Why Folk High Schools Matter for Advancing SDG 4.7, and Why Their Role Should Shape the Post-2030 Dialogue

As the international community begins to look beyond the 2030 horizon, discussions about the future of education for sustainable development and global citizenship are gaining urgency. Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) Target 4.7 calls on countries to ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, human rights, gender equality, and global citizenship. While progress has been made, one important educational model remains under-recognized in global policy discussions: folk high schools.

Originating in the Nordic countries, folk high schools are non-formal educational institutions that emphasize holistic learning, civic engagement, and personal development. They typically offer residential or community-based learning environments for young people and adults, focusing less on exams and more on dialogue, participation, and lived experience. As such, they provide a powerful, practice-based approach to SDG 4.7, one that deserves greater attention in shaping future education strategies.

Folk high schools are uniquely positioned to advance SDG 4.7 because sustainability is not treated as a separate subject but embedded in the ethos and daily practices of education. Recent findings from Finnish and Norwegian folk high schools show a strong and shared commitment to sustainability across institutions, with teaching that consistently integrates human rights, environmental responsibility, and global citizenship.

In Finland, sustainability themes such as human rights, gender equality, and environmental responsibility are present in approximately 94% of schools. In Norway, institutions place particular emphasis on climate responsibility, sustainable lifestyles, and global solidarity. While the specific focus areas differ, both systems demonstrate how SDG 4.7 can be implemented comprehensively, through curricula, pedagogy, and community life.

This integrated approach stands in contrast to more fragmented models where sustainability is added as a discrete module or optional course. In folk high schools,

sustainability becomes a lived reality rather than abstract knowledge.

Pedagogy That Enables Transformative Learning

A defining feature of folk high school education is its pedagogical approach. Both Finnish and Norwegian schools rely heavily on participatory methods such as dialogue, critical reflection, and community-based learning. However, their approaches also illustrate the diversity within the model.

Finnish schools emphasize experiential and nature-based learning, futures thinking, and embedding sustainability into everyday school life. Norwegian schools, on the other hand, often prioritize project-based learning and collaboration with local communities and organizations..

Despite these differences, both approaches support what is often described as “transformative learning”, the kind of learning that changes not only what people know, but how they think and act. This is essential for achieving SDG 4.7, which goes beyond knowledge acquisition to include values, attitudes, and behavior.

Sustainability as Everyday Practice

Folk high schools also demonstrate how sustainability can be operationalized at the institutional level. Across both Finland and Norway, schools implement practical environmental measures such as waste sorting, reducing food waste, offering vegetarian options, and conserving energy.

Yet important differences in emphasis reveal complementary strengths. Finnish schools often link environmental sustainability to biodiversity, cultural landscapes, and traditional skills, integrating these into both teaching and daily activities. Norwegian schools tend to focus more on climate mitigation, energy efficiency, and sustainable food systems, including self-sufficiency initiatives.
This diversity highlights an important lesson: there is no single pathway to sustainability education. Instead, locally grounded approaches rooted in community, culture, and context can be equally effective and often more meaningful for learners.

Strengthening Social and Cultural Sustainability

Beyond environmental issues, folk high schools play a critical role in supporting social and cultural dimensions of sustainability. Finnish schools emphasize inclusion, equality, participation, and community-building, while Norwegian institutions focus strongly on student well-being, safety, and preventing social exclusion.

Both systems actively promote cultural diversity and tolerance, though challenges remain in improving accessibility, particularly in terms of language inclusion and participation structures. Addressing these gaps will be essential for ensuring that SDG 4.7 is truly inclusive and equitable.

Challenges That Reflect Broader Systemic Gaps

Despite their strengths, folk high schools face challenges that mirror wider issues in sustainability education. In Finland, limited resources, particularly staff time and funding, constrain the ability to develop and scale sustainability initiatives. In Norway, challenges are more closely linked to staff competence, motivation, and uneven prioritization across institutions.

Across both countries, there is a shared need for practical teaching materials, accessible evaluation tools, professional development opportunities, and stronger collaboration networks. These needs are not unique to folk high schools; they reflect systemic gaps in how SDG 4.7 is currently supported and implemented.

Why Folk High Schools Should Inform the Post-2030 Agenda

As discussions on the post-2030 agenda take shape, the experience of folk high schools offers valuable insights. First, they demonstrate that sustainability education is most effective when it is holistic, participatory, and embedded in everyday life. Second, they show that diverse pedagogical approaches can achieve shared goals, allowing for flexibility and context-specific adaptation. Third, they highlight the importance of learning environments that foster community, agency, and active citizenship.

Importantly, folk high schools also remind us that education for sustainable

development is not only about preparing individuals for the future, it is about enabling them to shape it. Their emphasis on dialogue, critical thinking, and collective action aligns closely with the transformative vision at the heart of SDG 4.7.

Moving Forward

To fully realize the potential of SDG 4.7 in the years beyond 2030, policymakers and educators must broaden their understanding of where and how meaningful learning happens. Non-formal institutions like folk high schools should be recognized as key actors in this landscape, not peripheral ones.

Strengthening their role will require increased investment, stronger policy recognition, and more systematic collaboration at national and international levels. It will also require integrating their practices and insights into broader education frameworks.

As living communities of learning, folk high schools demonstrate that sustainability can be taught not just as content, but as practice, through everyday choices, shared experiences, and collective responsibility. In doing so, they offer a compelling model for the future of education, one that should play a central role in shaping the post-2030 SDG 4.7 dialogue.

This article was written by Rilli Lappalainen, CEO of Bridge 47, and developed as part of the Building Bridges for Sustainable Development project.

The study was conducted as part of the Building Bridges project (https://www.kansanopistot.fi/suomenkansanopistoyhdistys/kehitamme/hankk…), an Erasmus+ initiative funded by the European Union and carried out in cooperation between Finnish and Norwegian folk high schools. The project focuses on advancing sustainable development and global citizenship (SDG 4.7) by supporting the sharing of good practices, providing comparative insights, and promoting the long-term development of sustainability work in folk high schools.

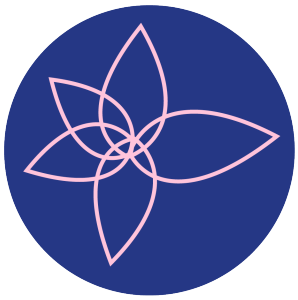






Co-funded by
the European Union

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