

Connecting for Non-Formal Education 2023

Organized by eemaco with the support of NGO Academy

1. What was the purpose / objectives of the event

The event was designed as an opportunity to bring together actors from the sector of non-formal education and start a debate around the subject of non-formal education. The long term general objective is to create a recurring event and eventually a community centered around it and the subject of non-formal education.

1. The main planned objectives were:
 - a. Start the ball rolling on understanding, promoting and creating opportunities for non-formal education
 - b. Focus attention, in a first stage, of specialists and people passionate about education on the subject of non-formal education
 - c. Explore ways in which non-formal education becomes an important subject in the educational debate
 - d. Generate opportunities within the smaller and wider group of participants in the 2 day event
 - e. In a way this is a pilot. No definitive answers are expected. We want to experiment, see what works and doesn't. Find out what we can do better in "Connecting for non-formal education 2024" and then 2025 etc.... with the aim of creating a community focused around systemic change on the long run.
 - f. Enjoy spending time with other people passionate about non-formal education and talk about what fills us with enthusiasm.

2. What was the structure

From the beginning Connecting for Non-Formal Education 2023 was designed as a two day event. The idea was to give participants the opportunity for in depth discussions and reflection. Our belief that good results demand time.

The first day and beginning of the second day was designed as a workshop for a limited number of participants. The second part of day 2 was designed to have the debates of day 1 opened to a larger even more diverse audience.

All participants received in advance the brief for the event, its structure as well as a series of subjects they should reflect on.

To achieve our exploratory objectives we agreed upon a series of 5 questions:

- a. What is non-formal education? / What does non-formal education mean for the beneficiary?
- b. What are best practices in terms of non-formal education?

- c. What are the opportunities that non-formal education can bring to the development of children and young people?
- d. What are the challenges & pitfalls facing non-formal education now and in the years to come?
- e. What new directions does the changing context bring for individual organizations as well as for cooperation between organizations?

The questions were analyzed through a series of lenses.

- lens (a) perceptions and beliefs
- lens (b) strategies and methods
- lens (c) challenges and barriers
- lens (d) future and innovation
- lens (e) impact and benefits
- lens (f) personal

Each question got a series of lenses allocated to it:

Question	Lense allocated to the question
What is non-formal education? / What does non-formal education mean for the beneficiary?	a, b, c, e, f
What are best practices in terms of non-formal education?	d, e
What are the opportunities that non-formal education can bring to the development of children and young people?	b, d, e
What are the challenges & pitfalls facing non-formal education now and in the years to come?	a, c, f
What new directions does the changing context bring for individual organizations as well as for cooperation between organizations?	b, d, e

The questions were discussed one by one, between the workshop participants. Participants started individually, then moved on to discussions within groups of 2-3 participants and then reunited in plenary format to debate findings. And then we moved on to the next question

The objective in the end was to come up with 4 boards that would collect ideas to be presented to the public. These 4 boards were decided upon at the beginning of day two. As a group we decided the final topics of each board (which 4 of the 5 questions will remain) and then we included on them the essential ideas that we came up the previous day. The participants divided in 4 teams and each team would be responsible for one of the questions.

During the public event we would split the invitees in 4 that would move around and debate each question / board in segments of 20-25 minutes

The public event kicked off with warm-up activities and a general introduction. It was followed then by each of the workshop participants presenting their work and organizations.

After that the public was invited to split in 4 (based on tokens they had received at the beginning) and go to one of the 4 boards (stations). There they had the chance to listen to a short presentation by the workshop participants regarding the question and findings and then were invited to react and contribute. After 25 minutes they would be invited to move to the next station.

This part of the event was extremely energetic, with people getting involved and even passionate in the debates. It was an opportunity to connect, share visions and enrich the findings with even more ideas and concepts.

This segment of the event was followed by a moment of plenary reflection and feedback.

In closing we had the pleasure of listening, via video-conference, of a keynote from Bethany Kaylor, communications manager from Girls Garage. [Girls Garage](#) is a nonprofit design and construction school for girls and gender-expansive youth ages 9-18. Founded in 2013. Girls Garage is the first-ever design and building workshop for female, non-binary and gender expansive youth in the United States. The keynote was both engaging and inspiring, with the public engaging at the end with numerous interesting questions. In closing a small networking moment allowed for further discussions to happen.

3. Workshop participants

Luiza Apostu - Rubik School, Ana-Maria Costache - AMAIS, Edina Malkiç - MIOS, Ruxandra Isailă Oprică - Fundația Agapedia, Ana Maria Roată Palade - Orășelul Cunoașterii, Cristina Petrescu - De-a Arhitectura, Lidija Sejdinoviç - Teta Pričalica, Andreea Stoica - Fun Science, Maria Țărmure - Small Academy, Ion Neculai - eematico, Marianne Mann - NGO Academy, Bethany Kaylor - Girls Garage.

4. Results

1. General overview

We managed to structure the workshop in such a way so that the debate was well focused, active, energetic and fruitful. As a result we managed to map very well the main aspects of non-formal education (Status quo, Positives, Opportunities, Issues and New Thinking). The participants came out with renewed inspiration and clarity for their vision and mission.

The workshop also laid out the premises for some initial discussions regarding further collaborations between organizations. We are among the organizations planning to follow up the event with exploratory discussions for future collaborations.

We also believe we managed to create interest for NGO Academy within some of the organizations that intend to apply to join the network. We will keep advocating beyond the event of course.

As mentioned before we also believe that some of the organizations that were not applying hands-on methods got inspired by our activity and will look for ways to start using such methods.

The structure of the workshop and the design of the public event also allowed for the second day to be more of a participative experience than just a presentation of our conclusion. The presentation was actually conceived to be a debate on 4 of the questions that the workshop participants worked on. The division of the participants in groups allowed for engaging debates that created opportunities for further development of the conclusions. It also laid the foundation for future collaborations, many contacts and business cards were exchanged.

The event also created the opportunity for coagulating some sort of community. This was one of our hidden objectives. From the feedback of the participants we get the feeling that there is interest for

further debates and most clearly for another edition of the event, next year. If we manage to make this a “tradition” we can start thinking of developing a solid community.

1. The 4 points / groups

Group 1 – What is non formal education? Question: What are best practices in terms of non-formal education?

Question: What is non-formal education? / What does non-formal education mean for the beneficiary?

Lenses: perception and beliefs, strategies and methods, challenges and barriers, impact and benefits, personal

a. Perception and beliefs

This lens helped us to agree on following points in our discussion; non–formal education is:

- **NEEDED**: both in the sense that it helps to fill in the gaps of formal education and in the sense that it is wrapped around the youth and children’s needs, creative, adaptable, and the children and the youth are in focus.
- **LESS SYSTEMATIC** – not regulated as formal education is, with transversal levels of education, after finishing one level (elementary, secondary school) one gets a diploma for future vocation.
- **FUN AND PLAYFUL** – learning is more efficient than in formal education.
- **VALUABLE** –it provides individuals with life skills, person discover its potentials, applicable knowledge, and knowledge that is there for life, proactive and creative way of learning,
- **LESS PROTOCOLAR** - comparing to formal education, with levels of education, grades, tests, ...

b. Strategies and methods

This lens helped us to agree on following points in our discussion; non–formal education is:

- **HOLISTIC** – it provides an experience of “learning how to learn”, it has democratic approach to learning, growth mindset, interdisciplinary approach and team work orientation.
- **HIGH ENGAGEMENT** - beneficiaries are highly engaged into the learning since it provides flexibility in the approach (always looking into the beneficiaries needs), it uses methods and strategies that ensured high motivation like storytelling, play roles, crafting, learning-by-doing, involving the body (dancing, sports, gesticulations) art, dialogue, etc.
- **EMPOWERMENT** – since the learning process is following the needs of beneficiaries’ non-formal education empowers, ensures the connection to children and it is not opposed to formal education but with the methods and the strategies complements the vision of the formal education.
- **EXPERIENTIAL** – there are different approaches like Social and Emotional learning, Question based learning, Inquiry based learning, project based learning, service-learning, which are the

result of following the beneficiaries' needs. For the providers of non-formal education it is experiential because programs are developed in agile format, with trials and amendments to follow the needs of the beneficiaries and to ensure the fulfillment of learning outcomes. This **makes non-formal education much quicker than formal education** in responding to changes in the context and reality of the students.

c. Challenges and barriers

This lens helped us to agree on following points in our discussion; non-formal faces the following barriers:

- **COST BARRIER** – having in mind different strategies and methods, the implementation can be costly, requiring high resources: professionals, material, space, etc.
- **NEGATIVE PERCEPTION** – in the public it is in lots of cases perceived as a superficial, more like playing activities of recreation rather than learning.
- **SYSTEM RESISTANCE** – people have resistance towards it, since it requires stepping out of the comfort zone, impact is not visible on the short term and in general as a result of the negative perception.
- **FRAGMENTATION** – different organizations offer non-formal learning and “compete” for the same population; the connection between organizations is loose or does not exist, which ensures negative or poor perception from the public as well as decreased importance in the eyes of donors.

d. Impact and benefits

This lens helped us to agree on following points in our discussion; non-formal education has the following benefits:

- **HOLISTIC** – development of cognitive, emotional, social, civic aspects of a persons.
- **COMPLEMENTARY** – it complements to the learning outcomes from the formal education
- **INTEGRATED** – focused on real life situations, concepts rather than school subjects, and bringing together in one experience concepts from several different areas of knowledge (ie - bringing together concepts from math, physics, chemistry, with a hands-on approach, to explain to children for instance how rockets work)
- **PURPOSEFUL** – it starts from the mission and needs of beneficiary.
- **UP TO DATE** – continuous updating based on the feedback and needs of the beneficiaries as well as strongly based on the scientific research - both for the knowledge it provides as well as for the methods it uses.

e. Personal view

This lens helped us to agree on following points in our discussion; non-formal education is about:

- Lifelong experiential learning
- Daring to be curious

- Personal social change – give back to the community
- Being alive
- hard to create the change
- freedom & joy

Group 2 – On positive practices in non formal education

Question: What are best practices in terms of non-formal education?

Lenses: strategies and methods, impact and benefits

We divided the practices into 2 main directions:

- Positive practices aimed at children**
 - Strategies and methods
 - Impact and benefits
- Positive practices aimed at collaborations within educational actors and at developing the practices**
 - Strategies and methods
 - Impact and benefits

Positive practices aimed at children

- Strategies and methods:
 - o Service learning
 - o Project based learning
 - o Learning by doing
 - o Experiential approach
 - o Peer to peer learning (collaborative learning)
 - o Contextual learning
 - o Adapted educational tools for all children regardless of abilities, disabilities, social background, financial means, ethnic group, gender, religion etc. – simply put, **education should adapt to all and to serve all**
 - o **Technology included in day to day learning** especially if technology can be a way of reaching more children, of adapting learning to trends, of teaching safe ways of learning by using technology, creating positive ways of understanding the potential of technology in learning
 - o 21st century skills, adapted to present
 - o Self assessment skills
- Impact and benefits
 - o Critical thinking, problem solving skills
 - **Whole development of children, autonomy**

- o Equal chances and access for all children, changing the narrative regarding those who seem different or unadaptable
- o Lowering the drop-out risk while **offering and inspiring perspective**, dreams and hope for the future
- o Resilience, adaptability, soft skills, wellbeing
- o **Empowered children, prepared for the future** and also for jobs **connected to their potential and passions**

Positive practices aimed at collaborations within educational actors and at developing the practices

- a. Strategies and methods:
 - o **Autonomy of teachers**, especially in the formal field of education, for making decisions regarding the curricula and also to be offered support and trainings to develop the educational methods according to the needs of the children and their interest
 - o The formal educational system and the non formal also should **collaborate more with experts in different fields that the children show interest in**
 - o **Local partnerships between public and private sector**, between educational institutions and administrative ones, between NGOs and schools/ institution – thus creating a network of sharing resources that all children can benefit from on a longer term
 - o Creating a network of support and database for teachers, educators, all actors connected to education, in a way that can help offer answers and resources when needed from a larger base of information coming from these parts. Like a hub of information and resources, free for all that contribute also to this. It seems like there is a pattern in the obstacles and challenges of educational actors, thus this network could connect all the little lights in the pattern and find solutions that work somewhere else in the network)
 - o **More media coverage for non formal educational system**, positive coverage that can contribute to the image of non formal methods and professionals, that can promote the benefits, the better practices, thus showing how non formal education really is and why is it important
 - o **More pre and after school programs**, as a good solution for bringing non formal education into the formal space, for complementarity
 - o Organizing workshops also with people from the formal system, bringing them together for developing educational system
 - o Constant knock-knock at doors of formal schools, from NGOs especially, and taking risks in order to have an entrance there and to get to more children – non formal education methods to be presented as a solution that can help and support teachers, that can adapt to the curricula, underlining its role in the educational system as a complementary method and expertise, rather than something to compete with
- b. **Impact and benefits:**
 - o **Sharing resources** means more resources and sustainability
 - o **Autonomy of teachers** and support in using different ways of teaching

- o **No gaps between** formal & non-formal system, as well as no gaps between children who attend public schools and private schools
- o Improving education as **a system that can be accessed by all children**
- o School will become more attractive, fun and relevant to all needs
- o Society will be finally educated in a non-condescending way while keeping an open mind and desire to improve in the benefit of people

Group 3 – On challenges and pitfalls

Question: What are the challenges & pitfalls facing non-formal education now and in the years to come?

Lenses: perceptions and beliefs, challenges and barriers, personal beliefs

Approaching the challenges from three perspectives—perception and beliefs, challenges and barriers, and personal experiences—we identified various significant issues.

Through the lens of perception and beliefs, we recognized several challenges and pitfalls.

- Many educators, both within the traditional system and beyond, **perceive themselves as lacking playfulness**, which they believe hinders their ability to incorporate more engaging and interactive methods into their classes.
- Additionally, the **scarcity of resources**, such as financial and human capital, poses a significant challenge. This scarcity often leads to individuals **spreading themselves too thin** across multiple projects, ultimately resulting in **burnout** and diminished energy.
- Furthermore, the **mental health of those in the education sector** and the difficulty in finding suitable personnel for non-formal education were identified as critical concerns. The demanding nature of non-formal education requires individuals with personal resources, genuine motivation, and the willingness to engage in inner work, making it challenging to find the right people for the job.
- Lastly, we observed **false competition both between formal and non-formal education** and among different non-formal organisations, along with a **lack of respect and recognition** for the non-formal sector within the traditional educational system.

From the perspective of challenges and barriers, two prominent issues emerged.

- Firstly, **measuring the long-term impact** and success of non-formal education **proved to be difficult**. Whether working with short-term participants or those who only engage sporadically, tracking and assessing the lasting effects of non-formal education can be challenging.
- Secondly, **bureaucracy within the traditional system** presented a significant obstacle. Despite an expressed desire to incorporate non-formal educational practices, the existing administrative responsibilities, time constraints, and limited resources hinder educators from fully integrating non-formal culture into their daily work.

- Additionally, **resistance to change within the formal education system** is a substantial challenge. Societal beliefs and comfort with the status quo often impede efforts to transform the system, necessitating extra work, stepping out of comfort zones, and challenging deeply what learning is and how it takes place.

On a personal level, each of us faces unique challenges in our daily endeavours.

- **Burnout and a lack of resilience** resulting from insufficient resources were common issues.
- **Micromanagement and excessive administrative tasks** hindered our ability to fully engage with the children.
- **The lack of institutional support** and prevailing outdated beliefs about non-formal education and its impact created obstacles when working with authorities, the formal system, and even parents.
- **Inadequate connections between non-formal organisations** and a prevailing sense of false competition impeded progress.
- Additionally, the shortage of qualified individuals prepared to unlearn and implement non-formal education practices
- Lack of implementation - there are too many ideas but just a few people are actually implementing it
- **Lack of continuity** - there are kids and people that are coming at our programmes for one time, or for a very short period of time, so we won't see the impact and how they evolve.

By comprehensively examining the challenges and pitfalls in non-formal education from various perspectives, our group sought to shed light on the pressing issues and then, we all fostered discussions around potential solutions.

Group 4 – New thinking

Question: What new directions does the changing context bring for individual organizations as well as for cooperation between organizations?

Lenses: perceptions and beliefs, challenges and barriers, personal beliefs

Strategies and Methods

- Create a **consortium of non-formal organizations** for an open dialogue, sharing of good practices, sharing of resources in order to build-up knowledge and information, connecting and supporting each other, allowing organizations to achieve more together than they could individually. It fosters cooperation, mutual benefits, and shared success, ultimately leading to a stronger and more resilient ecosystem.
- Bring **specialists** on the table. Specialists bring deep expertise and knowledge in their respective fields. They can provide children with accurate, up-to-date information, insights, and skills that go beyond what general educators may possess. On the other hand, specialists can offer unique

learning experiences that go beyond traditional classroom teaching. They can organize hands-on activities, experiments, workshops, and interactive sessions that engage children beyond traditional educational methods.

- Fulfilling the **emotional needs and well-being of children**, through a **connection** based approach, while engaging them in the learning process. When children's emotional needs are met, they feel safe, secure, and supported, creating an optimal learning environment. Emotional well-being creates a foundation for children to focus, concentrate, and actively participate in their learning. When their basic emotional needs are fulfilled, they are more open to exploring new ideas, taking risks, and engaging in critical thinking.
- **Involve children in the learning process, through real life projects**. Real-life projects provide children with opportunities to apply their knowledge and skills in authentic and meaningful contexts. Instead of learning in isolation, children can see the practical relevance and purpose of what they are learning. This hands-on approach fosters deeper understanding, critical thinking, problem-solving, and the transfer of knowledge to real-world situations.
- Guide learning through the principle of "**loving, setting limits, letting the kids be**" (a flexible approach, with a plan in mind). This principle emphasizes the importance of balancing love and support with the need for boundaries and individual autonomy.
- Have an **interdisciplinary** approach in the learning process, where children can explore topics, themes or problems by drawing connections and insights from various academic disciplines, rather than studying them in isolation. By adopting an interdisciplinary approach, educators promote a deeper and more meaningful understanding of subjects, enhance critical thinking skills, and prepare children to apply their knowledge in complex, real-world contexts.
- Promote **practice programs in companies**. This offers children invaluable opportunities for real-world learning, skill development, career exploration, networking and personal growth. By engaging in these programs, children can gain practical experiences, broaden their horizons and make informed decisions about their future educational and professional pathways.
- Promote a **teamwork based approach**, helping children develop crucial skills, such as collaboration, communication, critical thinking and problem-solving. This approach nurtures well-rounded individuals who can effectively collaborate, contribute to society and succeed in a team-oriented world.

Future and Innovation

- Promote a **hybrid and enhanced learning**, which combines traditional face-to-face education with online or technology-enhanced components. This approach offers flexibility, personalization, expanded learning opportunities, collaboration, timely feedback, multimedia engagement and the development of essential technological skills. By leveraging these benefits, hybrid and enhanced learning approaches can enhance student engagement, improve learning outcomes, and better prepare students for a digitally connected world.
- Have an **elevator pitch skillset**, which can empower children to communicate concisely, make a strong impression, build professional connections, promote ideas or projects effectively, enhance personal branding, boost confidence, and maximize time efficiency.
- Engage children through a **STEAM based approach**. The STEAM approach integrates multiple disciplines, allowing children to develop a holistic understanding of real-world problems and phenomena. It promotes connections between subjects, fostering a multidisciplinary perspective. Children gain insights into how different fields of knowledge intersect, encouraging critical thinking and a broader understanding of the world.

- Use **technology to enhance the learning** process. When utilized effectively, technology can enhance teaching and learning experiences, promote engagement, facilitate personalized instruction and prepare children for a digitally connected world.

Impact and Benefits

- Add digitalisation to all our initiatives
 - Generates a shift in mindset
 - Increases the mental health of children and educators
 - Motivates and inspires others
 - Develops critical thinking
 - Generates the well-being of people
 - Develops future adults prepared for real life
 - Sharing as a way to improve the field
2. Other outcomes
 3. Feedback forms and menti

5. Team

Manager - Ion Neculai eematico
Coordinator - Mihaela Sultana eematico
Assiting manager - Ioana Iancu eematico
Hands on Workshop - Bogdan Bălănescu eematico
Graphics - Flavia Fabian eematico
Advisor - Carolina Pascal eematico
Facilitation - Florin Ghindă
Design advisor - Andrei Carcea - Kort Marketing
Photography - Marius Lupu

6. Partners

1. The event was developed with the support of NGO Academy. The NGO Academy was founded in 2013 with the goal of strengthening the civil society sector in Central and South-Eastern Europe by providing further educational opportunities. NGO Academy is a partnership between Wirtschaftsuniveristaet Wien and Erste Foundation. As a parto of their educational efforts NGO Academy has developed the concept of Community Led Events. **Community-Led Events (CLEs)** is a funding scheme, developed by NGO Academy with the objective to enable exchange and collaboration among NGO Academy Member Organisations and other organisations and professionals in Central and South-Eastern Europe. A CLE is organised and held by one or more NGO Academy Member Organisations, with the purpose of networking, knowledge transfer, project development etc. In a call for application, NGO Academy members can apply for funding of an either closed or public event.
2. Nod Makerspace - were the providers of the venue at Mater Library, and supported us with discounted rates.
3. Perfect Simplu Coffee Shop - provided the coffee and refreshments for the public event

4. Veneto Secco - provided the refreshments for the networking event
5. Ela Bistro provided the catering for the workshop
6. International Hotel Bucharest housed our external participants.

7. Pictures

day 1 - <https://www.flickr.com/gp/eemaco/00dr0776u6>

day 2 - <https://www.flickr.com/gp/eemaco/B3J7d65301>

8. Additional resources (including presentations and other)

<https://padlet.com/floringhinda/connecting-4-non-formal-education-1omflfqxmb51bjp>

9. Authors

This document is a result of the ideas discussed and debated the participants at the July 6-th workshop:

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Andreea Stoica - Fun Science

Maria Țărmure - Small Academy

Ion Neculai - eemaco

Marianne Mann - NGO Academy

As well as valuable input from the other participants at the public event.