

**AN IMPORTANT URBAN RESEARCH PROPOSAL:
ADULT EDUCATION FOR SUSTAINABILITY IN THE
CONTEMPORARY URBAN LANDSCAPE: THE MEANING OF
LIFELONG ACTION THROUGH SUSTAINABLE URBAN
COMMUNITIES**

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Abstract

The proposed research aims to explore the ways in which Adult Education for Sustainability will be integrated into the contemporary Urban Landscape. The key question is, how an effective Formal Adult Educator Training, as well as a Non-Formal Adult Education, should be structured through organized educational programs, actions, communication policy and educational strategy to trigger a transformative way of thinking and acting, resulting in the creation of Sustainable Urban Communities and their Lifelong Action, in the urban landscape.

More specifically, in the field of Adult Education for Sustainability, the study is linked to the need to recognise the importance of the environmental and social limits within which human activity in cities needs to be confined. Regarding the second field of knowledge, the research will be focused on changing the current individual beliefs, habits and actions of citizens as units, towards a collective transformation of Lifelong Action, through organizing themselves into Sustainable Urban Communities.

The research will be conducted in the urban network of Athens as it alternates between characteristic nodes of the Attic Metro, in order to explore the needs of specific target populations and to pursue the desired outcomes.

Key words: *Formal & Non-Formal Adult Education for Sustainability, Lifelong Action, Sustainable Urban Adult Education Communities.*

Introduction

Today, there's an enormous need for citizens to recognise the importance of the environmental and social limits within which human activity in cities must be contained. Science has already demonstrated the need to limit the temperature increase from human activity to 1.5o Celsius by 2030 in order to survive on Earth. To achieve it, the UN's agenda of 17 Sustainable Development Goals must be implemented in every corner of the world. But it is not easy to rationalize the truth to change the deep and unconscious consumption habits that drive human actions in today's globalized conditions. Nor is it easy to implement prohibitive measures, laws and policies that would restrict individual freedom through democratic processes when citizens themselves are not ready for such radical changes in their way of life (Orr, 2004).

The general problematic of this proposal is the study, research and evaluation of adult education in both formal and non-formal contexts. Its character is interdisciplinary. It will move in the cognitive domain of two disciplines of adult education a) on sustainability and b) its lifelong action through the organization of sustainable urban communities. Particularly, in the field of adult education for sustainability, the study is linked to the need to recognize the importance of the environmental and social limits within which human activity in cities must

be confined. In relation to the second area of knowledge, research will be concerned with changing the current individual beliefs, habits and actions of citizens as units towards a collective transformation of lifelong action through their organization into Sustainable Urban Communities.

Adult Education for Sustainability

Izabel Rimanoczy (2021) proposes as a necessary precondition for this change the transformation of values, perceptions and beliefs towards a sustainable way of thinking and therefore acting for modern society, which will be achieved not only by taking into account the magnitude of the destruction the planet is experiencing, but by achieving 'a broad understanding of the revelations of the ecosystem, through social awareness and an intimate focus on personal values and the higher self, expressed through action for the common good. Such change is intimate and is reflected in several approaches that need to be developed at both individual and collective levels: ecological worldview, systems thinking, and emotional and spiritual intelligence.

The ecological worldview is a unifying perspective on reality that guides individuals in analyzing information and making decisions, taking into account aspects of environmental and social interconnectedness (Weber, 2010). This way of thinking might result in negative emotions such as fear, anxiety, despair, but also positive ones such as hope, enthusiasm, confidence, compassion. The ecological worldview is empowering and promotes awareness of the individual's role, as it activates the capacity to respond and the ability to choose behavior that has a positive impact (Barnes, 2013).

Cultivating relationships between people and places involves the notion that people are one and related to nature. Although today's citizens are not born into communities where such an understanding is a lived practice, there is a strong need for it. Without seeing it as a conscious process, redefining the relationship between humans and nature could mean seeing a connection to nature as embedded in it, and nature as embedded in humans. Rather than being emancipated and separated from nature, humans can reconnect with the city's natural environment (Horn & Hausdoerffer, 2017). As a way of connecting with it and reflecting on its wisdom, human actions could be relocated on guided tours in green open spaces, engaging with different senses, connecting with non-human beings and seeking inspiration from nature. Such exercises would provide an opportunity to stop, read and reflect on alternative ways of knowing that brings wisdom to their daily lives (Benyus, 1997). Human-nature values could get engaged with the idea and metaphor of connection with nature, through creative experimentation in which citizens could connect, get inspired and express their emotions on a personal level but also to get to know each other while connecting to the theme of human-nature relations.

The systems approach, on the other hand, helps to examine the interactions between different systems, their mutual influences and feedback loops, while feeding into the short- and long-term thinking that is equally necessary for sustainable decision-making (Capra & Luisi, 2014). As an alternative to polarization, the system's perspective focuses on non-binary thinking, leading to inclusive decisions that respect people and ecosystems, the present and the future. Moreover, systems processes encourage consideration of natural cycles, something societies today neglect, because they rely on linear thinking, with linear growth targets (e.g. GDP) that do not respond to the planet's finite resources and focus on control rather than adaptive resilience (Rowarth, 2018).

To cultivate this mindset, embodiment is a state in which new meanings, relationships, and understandings of self are developed through the connection of body, mind, heart, and imagination (Sipos et al, 2008). Embodied practices are practices that engage cognitive and

embodied knowledge and nurture the body and mind in a simultaneous and synergistic way and in addition, create spaces of connection and expression beyond words. Participating in skill-building activities that are designed and curated around the idea that the body and mind are not separate entities, but an integrated and interconnected whole, can offer opportunities for deep connection with self, others and nature (Richmond & Snowber, 2019). For example, daily lessons could be encouraged, starting with an embodied knowledge session in a park, through movement exercises based on play or dance, or with workouts such as walking, stopping and running, and finally becoming aware of the space around oneself. Another embodied approach could be sensory walks, such as guided tours, which provide an opportunity to explore the specific area through the lens of a sense (e.g. auditory, visual, taste and smell). Playful learning also involves getting into a playful state of mind. Through play, people open up a way of breaking through cognitive biases and using other ways of knowing, acting and being.

The development of emotional intelligence is also challenging individuals to rethink the pace and speed of their behaviors, which tend to adapt to today's expectation of quick reactions, while decisions are made without adequate consideration of environmental and social impacts (Argyris & Schon, 1974; Goleman, 1995). Contemporary cultural values such as independence and autonomy, competition, comfort and wealth, while reinforcing individual identity, are an obstacle to sustainability. Finally, in order to develop a more sustainable mindset, individuals need to free themselves from limiting beliefs that prevent them from developing their full innovative and creative potential, which is of paramount importance in developing sustainable solutions (Nemeth & Oliver, 2017).

Getting to know the world in other ways, such as through imagination, creativity, intuition, sensations and emotions, is now a priority beyond the use of uninhibited scientific knowledge. Arts and science approaches are potential interdisciplinary methods for engaging and working with different habits of knowing in an open, collaborative and creative way. Art has the capacity to create learning spaces that help expand people's imagination for a regenerative, just and peaceful present and future. In these learning spaces, citizens can imagine and develop interventions and transform everyday situations. Such approaches provide a tangible experience and conceptual understanding of interdisciplinarity and how to explore broadening horizons for addressing environmental challenges. It could include a theoretical lecture on interdisciplinarity, as well as different interdisciplinary approaches to imagining and co-creating just sustainable, healthy futures that promote a sense of belonging. (Kokkos, 2021).

In fostering emotional intelligence in societal change, stories can play an important role as they function like magnifying glasses that help us to make sense of and learn from a complex past and present (Grummell & Finnegan, 2022). A crucial aspect is their use of metaphors. Metaphors create meaning, images, emotions, values, and judgements about what is true and possible. Stories can become the windows into other worlds and lives, revealing hidden perspectives and illustrating the challenges others are currently facing while creating empathy and connection. They can illuminate future possibilities and thus support the creation of meaning, agency, and direction. As a way to reflect on understanding wisdom, storytelling sessions lead the group to get to know each other while connecting to the theme.

Finally, the spiritual intelligence approach aims at reunification with nature, a concept that is not acquired intellectually, but through actual experience. However, these are simple experiences, available to anyone at any time, without purpose, that bring a new perspective to peoples' thinking, influencing their choices and the way they relate to the natural resources on which they tend to depend (Zohar, 2012). Empathy, a term used to describe contemplative practices of all kinds, invites individuals to focus on the inner dimensions, the silent self, tuning out the noise and distractions and connecting with their intuitive and ancestral wisdom.

As individuals, human beings move from automatic and reactive behaviors to more conscious, purposeful and directed ones, they give new meaning to their self-realization and bring out the best of what they have for the sustainability of the planet (Scharmer, 2009).

Exploring and connecting to one's inner capacities and most important values is a powerful and effective way of building empowerment and leadership. Creating spaces where citizens can explore the values that underpin their actions and where they can deepen their sense of meaning, can be highly empowering and can strengthen their commitment to regenerative urban futures. Across different cultures and geographical contexts people value the relationships that ensure cooperation and protection of the natural world and that it is a matter of making these values salient and bringing them into practice. Discovering and cultivating the values that inform and motivate people can help establish ethical, responsible, and caring relationships within and beyond their neighborhood. Working in small groups on personal moments of deep insight and intuition that changed their course of action in the past, or sharing experiences when they felt that their purpose was aligned with their actions could help identify useful tools and practices to invite wisdom into daily decisions.

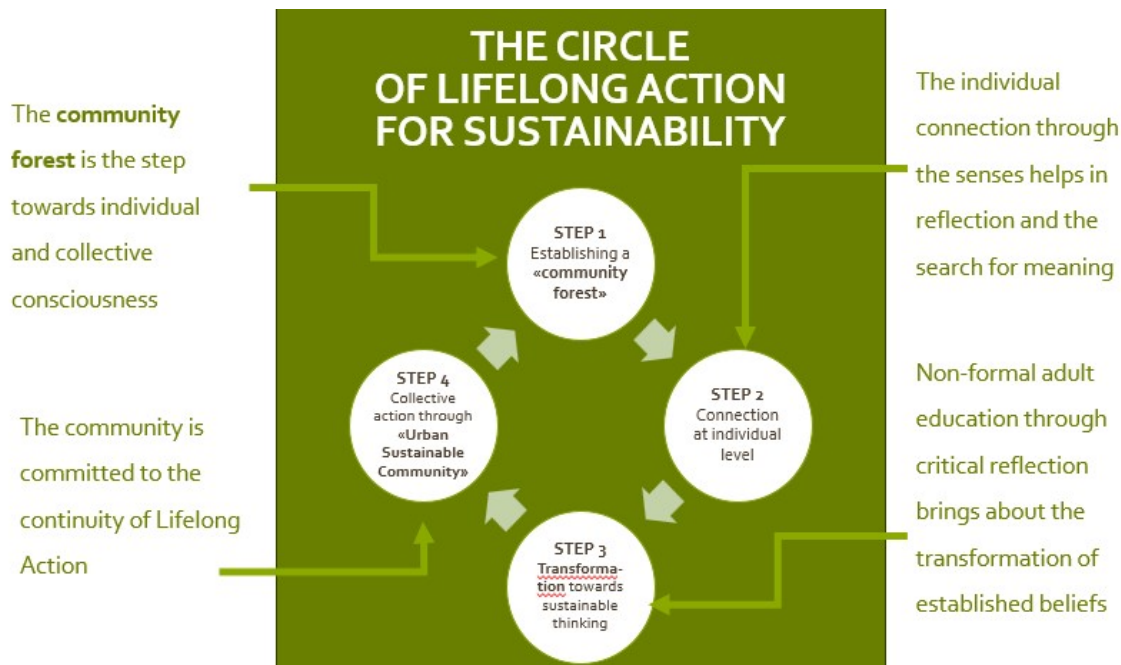
Urban Sustainable Communities and the Circle of Lifelong Action for Sustainability

The Urban Sustainable Community could be developed as a space for expression and action, through collective change and individual approaches, to achieve a sustainable way of thinking and acting locally. Recent research has shown that there is widespread public support for bolder action to protect the planet, despite prevailing perceptions that citizens are less likely to act, or that the burden of action falls disproportionately on the less well-off, discouraging their participation. Changing the narrative to one of widespread public support, and telling stories of communities that have taken action, is more likely to inspire citizens to take concrete action to reduce inequalities and build social trust, thereby promoting widespread public support for urgent and bolder action for the planet that supports the well-being of all (Chamberlin, 2009).

Building lasting alliances through the creation of local sustainable urban communities requires patient work to build common understanding, trust and partnerships. New ways of thinking and acting often require explaining the same thing over and over again. On the tactical side, it requires a deeper understanding of who the key people are, who can influence political processes and who can often be barriers to progress. It is important that adult educators engage using a variety of approaches and tools, as mentioned above. Working with local actors and civil servants to support lifelong learning requires the integration of systems thinking into public administration and policy making so that they are better equipped to address interrelated societal challenges. Policies should not be something that governments impose on citizens and that only politicians talk about. There should be more support and education for every citizen to participate actively in policy making (Vandenabeele, Schreiber-Barsch, Finnegan 2024). Therefore, it is the education of citizens in a culture of lifelong action that will gradually lead them to active participation and active citizenship.

The research will attempt to apply the idea of a cycle that promotes the regeneration of lifelong action in the urban environment. This cycle aims to be renewed and revitalized by the citizens themselves, who, by changing roles throughout the process, actively participate in the transformation, both individually and of the city. In the first step of the cycle, the neighbors of a place commit themselves to how they will create the community forest, a reference point in which they will cultivate their individual and collective consciousness. Its creation is intended to encourage further experimentation in the neighborhood to implement sustainable solutions. The second step involves cultivating connections with the natural environment at an individual level, bringing the local population together through reflection and finding

meaning in the daily life of the community. In the third step, non-formal lifelong learning, which promotes critical reflection and dialogue, is used to transform established beliefs and strengthen collective sustainable thinking. The fourth step for the neighborhood is a commitment to collective action by transferring the knowledge gained to the next neighborhood, ensuring continuity of lifelong action for sustainability across the city.



Working case - Objectives

Individual research objectives will be set:

- In the first phase, to study and review the current international literature and research on Adult Education for Sustainability in the Urban Landscape as it has been reflected in contemporary societies.
- To study the current situation in Greece regarding the existence of organized actions, activities, educational programs concerning Adult Education for Sustainability in the Urban Landscape and to present the typology of these programs and activities.
- To draw conclusions about the needs and expectations of adults to ensure a sustainable future in the Greek urban landscape.
- To identify the obstacles that constitute a barrier to the adult learning process, both towards an individual sustainable transformation and towards a collective lifelong action transformation, and to propose ways to remove these obstacles.
- The study and presentation of contemporary educational theories of adult education (with particular emphasis on transformative learning, critical reflection) and their potential for creative application in adult education for sustainability in the Greek urban landscape.
- In relation to the previous objective, to propose appropriate pedagogical techniques and tools to facilitate learning.
- The study of case studies and good practices in the organization, implementation and application of formal and non-formal education programs for Adult Education for Sustainability and Lifelong Action in urban landscapes worldwide.
- The potential contribution and use of digital technologies, modern and asynchronous tele-education in the effort to broaden the way citizens organize themselves in sustainable urban communities.

- The presentation of the necessary and specialized knowledge and skills that Adult Educators for Sustainability and Lifelong Action need to possess in order to be able to fulfil their task.

In particular, the role of training adult educators in the creation of sustainable urban communities and their lifelong action in the urban landscape will be explored:

- In formal training and certification of adult educators for urban sustainability and lifelong action.
- In non-formal education, focusing on the organization and implementation of face-to-face and online training programs on the creation of sustainable urban communities and their lifelong action, through research-action.
- In informal learning, through actions within the urban fabric that contribute to collective Lifelong Action for the city.

Research methodology

The research aims to change the current individual beliefs, habits and actions of citizens to search for internal contradictions and gaps in a system of thought (or discourse) and push these contradictions to the point where something different emerges, so that they can begin to see where possibilities for change might lie and where they might take action (Kearins & Springett, 2003). To construct qualitative research 'with people' rather than 'for people' requires theoretical and methodological creativity. The focus cannot therefore be on data collection, but on stimulating and encouraging collective and critical knowledge production with participants. Collaborative action research requires different ways of approaching it, through criteria of validity, reliability, ethics and quality, based on the researcher's ability to truly respond to what is learned through dialogue. Aiming to explore the ways in which Adult Education for Sustainability is integrated into the contemporary urban landscape, the research will be conducted in the urban network of Athens as it alternates between characteristic nodes of the Attic Metro, in order to explore the needs of specific target populations and to pursue the desired outcomes.

Research Tools

1st Stage: Creating Community Forests at Metro Stations

Areas of trees, called "community forests", will be created at indicative metro stations. Inside, passengers will be able to walk around the space, creating sensory connections with the natural environment that is missing in their area. Using QR codes located along the route, passengers will be able to enter links on their smartphones, either through story examples or through exploratory questionnaires, to indicate their willingness to regenerate and green their neighborhood, as well as the place where they would like to be active.

2nd Stage: Empowering Urban Communities for Sustainable Regeneration

From the 1st stage, samples of the population will be taken in different locations to form the first groups of adult learners. They are the ones who, in the second phase, will actively participate in a non-formal training course on the role of sustainability in the daily life of the city and the results that can be achieved through collective action.

The main objective is to increase the positive and active participation of citizens in creating a sustainable future in their local community, based on the shared values they will co-create (Suzuki, 2007).

The training will be followed by second action-research of the groups in their respective neighborhoods. The trainees will be asked to carry out a sustainability action through

awareness-raising and action by local collectives, first at the level of the apartment building and then at the level of the neighborhood. From the groups formed, conclusions will be drawn, adapted to local needs, and problem-solving efforts will be carried out, with the aim of transforming the habits that lead to unsustainable practices in the daily lives of citizens.

3rd Stage: Creating Community Forests - Fostering Sustainable Urban Engagement

In a third stage, the "sustainable urban communities" that will emerge through collective processes will claim the creation of their Community Forest, a reference point in the neighborhood for the further development of a sustainable culture that will have a multiplier effect on the wider area. The Community Forest will be studied as a research tool within which to carry out processes of connecting the different populations that make up the urban landscape and interacting with local actors, forming the basis for direct participation in the management of public space. The main objective is to enhance the positive and active participation of citizens in the creation of a sustainable future in their local community, based on the shared values they will co-construct.

The non-formal educational material will help the citizens of the communities to address social cohesion AND environmental challenges; to carry out projects and implement their inclusive democratic participation; to support teachers in new key competences so that a new curriculum can be created from all the research and intercultural knowledge can be co-constructed. At the end of the three phases of research, pedagogical material will be collected to formulate formal training of sustainability educators to become key relays in the non-formal training of local cooperating teachers in the field of social sciences/citizenship.

Desirable outcomes

The success of the whole project would be considered as its continuing character through a cyclical renewal of adult education for sustainability and especially of Citizens' Lifelong Action in the urban landscape. The research will attempt to theorize this desirable circularity through **the circle of lifelong action for sustainability**.

In conclusion, there is urgent need for formal training of adult educators for sustainability to be built up. They will be the leaders for a Non-Formal Education of the citizens through organized educational programs and actions, building a communication policy and educational strategy that will trigger a transformative way of thinking and acting and finally, resulting in the creation of Sustainable Urban Communities and their Lifelong Action, in the urban landscape. In order to carry out the research, key stakeholders must be contacted, and resources have to be raised, in order to implement the project in the most efficient way. The expected results may be able to provide the impetus to overcome the current difficulties in adopting sustainable practices in the city.

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