to project-based and outdoor learning, and face structural barriers to innovating their practice. To move forward, strategic investment and stronger systemic support are essential to embed outdoor, experiential learning within the core fabric of education—ensuring that sustainability becomes not a supplement, but a central pillar of everyday teaching and learning.

Serbia

The implementation of ESD remains fragmented across key levels of the education system, despite the presence of promising initiatives such as participation in the international Eco-Schools programme. At the national level, there is a lack of comprehensive policy, funding, or regulatory frameworks to guide and incentivise sustainable school operations—leaving efforts largely dependent on NGO-led coordination and individual school initiative. Without nationwide standards or investment in eco-infrastructure, the shift toward energy-efficient and environmentally responsible practices remains slow and uneven. Institutionally, many municipalities face budgetary constraints that hinder the modernisation of school facilities, particularly in rural areas where access to digital tools essential for ESD—such as simulations, environmental data platforms, or virtual labs—is often limited. At the educator level, teachers are frequently under-supported, lacking the time, training, and systemic backing needed to implement cross-curricular or whole-school sustainability approaches. Experiential and place-based learning also remains underutilised, with few opportunities for professional development in this area. Overcoming these obstacles will require coordinated action to embed sustainability into the structural, pedagogical, and operational fabric of schools.

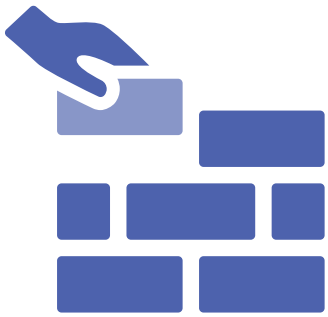
Romania

In Romania, systemic barriers continue to limit the integration of sustainability into educational environments, particularly due to economic, social, and technological constraints. At the national level, funding mechanisms remain focused on fulfilling basic infrastructural needs—such as heating and sanitation—without extending support to sustainability-enhancing upgrades. As a result, institutional efforts to create environmentally responsive learning environments are uneven and under-resourced, especially in rural areas where disparities in access to tools, support, and infrastructure are most pronounced. At the educator level, teachers often lack access to localised technological tools such as climate simulation platforms or participatory environmental planning resources, further restricting their capacity to engage students meaningfully with sustainability topics. These overlapping challenges highlight the urgent need for investment not only in physical infrastructure, but also in tools, training, and localised approaches that can empower schools and educators to lead Romania's transition toward sustainable education.

Austria

In Austria, despite formal commitments to sustainable education, numerous systemic challenges continue to hinder the full realisation of ESD across the school system. At the national level, sustainability remains underrepresented in federal infrastructure planning, with many school buildings lacking energy-efficient design or environmental functionality. Moreover, the absence of an evaluation framework for key initiatives, such as the 8-Point Plan for Digital Learning, limits the capacity to measure progress and adapt strategies effectively. Critically, the social dimensions of ESD—including human rights, gender equality, peace, global citizenship, and cultural diversity—receive insufficient attention in both policy and practice. On the institutional level, municipalities often struggle with limited resources to upgrade school infrastructure or ensure equitable digital access, particularly in rural and underserved regions. Educators, in turn, face a range of constraints: from inadequate time and tools to implement whole-school approaches, to limited support for integrating social and cultural sustainability themes. Furthermore, the lack of dedicated physical spaces for experiential learning—such as school gardens or laboratories—further restricts hands-on engagement with ESD. Bridging these multifaceted gaps requires not only stronger political commitment and financing, but also a more holistic understanding of sustainability that embraces environmental, technological, and socio-cultural dimensions alike.

Building Capacities of Educators



Goal: Equip educators with the skills to deliver ESD effectively.

Greece

In Greece, the systemic integration of ESD into teacher training and professional development remains constrained by structural, economic, and technological gaps across national, institutional, and educator levels. At the national level, initial teacher standards and licensing frameworks have only recently started to adequately embed ESD competences, while dedicated funding for nationwide upskilling remains sporadic. The absence of a centralised data system to track ESD qualifications further weakens strategic planning. Nevertheless, progress is visible through a growing landscape of optional, government or EU-supported online courses and open educational resources, with the Institute for Educational Policy working toward cataloguing these offerings to enhance coherence. Institutional barriers persist, including limited budgets for training-related travel or substitute staff, high participation costs, and little formal recognition of ESD efforts. Schools rarely integrate professional development outcomes into broader planning, limiting their impact. Educators themselves often bear the financial and logistical burden of their ESD engagement, and face further challenges due to digital skills gaps, poor connectivity, and overwhelming workloads. Yet, informal grassroots teacher networks have emerged as important support structures, fostering the exchange of materials and peer mentoring. Unlocking the full potential of ESD in the Greek education system will require a coordinated policy shift—one that invests in systematic, inclusive, and career-long professional development while removing disincentives for teacher engagement.

Cyprus

In Cyprus, the advancement of ESD faces challenges related to educator capacity, institutional support, and national policy alignment. At the national level, continuous professional development programmes tailored to ESD competences are not obligatory. This means that many educators lack the structured guidance necessary to deliver sustainability education with confidence and impact. Without clear incentives or institutional encouragement, participation in international knowledge exchange opportunities also remains low, further isolating educators from global innovation in ESD. Within schools, the lack of centralised resources, sustainability coordinators (especially in secondary education), or collaborative structures impedes the integration of interdisciplinary and project-based approaches, especially in secondary education where rigid subject requirements dominate. At the individual level, educators across all grades often feel underprepared for their contributions to sustainability initiatives—resulting in a reliance on voluntary action. These interlinked challenges are addressed in the Renewed Strategy on Education for Sustainable Development and the Green Transition 2030, which is crucial for guiding future action.

Serbia

In Serbia, the integration of ESD into teacher training and professional development remains a significant challenge due to systemic gaps at multiple levels. Nationally, the teacher education framework does not yet explicitly require ESD-related competencies, and sustainability is absent from the formal criteria for teacher licensing and career advancement. This lack of policy alignment reduces institutional motivation for educators to prioritise ESD. At the institutional level, ongoing professional development focused on sustainability is underfunded, especially in smaller or less well-resourced municipalities, while educators who do pursue ESD training often receive little recognition or career incentive to apply it in practice. Compounding these issues, teachers have limited access to modern, high-quality resources and interactive tools that could support the effective delivery of ESD content. Addressing these barriers requires a concerted national effort to embed sustainability into teacher training standards, invest in inclusive professional development, and establish clear incentives for educators to lead ESD integration across Serbian schools.

Romania

In Romania, the professional development landscape for ESD remains fragmented and largely voluntary, undermining the systemic integration of sustainability across the education system. At the national level, teacher certification and qualification frameworks do not mandate sustainability-related training, which limits both accountability and motivation for educators to engage with ESD. While NGOs and EU-funded projects occasionally offer workshops and training opportunities, these are inconsistently available and participation is often left to individual initiative. At the institutional level, there is a lack of coordinated support for teachers to access or apply what they learn, particularly in the absence of structured mentoring or incentives. Educators themselves frequently express a strong interest in sustainability topics, yet face challenges due to limited access to interdisciplinary teaching materials and few opportunities to exchange good practices with peers. To unlock the potential of Romanian teachers as agents of change, ESD must be embedded into national certification standards, accompanied by more consistent, well-supported, and collaborative professional learning pathways.

Austria

In Austria, the integration of ESD into teacher education and professional development faces significant challenges rooted in policy gaps and resource limitations. Nationally, teacher education policies do not mandate ESD competencies, and sustainability is not formally embedded within teacher licensing or competency frameworks, reducing incentives for systematic adoption. At the institutional level, professional development opportunities centred on ESD are often underfunded and inconsistently available, while educators frequently lack dedicated collaborative spaces for reflection and peer exchange—critical for fostering innovative teaching practices. Additionally, many teachers face technological barriers, with limited digital competencies that restrict their ability to utilise interactive tools such as simulations, data analysis, and digital storytelling methods aligned with sustainability education. Overcoming these challenges will require coordinated efforts to embed ESD into policy frameworks, sustainably fund teacher development, and enhance educators' digital skills.

Empowering and Mobilising Youth

Goal: Foster youth engagement in sustainability processes

Greece

Youth engagement in ESD faces multifaceted challenges across national, institutional, and educator levels, despite notable enabling factors. At the national level, young people's inclusion in ESD policy development and consultation remains limited, while state funding for youth-driven sustainability programmes is scarce. The absence of a centralised, government-endorsed digital platform for student collaboration further restricts opportunities for meaningful participation. Nonetheless, external frameworks and recognition through EU, UNESCO, Council of Europe, and OECD youth programmes offer valuable support and legitimacy. Institutionally, limited budgets and often tokenistic approaches to student input undermine genuine youth involvement, although statutory secondary school councils and a strong culture of student volunteerism provide promising platforms. Pilot schools showcase effective use of free digital tools, highlighting the potential for student-led environmental projects. However, educators frequently report insufficient training and confidence to promote authentic youth leadership, compounded by technological constraints such as weak broadband and limited collaborative software. Heavy workloads and multi-school responsibilities further restrict teachers' capacity to mentor youth initiatives, while school cultures may at times discourage activism to avoid perceived politicisation. Addressing these intertwined challenges is essential to cultivate empowered, active youth as key agents of sustainability.

Cyprus

Cyprus has made notable strides in acknowledging the critical role of youth in advancing sustainability. Youth participation in ESD policy and practice has made progress but is not yet fully institutionalised. At the national level, existing frameworks provide some opportunities but do not always ensure structured and impactful involvement of young people in the design, implementation, and evaluation of sustainability initiatives. In many cases, student engagement still takes place mainly through traditional formats, such as student councils or school-based activities. While valuable, these approaches often have limited influence on decision-making processes at the institutional or policy level. International platforms such as Erasmus+ and youth climate forums offer valuable opportunities for engagement. However, Cypriot student participation remains somewhat constrained, often due to financial limitations, limited outreach, not willing to participate and insufficient institutional support. In addition, there are relatively few structured opportunities for direct dialogue between young people, policymakers, and sustainability experts. This reduces the potential for students to gain exposure to diverse perspectives and to contribute meaningfully to collective problem-solving. Within schools, especially in secondary education, youth involvement in sustainability efforts is often organised through extracurricular or occasional activities. While these are valuable, there is still limited systematic emphasis on developing critical skills—such as advanced IT literacy, collaboration, and civic leadership—that would enable more active and sustained participation. Educators also face challenges, as they may not always have the training, resources, or institutional support needed to fully integrate student voices into sustainability decision-making. As a result, participation often relies on formal structures that, while useful, can be limited in scope and may not reach all potential contributors. Strengthening support for educators and expanding participation channels would help to better engage youth as active partners in shaping a sustainable future.

Serbia

In Serbia, youth participation in ESD policy and practice faces significant structural and cultural barriers across national, institutional, and educator levels. At the national level, the participation of young voices in policy design processes is rather limited, despite the existence of youth councils and organisations whose influence on educational sustainability agendas remains modest. Financially, sustainability-focused youth programmes are rare and heavily reliant on international donors or civil society support, impeding consistent and locally driven youth engagement. Institutionally, there is no formal legal framework mandating or supporting youth involvement in sustainability decision-making at regional or local levels, further constraining opportunities for meaningful participation. Within schools, environments often lack the structural supports necessary for student-led sustainability initiatives, and educators frequently report insufficient training, time, and institutional encouragement to foster youth leadership in this area. Technological infrastructure is also lacking, with few dedicated digital platforms or coordinated channels to facilitate collaboration on sustainability projects across schools or regions. These intersecting challenges underscore the urgent need to build enabling frameworks, capacity, and resources that can empower Serbian youth as active agents of sustainability.

Romania

In Romania, meaningful youth participation in sustainability policy-making and school governance remains limited despite the presence of formal mechanisms such as student councils. These structures are seldom actively consulted on environmental or sustainability issues, restricting young people's influence on decisions that affect their learning environments. At the institutional level, while some youth-led sustainability projects do exist, they are rarely embedded within school evaluation or reward systems, resulting in limited recognition and support for student initiatives. Furthermore, many sustainability activities continue to be teacher-directed rather than genuinely youth-led, which constrains authentic engagement and leadership development among students. Addressing these challenges will require strengthening participatory frameworks, integrating youth contributions into institutional policies, and fostering a culture that values and nurtures student-led sustainability action.

Austria

In Austria, despite formal commitments to youth inclusion in sustainability agendas, genuine participation of young people in ESD policy and practice remains limited and frequently symbolic. Marginalised and vulnerable youth are particularly underrepresented in national education policy dialogues. Financial support for youth-led sustainability initiatives is inconsistent and scarce, which further constrains the scope and sustainability of their engagement. At the institutional level, governance frameworks rarely embed structured mechanisms for youth participation, even though such inclusion is emphasised in the Austrian Youth Strategy. Within schools, leaders often underestimate students' capacity to lead sustainability efforts, while technological limitations—such as insufficient digital platforms—restrict youth collaboration and reduce opportunities to document and amplify their impact. These overlapping challenges highlight the need to strengthen both policy frameworks and school cultures to empower Austrian youth as active agents of sustainable change.

Accelerating Local Level Action

Goal: Promote ESD through community-level innovation and partnerships

Greece

Local governance and school-community partnerships are critical yet underutilised components of ESD, facing considerable constraints alongside promising enabling factors. At the national level, the abolition of small-municipality school committees has weakened local governance capacity, while the absence of clear ministry guidelines or incentive schemes limits coordination between municipalities and schools on sustainability efforts. Legal frameworks for formalising school–community partnerships remain lacking, creating uncertainty and inconsistency in collaboration. However, the Climate Law 4936/2022, mandating municipal Climate Action Plans that can include schools, presents a promising legal foundation for future integration. Institutionally, municipalities frequently lack the budget, staff, and expertise to secure external funding, and partnerships often depend on informal personal contacts rather than formalised agreements, reducing sustainability and scalability. Community resistance to certain service-learning initiatives further complicates engagement. Nonetheless, EU-funded pilots from funding instruments like LIFE and Interreg provide successful replicable models of school-community cooperation, while Regional Education Centres serve as brokers of local partnerships and facilitators. At the educator level, field-based and experiential learning opportunities connected to local challenges are scarce, and multi-school assignments hinder the continuity of local partnerships. Encouragingly, grassroots teacher networks actively share scalable project templates, providing a valuable bottom-up resource.

Cyprus

In Cyprus, schools often work somewhat independently from their surrounding communities, which can limit opportunities to develop place-based responses to local sustainability challenges. National policies offer insufficient incentives or mandates for schools to forge meaningful partnerships with diverse stakeholders such as green businesses, NGOs, and municipal authorities. This sense of isolation is exacerbated in rural areas where financial and material resource constraints further impede effective local engagement, contributing to disparities between urban and rural schools. At the institutional level, school engagement with the community often focuses primarily on local boards, while collaboration with other key partners—such as environmental organisations, academic institutions, and local enterprises—remains limited. This narrower approach can reduce access to specialised knowledge and innovative practices. In addition, many sustainability initiatives are not yet sufficiently adapted to the specific characteristics of local communities, which can lessen both their relevance and the level of community participation. Regarding educators, teachers may have limited training in establishing and maintaining community partnerships and may not be fully familiar with local sustainability challenges. As a result, teaching often relies more on indoor, theoretical approaches, with fewer opportunities for experiential, project-based learning that connects students directly with real-world sustainability issues. Addressing these gaps requires strategic efforts to strengthen school-community linkages, empower educators as connectors, and promote locally grounded, impactful ESD practices.

Serbia

At the national level, policies often lack clear incentives and coordination mechanisms to effectively align local ESD initiatives with broader strategic goals, leaving community actors to work in relative isolation from national frameworks. Legal recognition and support for community-based education models that embed ESD principles remain limited, creating barriers to formal collaboration. Locally, governments frequently face economic constraints, lacking sufficient budgets and human resources to sustain community-centred sustainability projects involving schools. Partnerships between educational institutions and local businesses, NGOs, and community organisations tend to be sporadic and project-driven rather than systemic, reducing their long-term impact. Within schools, limited connection to local ecological initiatives means that students miss valuable opportunities for experiential learning that links education to real-world environmental challenges. This disconnection diminishes the relevance and transformative potential of sustainability education.

Romania

In Romania, financial constraints at the national level significantly limit schools' capacity to engage meaningfully with their local communities on sustainability initiatives. Establishing a dedicated micro-grant fund, distributed through annual thematic calls, could provide vital support to schools seeking to develop community-based projects. However, collaboration between Romanian schools and local stakeholders—such as NGOs, municipalities, and businesses—remains rare and often informal, impeding the development of systemic partnerships that could enrich ESD. Educators face substantial bureaucratic burdens that discourage efforts to build and sustain partnerships beyond the classroom, representing a major barrier to expanding community engagement. Addressing these interlinked challenges is critical to fostering stronger school-community synergies that can support more effective, locally grounded sustainability education.

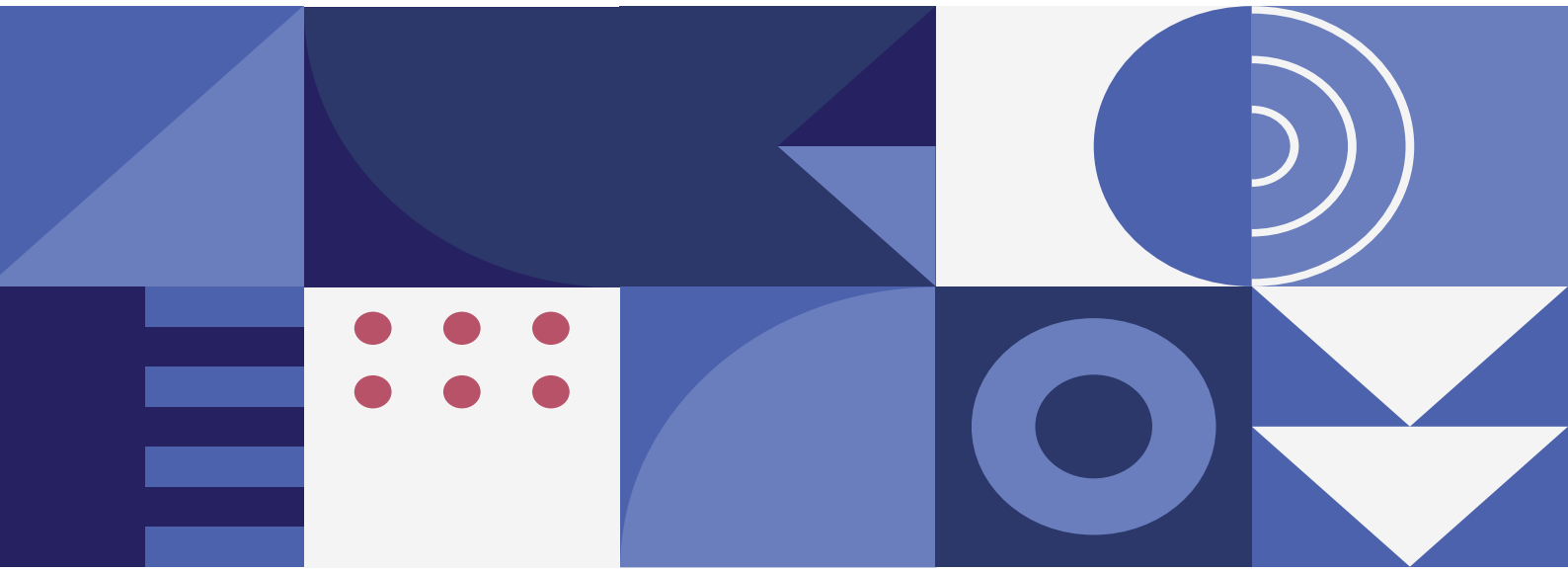
Austria

In many contexts, centralised education governance structures limit local innovation and the scalability of community-based sustainability initiatives, creating a top-down dynamic that hinders responsiveness to local needs. Legal frameworks often fail to provide sufficient support for partnerships between schools and external actors such as NGOs and community organisations, while budget cuts affecting civil society organisations further constrain collaborative opportunities in ESD. At the institutional level, many schools lack dedicated budgets and staff to actively engage with community stakeholders, leading to operational silos disconnected from local social and ecological realities. Potential partners frequently remain unaware of opportunities to collaborate with educational institutions, limiting the development of mutually beneficial relationships. From the educators' perspective, unfamiliarity with local sustainability challenges and insufficient institutional support impede their ability to lead community-based ESD projects effectively. Addressing these multifaceted challenges is essential for fostering integrated and context-sensitive sustainability education. The following section will explore strategies to enhance legal frameworks, institutional capacities, and educator support to strengthen school-community synergies in ESD.

Building on these insights, the following section will outline strategies to strengthen school-community synergy as a driver for effective and locally relevant ESD.

4. Policy Recommendations

The identified gaps in Greece, Cyprus, Serbia, Romania and Austria across national, institutional, and educator levels highlight systemic weaknesses that limit the effective integration of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) in the afore-mentioned countries. To bridge these gaps and translate commitments into practice, a set of targeted policy recommendations has been developed. These recommendations directly respond to the challenges observed, aiming to establish stronger governance, transform learning environments, empower educators and youth, and promote innovation at the local level.



Greece

Priority Area	Identified Gaps	Policy Recommmendation	Level[2]	Description
1 Advancing Policy	Weakened local governance after abolition of small-municipality school committees. No clear guidelines, incentives, or legal frameworks for municipal–school ESD coordination Municipalities lack resources and expertise to sustain partnerships or access external funding. Collaboration remains informal, with reliance on personal contacts and occasional resistance from local communities. School infrastructure programmes often apply opaque and inconsistent selection criteria.	Finalise Greece's ESD Strategy 2025-30	**N & I**	Initiate and fast-track inter-ministerial negotiations so that a dedicated ESD Strategy is passed as soon as possible on the basis of the existing National Strategy for Sustainable and Equitable Development 2030. The decree should: (a) enumerate SDG 4.7 indicators, (b) set annual targets, (c) identify funding lines (national + EU), and (d) assign lead responsibilities. A three-year pilot cycle with midpoint review will ensure policies have enough room for meaningful implementation – remedying today's "announce-then-rush" pattern.

2 N = National; I = Institutional; E = Educator

2 Transforming Learning and Training Environments	No comprehensive programme or standards for sustainable school infrastructure; funding initiatives (e.g. "Αθηνά") remain limited in scope. Existing digital resources (e.g. Photodentro) are underused and not systematically integrated into teaching. Municipalities lack funds and co-financing capacity for sustainability projects. Schools face unequal access to digital tools, often relying on parents for support. Co-housed campuses and accessibility gaps hinder safe, sustainable management. Renovation projects are governed by ad-hoc reporting, opaque criteria, and piecemeal upgrades without holistic planning.	Roll out a safe and sustainable school infrastructure plan	**N & I**	Merge energy upgrade focused calls for funding such as "Αθηνά" (Athena) with disaster-risk criteria (seismic retrofitting, heat-resilient design, flood-proof landscaping) and launch it as a single safe and sustainable school plan. Schools complete a risk-and-carbon audit via an online tool; high-risk sites receive priority grants and technical supervision. The Plan operationalises article 16 of Climate Law 4936/2022, treating infrastructure as both an adaptation and mitigation lever.
3 Building Capacities of Educators	Teacher standards, licensing, and promotion frameworks do not mandate ESD competences. Funding for nationwide training is scarce and inconsistent. No central system exists to track teachers' ESD qualifications Teachers often self-fund and schedule their ESD work. Limited digital skills, weak connectivity, and gaps in competence hinder effective use of online resources. Heavy workloads and multiple school assignments reduce capacity for sustained projects. Low salaries discourage additional unpaid commitment	Launch an EU-project readiness hub	**N & E**	The central authorities should support Greek National Agencies for Erasmus+ so that they are able to co-host a year-round virtual "EU-Project Readiness Hub" for educational units. This will feature free monthly webinars on call guidelines – tailored to educational units, a Greek-language budgeting tool, and an AI-assisted platform that converts school ideas into Erasmus+ proposal formats. A help-desk can circulate model work-packages and share reviewers' feedback. By lowering administrative barriers, the hub unlocks EU funds for rural schools that currently sit out of competitive calls, directly boosting educator capacity and institutional resources.

4 Empowering and Mobilizing Youth	Youth have limited involvement in ESD policy design and consultation. State funding for youth-led sustainability programmes is scarce. No government-endorsed digital hub exists for student collaboration on ESD. School and municipal budgets rarely support youth-led ESD projects. Student participation is often tokenistic, discouraging genuine engagement	Adopt a national youth climate & ESD charter	**N & I**	Co-create, with youth organisations, a Charter that mandates: elected Student Climate/ESD Councils in every secondary school, two regional youth delegates, and an annual Youth-in-Parliament session feeding directly into existing initiatives such as the national progress report on Climate Law 4936/2022. Ideally, charter signatories should gain access to additional micro-funds for financing student-led initiatives. This Charter will embed meaningful participation in law, answer the current tokenism gap, and align with UNESCO's call to "leave no learner behind".
5 Accelerating Local Level Action	Local governance weakened after the abolition of small-municipality school committees. No ministry guidelines, incentives, or legal frameworks to support municipal–school coordination on ESD. Municipalities lack resources and expertise to apply for external funding. Partnerships are informal, relying on personal contacts; formal agreements (MoUs) are rare. Service-learning projects sometimes face resistance when seen as competing with local businesses. Selection of schools for infrastructure upgrades often lacks transparency	Reinstate and empower school committees	**N & I**	Re-establish the abolished school committees and re-brand the existing ones as "School Sustainability Committees" (SSCs) and give them a dual role: (a) co-design local ESD projects with parent associations and municipal offices; (b) act as the first reviewer of each school's annual self-evaluation under Law 4692/2020, adding a sustainability lens. Each SSC receives a modest grant per pupil. This institutional fix rebuilds the missing governance bridge between municipalities, schools and families, accelerates local action (PA 5) and works along the documented success of the former school-committee model.

Cyprus

Priority Area	Identified Gaps	Policy Recommmendation	Level[3]	Description
1 Advancing Policy	ESD mandatory policies for pre-primary and primary educational level but not for secondary education; fragmented ESD implementation; limited coordination among ministries/local authorities. Optional application of SEEP in secondary schools; ESD not embedded across disciplines; limited interdisciplinary collaboration.	Strengthening Curricula for Sustainable Development and the Green Transition	**N & I**	Enhance the curricula for sustainable development and the green transition through competence-based programmes focused on sustainability and the environment, active citizenship, green innovation, entrepreneurship, and digital literacy
1 Advancing Policy	Limited participation in international ESD networks; lack of policy coordination and leveraging European/global platforms for knowledge transfer and funding	Enhancing Cyprus's International Standing	**N**	Strengthen Cyprus's presence in international and regional organisations for ESD and the green transition. Increase participation in international networks, transfer expertise, and promote policies through bilateral and multilateral collaborations and networks. Leverage national and European funding mechanisms to implement policies effectively
2 Transforming Learning and Training Environments	Schools prioritise indoor teaching; challenges towards applying whole-institution approach to sustainability; limited stakeholder partnerships; relatively limited integration of outdoor and experiential learning approaches within schools. Teachers occasionally feel unprepared to implement project-based or school-wide sustainability methods.	Establishing a Whole-School Approach	**I & E**	Introduce a Whole School Approach across all educational levels by promoting pedagogical methods, educational tools, changes in infrastructure (green technologies), schools' operations and governance. Strengthen the connection between schools and their local communities to contribute to their sustainable transformation
2 Transforming Learning and Training Environments	Absence of a single, centralised repository for ESD materials; inconsistent integration across subjects; reliance on traditional teaching. Teachers lack confidence and training to implement ESD competences; over-reliance on traditional methods; need support in using innovative tools and pedagogies.	Revising Educational Materials	**I & E**	Review existing educational materials on ESD and adjust them to current ESD trends and pedagogies, based on gamification, real life scenarios, problem-solving, experiential and inquiry learning. This effort will support the application of the ESD curriculum and strengthen teaching and learning processes, leveraging both ESD pedagogical methods and digital education tools.

3 N = National; I = Institutional; E = Educator

2 Transforming Learning and Training Environments	Limited capacity of Environmental Education Centres (EECs) to accommodate the broader civil society; reliance on EECs for outdoor learning; schools lack their own programmes.	Strengthening Non-Formal Learning	**I**	Extend the programmes of the National Network of Environmental Education Centres to the broader civil society while upgrading their infrastructure to align fully with the green and digital transition. At the same time, encourage and support schools to use school green spaces as a place of learning and strengthen them to develop outdoor learning programmes where the outdoor settings and local natural environments can provide experiential learning opportunities and foster a connection to the community.
3 Building Capacities of Educators	Lack of robust monitoring and feedback systems to evaluate ESD implementation; limited sustainability coordinators or teams within schools (especially in secondary education). Teachers feel unprepared to adopt new sustainability practices without structured guidance or feedback mechanisms.	Implementation of Self-Improvement Mechanisms and among school institutions	**I & E**	Develop mechanisms to promote self-improvement and enhance schools' sustainability focus through the establishment of sustainability certifications for schools. Effective feedback mechanisms are essential for aligning school-level sustainability actions with national goals and ensuring continuous improvement. These loops can include regular reporting, monitoring, and collaborative review sessions and sustainable school ISO accreditation involving both schools and policymakers.
3 Building Capacities of Educators	Schools lack structured mentorship, interdisciplinary support, or incentives for teacher engagement in sustainability. Lack of continuous professional development in ESD; voluntary training in sustainability competences; low confidence in implementing ESD.	Professional Development for Educators	**I & E**	Revise professional development programmes for teachers, principals, and educational leaders. Strengthen their understanding of content, teaching methodologies, and strategies related to sustainability, environmental issues, the green transition, and the organisation and management of sustainable institutions. Introduce mentorship programmes where experienced educators guide their peers in implementing sustainability practices and engaging in interdisciplinary teaching.

4 Empowering and Mobilizing Youth	Insufficient student involvement in school decision making processes; youth initiatives not supported efficiently; relatively low participation on European and international programmes. Teachers, school administration and local authorities are unprepared to promote meaningful student and youth involvement in everyday life decisions or decisions related directly to them.	Strengthening Non-Formal Learning	**I & E**	Youth participation in sustainability, on local, national and international level, should be strengthened by giving students real, meaningful roles in decision-making. In addition, seeking financial aid and support from relevant national organisations can expand access to international programmes, while regular dialogues with policymakers and experts will keep youth voices heard.
5 Accelerating Local Level Action	Absence of structured incentives or recognition programmes for sustainability engagement. Schools may lack motivation or guidance to innovate in sustainability.	Incentivising Schools to Innovate in Sustainability Practices	**N & I**	Award schemes and recognition programmes can serve as powerful motivators for schools to innovate in their sustainability efforts. National or regional sustainability awards, certifications, or recognition programmes can reward schools for exemplary practices in integrating sustainability into their curricula, operations, and community outreach.
5 Accelerating Local Level Action	Schools' partnerships are limited mostly to community boards; lack integration with NGOs, businesses, and academia. Teachers lack training in forming and sustaining local partnerships.	Strengthen Community Engagement	**I & E**	Strengthen schools' ties with local authorities, businesses, universities, and NGOs and encourage them to co-develop projects that address shared sustainability challenges.

Serbia

Priority Area	Identified Gaps	Policy Recommmendation	Level[1]	Description
1 Advancing Policy	Serbia lacks a dedicated national ESD policy, enforceable curriculum mandates, and sufficient government funding, leaving sustainability initiatives fragmented and dependent on external support. Regional education authorities have weak coordination and oversight, and schools—especially in underfunded areas—struggle to access resources for effective ESD implementation. Many teachers and school leaders are unfamiliar with ESD frameworks and face no institutional obligations, making sustainability initiatives largely voluntary.	Strengthening National ESD Frameworks	**N**	Serbia should adopt a comprehensive ESD strategy aligned with international frameworks, integrating ESD into national education legislation with clear, measurable learning outcomes. Dedicated national funding (via relevant government ministries in charge of education and/or environment) for ESD is essential to ensure stable, long-term implementation.
			I	At the institutional level, the introduction of regional ESD coordinators would enhance communication, support, and accountability, particularly in under-resourced areas. Regional funding mechanisms should be developed to reduce disparities and support local ESD efforts
			E	At the educator level, mandatory ESD awareness programmes for school leaders should be established, strengthening their role in leading sustainability initiatives. Schools should also be required to develop formal ESD action plans to embed sustainability into institutional practices.
2 Transforming Learning and Training Environments	Serbia lacks national support, funding, and regulatory frameworks for sustainable school operations, with eco-school participation driven mainly by NGOs rather than policy. Many municipalities and schools, particularly in rural areas, face budget and technology constraints that limit green infrastructure and digital tools for ESD learning. Teachers have limited time, resources, and training to implement whole-school or experiential sustainability programs, including outdoor and place-based learning.	Greening Schools	**N**	At the national level, Serbia should introduce national eco-school guidelines with clear sustainability standards and establish a Green Infrastructure Fund to support school upgrades, energy efficiency, and green spaces.
			I	At the institutional level, targeted regional grants should be provided to improve digital access for ESD, particularly in under-equipped schools. Local eco-networks should be formed to foster collaboration between schools, municipalities, and environmental organisations
			E	At the educator level, teachers need protected time to lead whole-school sustainability projects. Professional development should prioritise outdoor, experiential, and place-based learning, equipping educators with practical tools to implement transformative ESD approaches

1 N = National; I = Institutional; E = Educator

3 Building Capacities of Educators	Teacher education in Serbia does not require ESD competencies, and sustainability is not tied to licensing or career progression, limiting its integration into teaching. Schools receive little investment for ongoing ESD-focused professional development, and educators often lack recognition or incentives to prioritize sustainability. Teachers have limited access to up-to-date resources and interactive tools needed to effectively deliver ESD content	Strengthening Professional Development	**N**	At the national level, ESD competencies must become mandatory in teacher education, licensing, and career progression frameworks to systematically embed sustainability within the teaching profession.
			I	At the institutional level, Serbia should establish a national platform offering free, high-quality ESD teaching resources, while regional budgets must support annual ESD-focused professional development, especially in disadvantaged areas
			E	At the educator level, digital micro-credentials should recognize teachers' ESD expertise and promote career development. Peer-learning networks should be created to encourage knowledge exchange, mentoring, and the dissemination of good practices among educators.
4 Empowering and Mobilizing Youth	Youth have little influence on ESD policy, and dedicated national programmes are limited and mostly rely on external funding. There is no formal framework requiring or supporting youth participation in sustainability decisions at local or regional levels. Schools rarely provide structured support for student-led sustainability initiatives, and teachers often lack the time, training, or digital tools to guide youth engagement effectively.	Strengthening Youth Participation	**N**	At the national level, Serbia should formally include youth representatives in ESD policymaking and expand national funding for student-led sustainability projects and initiatives.
			I	At the institutional level, schools should establish student ESD councils with formal roles in sustainability planning. National digital platforms should enable inter-school youth collaboration on sustainability actions.
			E	At the educator level, teachers need training in student empowerment and project-based learning to effectively support youth-led ESD activities. Schools demonstrating strong youth engagement should receive national recognition and public visibility.
5 Accelerating Local Level Action	National policies provide little guidance or incentives for local ESD initiatives, leaving community actors disconnected from broader strategies and lacking legal recognition. Local authorities often have insufficient funding and weak partnerships with schools, NGOs, and businesses, limiting systemic support for community-based sustainability projects. Schools and teachers are poorly connected to local ecological and sustainability initiatives, restricting students' access to practical, real-world learning experiences.	Bridging Schools and Communities	**N**	At the national level, Serbia should introduce national grants supporting community-based ESD initiatives and integrate ESD into municipal development strategies to strengthen local policy support.
			I	At the institutional level, local ESD hubs should be established to bring together schools, municipalities, and NGOs in co-developing sustainability projects. Municipalities should offer incentives to schools that build strong community partnerships.
			E	At the educator level, teachers should integrate real-world sustainability challenges into curricula through partnerships with local actors. Fieldwork and community-based projects should become key components of student learning experiences.

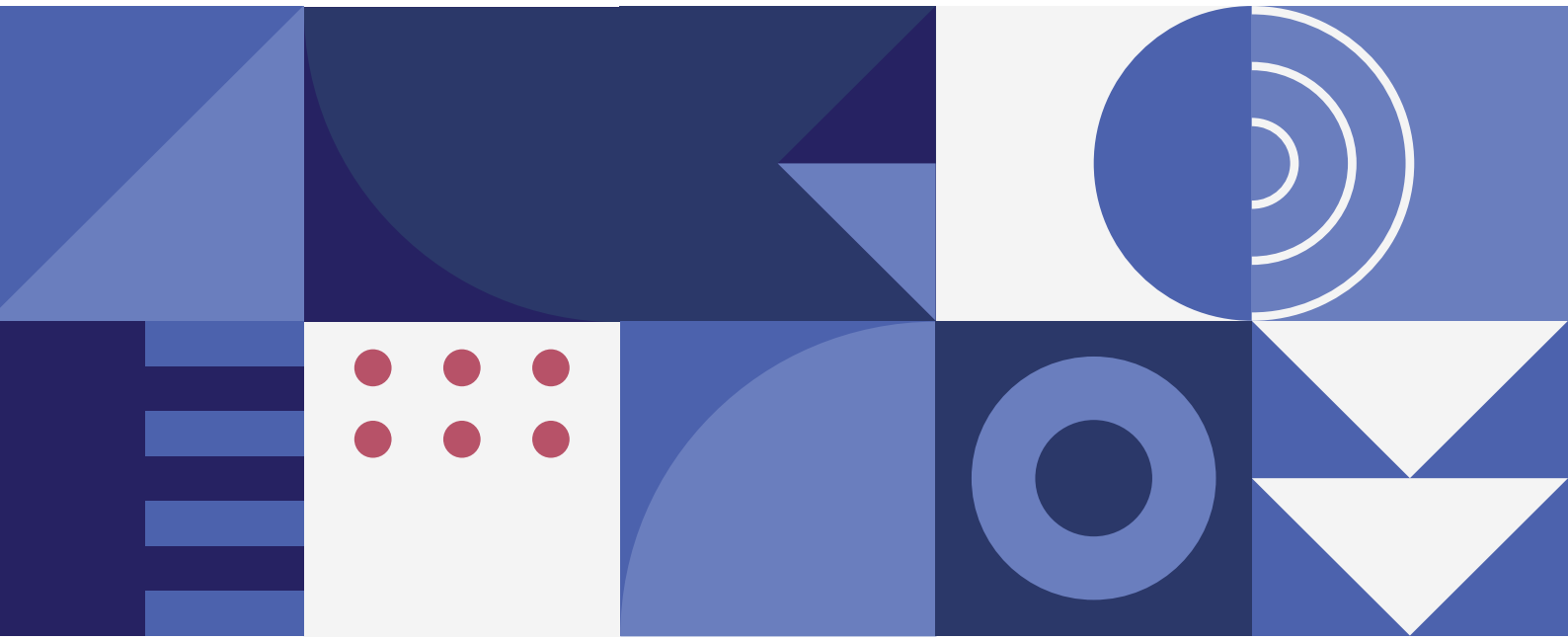
Romania

Priority Area	Identified Gaps	Policy Recommmendation	Level[1]	Description
1 Advancing Policy	Romanian law only mentions environmental education generally, without a clear ESD mandate or monitoring. Schools have limited autonomy or encouragement to implement interdisciplinary sustainability initiatives. Teachers lack mandatory ESD training or incentives, relying on personal motivation.	Integrate ESD into National Curricula and Teacher Standards	**N**	ESD should be explicitly embedded in Romania's national curricula, across disciplines and grade levels, accompanied by legal provisions and indicators for implementation. Teacher standards and certification frameworks should also require ESD competencies - UNESCO Priority 1. As a result of recent discussions in Romania, a recommendation would be to revise the National Education Law to include Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) as a cross-cutting subject, with clear objectives and an evaluation mechanism
2 Transforming Learning and Training Environments	Funding programmes focus on basic infrastructure rather than sustainability improvements. Schools often lack resources or tools to create sustainable learning environments, with urban-rural disparities. Teachers do not have access to localised technological tools for climate or environmental education.	Provide National Funding for Green School Practices	**I**	The Romanian Ministry of Education, in partnership with local authorities, should develop a clear funding scheme to support eco-friendly school infrastructure (e.g., waste management, green classrooms etc.) - Priority 2. The main recommendation would be the accreditation of regional networks of green schools, which would function as hubs for exchanging best practices and mentoring. Another solution would be to improve the already existing methodological framework in schools in Romania, which would allow schools to implement (more effective) interdisciplinary initiatives (e.g., environmental projects, green lessons). It is necessary to create a national programme for 'Sustainable Schools', with dedicated funds for green infrastructure (solar panels, selective waste collection, etc.). Considerable efforts must be made to reduce urban-rural disparities through competitive grants dedicated to schools in disadvantaged areas for the arrangement of sustainable learning spaces. Equipping Romanian schools with ecological education kits (e.g., compost, educational gardens, visual materials) would be a successful solution

1 N = National; I = Institutional; E = Educator

3 Building Capacities of Educator	Teacher certification frameworks do not require sustainability training. Existing workshops are voluntary and fragmented, lacking systemic professional development. Teachers are interested in sustainability but lack interdisciplinary materials and mentoring opportunities.	Create a National ESD Training and Certification Programme	**E**	A modular, accredited training programme should be promoted in Romania, offering continuous professional development for teachers on ESD themes, pedagogy, and tools - Priority 3. The introduction of bonuses or professional credits for teachers who participate in certified ESD programmes would be a motivating factor. One of the most effective solutions would be the launch of a mentoring programme between schools, where experienced teachers in ESD guide their colleagues in implementing projects. Considering today's technological evolution, digital training for teachers is recommended, focused on the use of interactive technologies in teaching sustainability (VR, educational games, etc.). Creating a legal framework for the recognition of ESD skills obtained through non-formal courses (e.g., recognising participation in NGO/EU trainings) is a desired action in Romania
4 Empowering and Mobilizing Youth	Youth participation in sustainability policy and school governance is limited. Youth-led initiatives are not systematically included in evaluation or reward systems. Activities often remain teacher-directed, limiting authentic student involvement.	Formalise Youth Involvement in School Sustainability Decisions	**I**	Encourage Romanian schools to consult students on sustainability-related decisions (e.g., waste plans) - Priority 4. There is a need for practical solutions such as supporting eco clubs coordinated by students, with real autonomy and logistical/financial support from the school administration. It is recommended to establish a National Council of Students for the Environment, with a consultative role in educational policies regarding sustainability. Another practical and effective solution would be to create a scoring/recognition system for students' green projects included in the educational portfolio

5 Accelerating Local Level Action	Budget constraints prevent schools from engaging effectively with local communities; micro-grant funding is needed. Schools rarely collaborate with local NGOs, municipalities, or businesses on sustainability projects. Bureaucratic procedures discourage teachers from developing partnerships beyond the classroom.	Support Local School-Community Sustainability Partnerships	I	Provide guidelines and micro-grants for Romanian schools (both from rural and urban areas) to initiate partnerships with local NGOs, municipalities, and businesses - Priority 5. There is a need for the allocation of funds for free participation in ESD workshops, especially for teachers from disadvantaged areas. A practical and effective solution would be the simplification of bureaucratic procedures for teachers' external collaborations, through clear guidelines and partnership models. The creation of a national catalogue of 'local resources for ESD', where schools can find local actors available for collaboration (e.g. experts, volunteers, institutions) is also recommended. The promotion of a "School in the Community" model is also recommended, with active and visible partnerships with local actors (e.g., local businesses, museums, NGOs).



Austria

Priority Area	Identified Gaps	Policy Recommmendation	Level[1]	Description
1 Advancing Policy	Lack of binding national legislation on ESD, inconsistent political engagement, and dependence on short-term funding. Underdeveloped leadership/ strategic planning and reliance on project-based funding in schools and HEIs. Absence of legal mandates for ESD in teacher education and educators' limited awareness of ESD relevance	Institutionalise ESD through Coordinated National Policy, Legislation, and Capacity-Building	**N & I & E**	Austria should embed ESD systematically across its education and sustainability policies by establishing a permanent inter-ministerial coordination body with a clear mandate. This effort involves enshrining ESD in national legislation and teacher qualification standards, supported by dedicated budgets at both federal and Länder levels. The revitalisation of National Strategy Working Groups should be guided by the European Declaration on Global Education to 2050. All educational institutions would be expected to co-create and publish ESD strategies with educators and learners, with access to seed funding for innovation. To help mainstream ESD in practice, a combination of incentives—such as awards, micro-certifications, and mandatory ESD training hours in teacher education—would be introduced.
2 Transforming Learning and Training Environments	Outdated school infrastructure, insufficient prioritisation of sustainability in federal planning, and neglect of social dimensions in ESD. Inadequate municipal funding and insufficient digital infrastructure for schools, especially in disadvantaged areas. Lack of tools, time, and spaces for experiential ESD learning and insufficient integration of social/cultural aspects into teaching	Modernise and Embed Holistic Sustainability Criteria into Austria's Educational Infrastructure and Practices	**N & I & E**	Transforming Austria's learning environments for sustainability requires national efforts to prioritise the modernisation of infrastructure through initiatives like the Green Schools Austria program. ESD-related criteria—including social issues such as human rights, gender equality, peace, global citizenship, and cultural diversity—should be incorporated into school quality assurance systems. Institutions must collaborate with municipalities to co-develop long-term infrastructure plans, improve access to digital tools, and integrate environmental and social sustainability into everyday school practices. Supporting educators is equally important, through peer mentoring, participatory pedagogy training, and the creation of hands-on learning spaces—such as gardens and energy dashboards—that foster meaningful and practical ESD delivery across all dimensions

1 N = National; I = Institutional; E = Educator

3 Building Capacities of Educator	Missing ESD requirements in teacher policy, licensing, and competency frameworks. Underfunding of professional development and weak provision of collaborative structures for educators. Lack of digital competencies and innovative tools aligned with ESD pedagogy.	Integrating Sustainability into Teacher Training and Continuous Learning	**N & I & E**	Embedding sustainability competencies into national teacher standards and mandating ESD modules in all accredited teacher education programmes are essential steps to build educator capacity for ESD in Austria. Institutions must allocate consistent funding for professional development and create peer learning communities. Enhancing digital competence requires providing educators with access to self-paced, gamified e-learning tools that foster innovative, sustainability-focused teaching.
4 Empowering and Mobilizing Youth	Limited and symbolic youth participation in education policy and inconsistent funding for youth-led initiatives. Governance frameworks lack structured mechanisms for youth participation despite policy commitments. Undervaluation of students' leadership potential and lack of digital platforms for collaboration and impact monitoring.	Institutionalise Meaningful Youth Participation and Leadership in ESD Policy and Governance	**N & I & E**	Austria can empower and mobilise youth in ESD by institutionalising meaningful youth participation in education policy. This involves granting advisory and voting rights to youth councils, such as the National Youth Council, in alignment with the government's 2025–2029 program, which emphasises continuing and strengthening the Austrian Youth Strategy based on European youth objectives. Successes within the Austrian Youth Strategy framework, which supports young people's active involvement in decision-making, should be regularly monitored and communicated. Sustainable funding mechanisms are essential to back youth-led initiatives, especially those aligned with local SDGs. At the school level, governance frameworks must require co-decision processes involving students. Additionally, educators need training to foster student leadership and access to digital platforms that facilitate collaboration and track impact.

5 Accelerating Local Level Action	Overly centralised governance, weak legal support for partnerships, and reduced funding for CSOs. Insufficient budgets, staff, and awareness within schools to build effective local partnerships. Lack of familiarity with local sustainability issues and limited support for leading community-based projects.	Decentralise ESD Governance and Strengthen Local Community Engagement	**N & I & E**	Accelerating local-level ESD action requires Austria to decentralise governance by empowering municipalities and regions, while simplifying regulations that facilitate school partnerships with local NGOs and businesses. Increasing funding is essential to support community engagement, including assigning dedicated staff and coordinators in schools to foster collaborations. Training educators to integrate local environmental issues through citizen science and promote intergenerational learning will help strengthen community ties.

5. From Insights to Action

The evidence gathered throughout the AELIA project underscores a clear and urgent imperative: **Education systems must be transformed to meet the demands of a sustainable future**. Across Austria, Cyprus, Greece, Romania, and Serbia, significant strides have been made in recognising the importance of ESD, yet systemic barriers continue to hinder its full integration. This moment presents an opportunity for policymakers to act decisively on the evidence presented in this White Paper, using it as a foundation for shaping national and European strategies. The forthcoming Policy Learning meetings will serve as a crucial next step in this process, providing a platform to translate findings into institutionalised commitments and long-term frameworks.

While some national frameworks and pilot initiatives have laid a foundation, widespread adoption requires more than isolated efforts. Embedding sustainability into educational systems must become a deliberate, coordinated, and policy-driven process—supported by legal mandates, institutional incentives, capacity-building mechanisms, and community collaboration.

The recommendations presented in this **White Paper** serve as **a roadmap for action**. They are grounded in both research and practical insights from educational leaders, stakeholders, and practitioners who navigate these challenges daily. They also reflect the collective commitment of the AELIA partnership to fostering inclusive, innovative, and future-ready education systems.

Moving forward, success will depend on political will, adequate funding, and a whole-of-society approach that brings together ministries, educators, youth, civil society, and local communities. Education for Sustainable Development is not a standalone initiative; it is a catalyst for achieving long-term climate resilience, social justice, and inclusive growth.

By acting on the recommendations outlined here, policymakers can empower education to become **a driving force in the green and just transition**—not only within the five partner countries, but as a replicable model across Europe and beyond.

6. References

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White paper on integrating education for sustainability in formal and non-formal education

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