

Civil society for lifelong skills development in Europe and partner countries – European Year of Skills

Conference report

Massively ramping up skills development and lifelong learning will be Europe’s priority during the European Year of Skills, launched on 9 May 2023. The Year aims to promote a mind-set where individuals, organisations and authorities share the view that lifelong skills development is necessary. This includes promoting the visibility, uptake and recognition of further education and training in adult life. The Year provides a promising opportunity for stakeholders across Europe to engage in discussions, learn from each other, and promote work in the field of skills development.

Within the framework of the Year, a conference on “Civil Society for Lifelong Skills Development in Europe and Partner Countries” was held in Brussels on 23 May 2023, at the initiative of the European Training Foundation (ETF), the Lifelong Learning Platform (LLLP) and the European Association for the Education of Adults (EAEA), who have joined forces to promote policy dialogue and partnerships between governments and civil society organisations (CSOs) active in skills development and lifelong learning.

Among the diverse range of contributors and high-level speakers was the chair of the European Parliament’s Committee on Employment and Social Affairs and the Director of Jobs and Skills in the European Commission’s Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion. The Head of the Occupational Policy and Labour Migration Regulation Directorate in the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection of the Republic of Moldova, and the Swedish Permanent Representation to the European Union on behalf of the European Council’s Presidency were as well among the high-level panellists, and this endorsed the importance of the event.

The debate engaged government and CSOs representatives from Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Jordan, Kosovo*, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia while other country representatives connected online, and it was rich and positive, opening up space for further collaboration.

Overall reflections

The Year of Skills promotes a mindset where lifelong skills development is considered the norm, in line with the objective to reach, within a decade, 60% of adults engaged in learning each year, up from 37% currently. This priority is in major EU policies – the European Pillar of Social Rights’ Action Plan, European Skills Agenda, and Council Resolution on a new European agenda for adult learning 2021-2030. It demands great focus on and investment in skills anticipation, development, and validation learning.

The contributions of CSOs to skills outside formal education is well documented. The question is, how can CSOs skills provision be properly acknowledged? Unlike the formal education, informal and non-formal learning – often short courses or occasional learning – are not always voiced in the institutionalised governance. For structured dialogue to take place, CSOs involved in skills should be seen as legitimate interlocutors.

The concept of lifelong learning is encompassing the plurality of learning experiences in life. There is no need for all learning to be standardised, but skills provision happening outside formal

* This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.

education should be considered part of skills development. Learning outside formal education is often the result of the initiative and capacity of non-state actors, including the private sector and civil society.

The idea of extending the notion of learning to many more and diverse activities is important. But it is not simple, because the recognition of the learning outside formal settings implies to extend the reach of governments' work. Validation of non-formal and informal learning, for example, should be implemented more systematically. There is also an explosion of online learning courses, including by CSOs, which should be matched with quality frameworks and eventually micro-credentials.

There is a network of interconnected issues and no one-size solution; but there are inspiring practices. In Ireland, effective umbrella associations have achieved a seat at the table of consultations for civil society with the government and private sector. The OECD has extensively researched skills strategies, stressed the key roles of CSOs in skills development and in dialogue, and has suggestions regarding engagement with civil society.

Turning to EU's partner countries, the conference saw a useful role for CSOs in the skills arena regarding new legislation and decisions. The question here is, how implementation can be effective? Ireland has shown that over time, with commitment and through negotiations, it is possible for governments to build helpful and productive relationships with civil society. Partner countries will need to look beyond formal education to recognise and count the out-of-school learning.

A third question is, what steps are needed to move forward? Several CSOs at the conference expressed disappointment at government responses to civil society inputs. While there are consultations or platform meetings, it seems there is little follow up.

A step that has proven to work is to start building partnerships at the sub-national level. Many CSOs have observed that at the local and regional levels, a common agenda may be more easily agreed. The impacts of challenges – such as the suffering of young people dropping out of school or unable to find jobs – may be easier to see and feel accountable for, than by a more removed national government.

Another overarching theme, advocated tirelessly by the EAEA and LLLP, is the holistic notion of skills. Civil society groups see skills broadly and their focus is on the human being, which gives a different flavour to human capital, thus lifelong learning should not only be valued in relation to the labour market needs. Skills are for work as well as for life – transversal competencies that support people to adapt to change and lead meaningful, productive lives. Their advocacy has contributed to a growing international consensus and large expert organisations such as the UNESCO, OECD and others agree on this holistic view.

The ETF too recognises the importance of all types of skills, although a primary focus of its work is on the transition from education to the labour market. Most governments and social partners such as employers are rightly concerned about skills mismatch, and the need for sufficient, well-prepared workers for the economy. Skills are linked to employment and wages, changes within and between jobs, and career development.

CSOs advocate the roles of informal and non-formal learning environments and approaches to lifelong learning vividly and support their advocacy with knowledge and experience. This is added value that civil society can bring to the design and implementation of skills policies. CSOs have trust and ties with communities that governments struggle to involve: people who are not in employment, education or training, with low income, living with a disability or representing an ethnic minority. Often marginalised, they should not be forgotten.

Setting the scene

The 'Setting the scene' session theme was a stakeholder dialogue designed to shape lifelong learning policies, chaired by the ETF. Its high-level speakers were top representatives from the European Parliament; the Swedish Presidency; the Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion; the European Economic and Social Committee; and the EAEA.

The speakers were in agreement that skills must be central to Europe's efforts to face multiple challenges. Skills for the green and digital transitions are often delivered through short courses provided by CSOs. It is also essential to step up the delivery of skills for mental and emotional resilience at a time of dramatic change.

To achieve 60% of adults in training each year will require the coordinated efforts of all stakeholders – governments, public authorities at all levels, education and training systems, the private sector, social partners and CSOs.

Actions putting in practice the European Skills Agenda are contributing to the objectives of the Year of Skills. A new approach to micro-credentials will enable certification of bite-sized training and enable employers to see what a person knows. Individual Learning Accounts will give every adult the opportunity to upskill and reskill. Under a new Pact for Skills, more than 1,500 organisations – public, private, civil – have offered 10 million new training opportunities.

More fundamentally, the general objective of the Year of Skills is cultural shift about skills. Developing the right skills is crucial for both young people and adults in the existing workforce. Lifelong learning is essential to maintain jobs and to remain active citizens, and CSOs have a key role to play in making the shift and supporting people to learn new skills, or reskill or upskill.

Structured dialogue and best practice sharing

Speakers pointed out that there is rich evidence that the involvement of CSOs, other social partners and local and regional authorities, improves the design of strategies and policies. This demands structured dialogue between governments and civil society.

CSOs have experience in the skills arena and deep understandings of the diversity of skills needs. They should be enabled to expand services related to non-formal and informal learning and support to employment – not on an *ad hoc* but on a sustainable basis – and more involved in monitoring and evaluating skills policies and delivery.

Structured dialogue with CSOs around skills development needs to be at the European and national government level. Crucially, there must also be dialogue at the local and regional level, where interventions such as skills hubs, skills centres and partnership initiatives between municipalities and CSOs tend to be more innovative. CSOs can bring to the table experimental practices they have developed, tested and researched. Local best practice can be scaled to the national level, and if useful to other countries, to the European level.

The European Parliament and European Commission supported the work of the ETF: policy advice to partner countries, research and analysis, and its role in disseminating knowledge and practice between the EU and partner countries. Parliament support was also pledged for the ETF in promoting partnerships between CSOs and public authorities, to advance the skills agenda in partner countries.

How CSOs help to address skills needs

A national government perspective

A senior official in Moldova's Ministry of Labour and Social Protection provided a government perspective. At the national level, skills development is frequently a responsibility across two or more ministries, for example labour and of education. This complicates skills dialogue and collaboration.

In EU partner countries, governments may lack capacity and there may be too few formal training providers. Thus, CSOs can play a significant role in skills development. At the same time, CSOs are themselves still developing and need strengthening. Both sides are unable to deliver mass skills development alone, making collaboration essential.

There are many more skills residing within populations than there are qualifications. The process of validation, which implies assessment and certification, of skills gained through informal learning offers an effective way for people and countries to deploy the skills they already have. The process is even more useful when is part of and complemented by career guidance services.

Moldova's government subsidises job seekers to obtain recognition of non-formal skills. It supports sectoral skills councils that may collaborate with companies and CSOs. There is a grant programme for youth-focused CSOs to provide skills. Also CSOs, local authorities and training providers are working together to offer skills training to vulnerable young people.

The ETF described examples from other partner countries, such as in Ukraine, which has a public council for consultation over policies and delivery. In Albania CSOs are actively involved in skills policy, implementation and monitoring. The new public-private Georgie Skills Agency is creating a space where the private sector, CSOs and government collaborate.

Civil society organisations perspectives

Representatives from civil society discussed the multiple contributions of CSOs in the skills development sphere. It became evident that their work and approach have common features, no matter their location and the level of their operation, whether it is local, national or international.

CDI Macedonia is a national umbrella association and a vocational education and training (VET) provider that engage with young and adult people of different backgrounds. It moreover belongs to a European-wide CSOs network, which creates opportunities for peer learning, organisational development and stronger advocacy. The Lifelong Learning Platform is an umbrella association for over 40 organisations active in education, training and youth that represent 50,000 education institutions across Europe. The European Association for the Education of Adults (EAEA) is a European non-governmental organisation that gives a voice to non-formal adult education and learning in Europe. EAEA's 122 members in 44 countries are adult education associations at the national and regional levels, providers, research institutes as well as public institutions, altogether representing over 60 million learners Europe-wide.

Many CSOs use – and widely share – dedicated tools and methodologies to analyse the personal and professional skills needs of people and groups at risk, and work with people to develop learning pathways that can help fulfil their potential. Acting on the assessments of learning needs requires a multi-stakeholder process, which allows for effective partnerships.

CSOs see skills development as a way of emancipating learners to seek out a livelihood, increasing self-awareness about own capacities and fostering positive relationships with others and their communities. In a world of standardisation, the strength of this approach lies in the capacity to assess needs, customise and personalise the learning experience, putting learners at the centre of the process and guiding them along the way. At times, CSOs are confronted with the requirements of certain programmes that grant funding according to one dimension – say, for people as migrants or single parents – while in fact people are multi-faceted.

Further, CSOs create bridges between actors and stakeholders, between skills needs and learning opportunities by training providers and job opportunities. They understand the expectations on the different sides, are able to view the skills needs of the future thanks to their innovation capacity and support people in navigating the transitions. With this, they substantively help the implementation of policies,

They act as mediators with a two-way approach. One side links the bottom level to the top: on the ground CSO experience and insights inform policy. On the other, CSOs operate as a dissemination agent of all initiatives implemented at European level, ensuring outreach to the grassroots level and providing or linking people to training pathways. The goal of this approach is to engage citizens and stakeholders throughout policy development.

Roles of CSOs in national skills strategies

The second session looked at the roles of CSOs in national skills strategies, with speakers from the OECD and The Wheel, Ireland's umbrella civil society association.

Skills strategies are complex initiatives because they cover a wide a range of policy domains, and involve multiple government departments as well as partners across the public, education, private and civil society sectors. They cater for the entire populace and cover the full gamut of skills that people and countries need to achieve their ambitions.

The OECD underlined that countries do not only need technical and professional skills for the job market. Skills strategies must also be concerned with cognitive and metacognitive skills, and social and emotional skills. Different skills may be acquired through different types of providers: education institutions, employers and unions, CSOs and others.

A key input for a skills strategy is to engage with all stakeholders and actors meaningfully, and to be meaningful it must be sustained. National skills strategies and policies need to be constantly changing and improving through their lifetimes.

As CSOs have a very good idea of what does and does not work for the communities and people they serve, they may offer key recommendations or ideas for skills development. Soliciting input is critical to building a shared commitment to policy reform. If affected groups are not included in a conversation, they will likely not support its outcomes.

CSOs can make an important contribution to implementation. Because they are very close to the people and communities they serve, there is a level of trust, knowledge and insight that others do not have. Many CSOs can reach out, explain what skills services and policies are available, and encourage take-up. They provide career guidance and training opportunities.

The OECD has identified three crucial drivers of CSO engagement. The first is a tradition of collaboration between government and CSOs, and actors who are familiar with each other. Second is the existence of institutions or practices – informal or formal, such as skills councils – that help to ensure engagement happens or is institutionalised.

Third, CSOs themselves can play a central role in ensuring that their voices are heard. They can do this in the same way as employers and labour – by forming umbrella organisations that represent their interests. This is critical. Policymakers do not always like to cooperate, and when they do, they want manageable engagement.

Best practice in Ireland

The Wheel is a best practice model for CSO engagement with policy. It is Ireland's largest umbrella body for civil society, and a primary focus is on delivering capacity building and skills to the 500,000 people who work and volunteer in the sector. In recent years, The Wheel has taken a more active role in public policy and advocacy on skills at the national level, alongside other CSOs. Ireland has a long tradition of partnering with civil society and the private sector in developing policy.

However, CSOs were not referenced in Ireland's National Skills Strategy 2025. So the sector energetically inserted itself into the recent consultation and review of this strategy by the OECD. As a result, civil society is now referenced as a key stakeholder in the recently published OECD report on the Irish Skills Strategy.

It is crucial for CSOs to open up lines of communication and build relationships with policymakers and officials, as well as education institutions, employers and so on. This can also lead to allies who support the CSO role. Irish experience indicates that CSOs must start working towards engagement years before the development of a National Skills Strategy happens. It is important to build effective cooperation models across sectors, that close the gap between CSOs and government.

Another strategy is building partnerships within the civil society sector, to help speak with one voice and attract other CSOs to the cause. Civil society is diverse, so CSOs must identify features that help them to be effectively involved in a skills strategy.

A major CSO contribution in the skills arena in Ireland has been providing an evidence base through independent research. Importantly, this knowledge has been framed in a way that can be understood and valued by policymakers and stakeholders.

CSO engagement with public authorities

The focus of the third session was on CSO engagement in the skills arena at the local, national and international levels. There were representatives of EARLALL – the European Association of Regional and Local Authorities for Lifelong Learning, and the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL).

Since 85% of learning during a person’s lifetime is estimated to take place outside formal education, it is imperative that there be greater recognition of the roles of non-formal and informal learning, which is often fostered by civil society, usually at the local level.

It is widely recognised that co-design and collaboration are important, including for creating optimal conditions for learning. So, it is important that a mix of organisations in terms of profiles and experiences, for example municipalities, learning providers and CSOs form an integrated learning ecosystem., and continuously invest in it.

Consultation should take place at the local, regional and national levels. But cooperation between the different levels is a must: to consider issues from the bottom to the top and from the top to the bottom can make a big difference. Further, much can be learned through the exchange of experiences in transnational cooperation. EU projects have shown that most localities and countries have the same challenges, but think in different ways and have different solutions.

UNESCO, lifelong learning and CSOs

UNESCO’s seventh International Conference on Adult Education was held in Marrakech, Morocco, in 2022. “The CONFINTEA VII Marrakech Framework for Action: Harnessing the transformational power of adult learning and education” was adopted by 144 countries and outlines key priorities and actions for adult education within a lifelong learning perspective.

According to the UIL, from the road to the conference to the adoption of the framework, civil society was key. First, CSOs assisted in mobilising governments and groups to participate in regional preparatory meetings. CSOs brought extensive adult learning experience. They also gave feedback to the framework drafting, which integrated civil society views when possible.

Traditionally UNESCO and UIL see CSOs as key partners in following up commitments made by countries, to provide ‘unfiltered’ progress reports. UNESCO asks countries to nominate delegates to submit national reports on the state of adult education and learning.

There will be space for civil society to monitor the Marrakech commitments. First, the framework is being translated into a set of indicators: CSOs will report on some of the indicators. Second, after regional follow-up conferences, communities of practice will be launched, where civil society and governments have space to discuss priorities and policies.

Some conclusions

The Brussels conference brought the public sector and civil society in dialogue. It was stressed that CSOs not only have a role in policy design and delivery, but also in monitoring what is happening on the ground, and eventually evaluating the actual results and longer-term outcomes. The importance of CSOs as service providers in skills development and lifelong learning came through clearly. Public

authorities can take advantage of the key roles CSOs can play in lifelong learning, to articulate systems that embrace the diversity of learners and learning needs.

In a world of diversity and transition, breaking down barriers between ‘skills for jobs’ and ‘skills for life’ could boost collaboration for more effective policy delivery. The policy debate should encompass all skills independently from their purpose, nature and development mode. If people are at the centre, when it goes to skills social dialogue and civil dialogue can benefit each other.

Promoting public-private-civil partnerships might help to forge common intention and language between stakeholders as well as ensure an integrated approach to skills development. Cooperation across all government, civil society, private sector and social partners will be crucial to advance the goal of massive skills development embodied in the Year of Skills.

The complexity of developing skill strategies is a challenge, due among other reasons to the range of policy domains and stakeholders it encompasses. Still, it is critical that governments engage with civil society alongside other stakeholders in designing strategies, proactively motivate CSOs to high-quality standard skills delivery, and continue engagement throughout the life of a skills strategy.

There are a multitude of understandings of skills development ‘versus’ lifelong learning, but ultimately the two are in the same policy domain and so might usefully be joined together.

The ETF will carry on using the lenses of partnerships and of resilience. The conference heard a lot about partnerships for skills strategies, delivery and evaluation, and also the skills needed for creating and operating demanding partnerships. Partnerships are necessary during a time of challenges and transition, and can be an instrument of resilience to be prepared for and navigate through transitions.

Civil society is being asked to do more and more in the skills arena. The Year of Skills is also about improvements in the financial framework for skills. There is a need to move from the logic of project funding to the logic of long-term sustainability to support skills development. Financial allocations from the EU, national budgets, and public and private sources will be vital in order to achieve the objective of moving from 37% to 60% of adults in training every year.

The ETF, in partnership with the Lifelong Learning Platform and the European Association for the Education of Adults, will continue to facilitate dialogue between civil society groups and government authorities, and to work with CSOs through the Year of Skills and beyond.