



## INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON COLLABORATION IN INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION PARTNERSHIPS FOR DEMOCRACY AND SUSTAINABILITY

11-12 December 11-12, 2024, online via Zoom

– Documentation –

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The conference was organized by Verein Niedersächsischer Bildungsinitiativen VNB e. V. and Learn2Change – Global Network of Educational Activists.



Documentation by Friederike Alts

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## Summary

The conference **Shaping.Future.Together – Online Conference on Collaboration in International Education Partnerships for Democracy and Sustainability** took place online from December 11 and 12 2024. Around 50 persons from diverse countries participated. Its main theme was collaboration in international education partnerships for democracy and sustainability.

The online conference opened a space in which people from the Global South and North exchanged views on how their joint educational work must develop further in view of current global challenges. The focus was on the impact and role of structures, power relations, trust and common values in international educational networks generally and the Learn2Change network specifically. Besides discussing challenges within educational partnerships, participants also created visions of an educational network for democracy and sustainability in the future. Participants brought their rich and diverse perspectives into discussions in breakout sessions and the plenary. Expert presentations provided further inputs for discussions. This was complemented by longer-term members of the network sharing their experiences and insights into the specific structures of the Learn2Change network.

**The following questions guided the conference:**

- What are the success factors to keep an international education partnership alive?
- What is the frame of an international partnership that supports democracy and sustainability? How do we relate to the SDGs? What could be our common goals and purposes?
- How can we build deep trust, what hinders us? What influence do existing power structures and colonial continuities have on our work in international partnerships?

## Program Overview

**Facilitation: Timo Holthoff, WELT.BEZIEHUNG.BILDEN, [www.welt-beziehung-bilden.org](http://www.welt-beziehung-bilden.org)**

Wednesday, 11 <sup>th</sup> December 2024	Thursday, 12 <sup>th</sup> December 2024
2-2:15pm Welcome	2-2:10pm Welcome
2:15-2:35pm Activation and Warm up	2:10-2:30 Activation and recap of day 1: Plenary and breakout sessions
2:35-2:45pm Orientation of the program	2:30-2:45 Dream journey
2:45-3pm Faces of Learn2Change – Stories of the Network	2:45-3pm Individual work: Visioning an education network for democracy and sustainability in the future
3-3:45pm Discussing International Education Partnerships for change in breakout sessions and the plenary	3-3:20pm Breakout sessions to share visions
3:45-4pm BREAK	3:20-3:40pm Plenary discussion
4-4:25pm Impulse Ruby Hembrom – postcolonial perspectives on the Sustainable Development Goals	3:40-3:55pm BREAK
4:25-4:40pm Resonance groups to discuss impulse	3:55-4:20 Impulse Ali Al Nasani: Trust and power relations in an international education network
4:40-5pm Plenary session, Q&A about impulse	4:20-4:35 Resonance groups in breakout sessions
5-5:10pm BREAK	4:35-4:50 Plenary session, Q&A about impulse
5:10-5:30 Moderated plenary discussion with short impulses about common values in international networks	4:50-5pm BREAK
5:30-5:45pm Open discussion	5-5:40pm Moderated plenary discussion with short impulses about trust and (in)equality in Learn2Change network
5:45-6pm Reflection and closing remarks	5:40-6pm Reflection and wrap up

## Wednesday, 11 December 2024

### Welcome

Facilitator Timo Holthoff welcomed the participants to the conference. On the first day roughly 40 participants joined from five continents. Countries included for example: Nepal, Portugal, Afghanistan, Nigeria, Estonia, Germany, Ghana, Canada, Chile, Uganda, South Africa, Hong Kong and Tunisia. Most participants worked in informal education and teaching, but there were also schoolteachers, social workers and academics.

Gabriele Janecki, coordinator of the Learn2Change network, welcomed the participants in the name of the Verein Niedersächsischer Bildungsinitiativen e. V. (VNB). After introducing the work of the VNB in aiming at strengthening civil society structures and contribute to global sustainability, she emphasized the importance of international education partnerships in the light of the multiple crisis the planet is facing. Believing in the transformative power of education towards democracy and sustainability set the basis to found Learn2Change (L2C), a global network of educational activists 10 years ago.

Afterwards she handed over to Maissara Saeed, who is part of the international steering group of the network and active in Umbaja e. V., an organisation in Germany aiming mainly to empower the Sudanese diaspora in Germany in Europe for a democratic and sustainable transition of Sudan. Maissara reminded the participants of the catastrophic war in Sudan and that many people there are losing their lives and hopes for the future. He then reminded participants of the powerful mission that L2C started off with 10 years ago build connections between educational activists and civil society actors from all over the world. With the goal of creating spaces for collective action and collaborating and exploring how we can shape the world and learn how to bridge our differences, he invited participants to bring their whole selves into the space and inspire, support and learn from each other.

### Activation of Participants and Expectations for the Conference

The participants were invited to engage with the “Making roots Meditation” to engage their full body and embrace the connections with each other. Afterwards participants went into break-out sessions of three people where each person answered the following 2 questions: What is worrying me right now? What is giving me hope?

Expectations and own contributions for the conference shared on Mentimeter and in the Chat.

#### Expectations: What do I wish for and hope to learn from this conference?

- New impulses for my work
- New ways for democracy
- Learning about global responsibility collaboration to reduce inequalities
- Concrete action plan/activities to implement as a network.
- Work on dismantling power relations in international partnerships
- Pragmatic Self - development progress
- New tools for my work
- How to sustainable international relations without conflict
- a different perspective

- Building solidarity
- to extend my network
- Take inspiration and learn new Educational solutions adopted by other individuals.
- And on the side to build networks
- Bridging democratic & societal gaps through sustainable education
- develop sustainable educational trends towards achieving international partnerships for local development
- How to address a large number of out of school children and improve learning outcomes across the Globe
- keeping networks sustainability
- How to address issues of out of school children and improve learning outcomes
- Learning about global responsibility collaboration to reduce inequities
- How to make solidarity stronger than Business as usual ..
- How to improve learning outcomes
- Exchanges of experiences and knowledge about contextualities of democracy and sustainability in practice
- Sharing experiences.

**Own contributions: What gift do I offer for this gathering?**

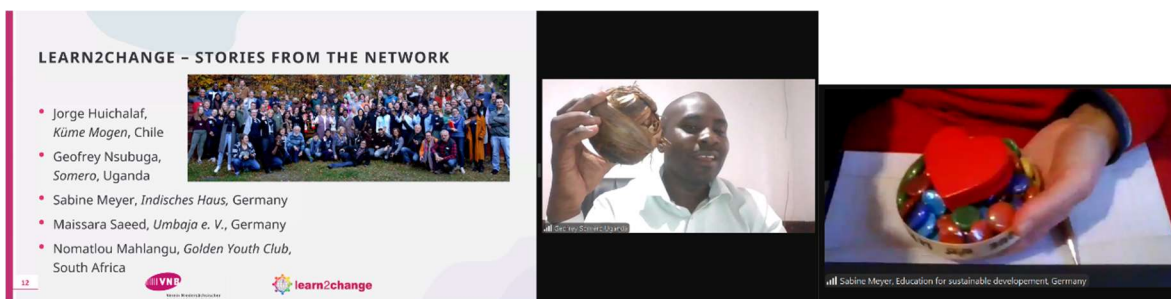


## Faces of Learn2Change – Stories from the Network

Five members of the network presented their stories and relations to the Learn2Change – Network of Educational Activists.

**Jorge Huichalaf** is a representative of the Mapuche in Chile. He works as primary school teacher and is co-founder of the cooperative bank Küme Mogen. He also manages a cooperative for healthy foods. He expressed his strong emotions towards people working in the Learn2Change network, who are inspiring and provided opportunities to learn about different perspectives. His connection to L2C started in 2015 through a friend when he made a trip to Europe and learned a lot about the schools' systems and tools there. Having connections around the world enables him to visit different institutions. In closing his impulse Jorge stressed the difficulties in his life and work because politics don't recognize the Mapuche as a people.

**Geoffrey Nsubuga** is the national coordinator and founding member of Somero Uganda. He carried a handwoven ball made from banana fibres to tell the story of the L2C network in a deeply human way. In Uganda such a ball is usually made for children to play with. It fosters connection and carries love and commitment to the makers and stands for transforming simple materials into something meaningful. This mirrors how international networks are formed: with dedication, passion, purpose and understanding that every individual matters. The different fibres of the ball symbolise togetherness, because the more woven together the fibres are, the stronger the ball gets. Furthermore, the shared joy of playing with the ball represents a network built with love aiming to make a difference for the greater good. The beauty lies in the roots of the ball because its making has been passed down from past generations and it celebrates local goods and personal uniqueness. Finally, Geoffrey emphasises the importance of supporting each other, embracing uniqueness, shared strength and joy.



**Sabine Meyer** is an educator from Germany. She runs an organisation called “Indisches Haus” and is active in transformative learning and education in and out of schools. She valued the dialogue and sharing of stories in the network. As a symbol for what she had learned about her own and other countries, she showed a small treasure box with colourful marbles. These are meant to represent the diverse individuals in the network. Our shared humanity and struggle for a sustainable future unite us more than our differences can ever divide us. Despite being a small group of people, we have the privilege to talk to and learn from each other. We might have different opinions and perspectives but share a vision. In the end, Sabine invited new people to contribute to the treasure box.

**Maissara Saeed** joined the L2C network in 2015. He was forced to leave his country because of the political situation and lack of security. He explained his feeling of having left his soul and mind in Sudan. Being in Germany created a new soul, mind and life which led him to having two souls and



minds in his body. Through L2C Maissara got the feeling that these two souls, minds and lives could come together again and create a unity in his body. He underlined the importance of L2C for supporting migrants from all different countries and building peace in his home country.

**Nomatlou Mahlangu** from the Golden Youth Club in South Africa is a passionate community activist who works closely with women, youth and marginalized groups. She came to L2C via her connections to the organization Peer Leader International. In the Learn2Change network, she got opportunities to express herself, moderate and facilitate workshops, meet new people and build relationships. Nomatlou is part of L2C because it aligns with her values, it empowers her to address global challenges and make a difference locally and globally.

### International Education Partnerships for change

After a break participants were assigned to breakout sessions with 5-6 people to discuss the following questions and collect their main points on a Flinga Board.

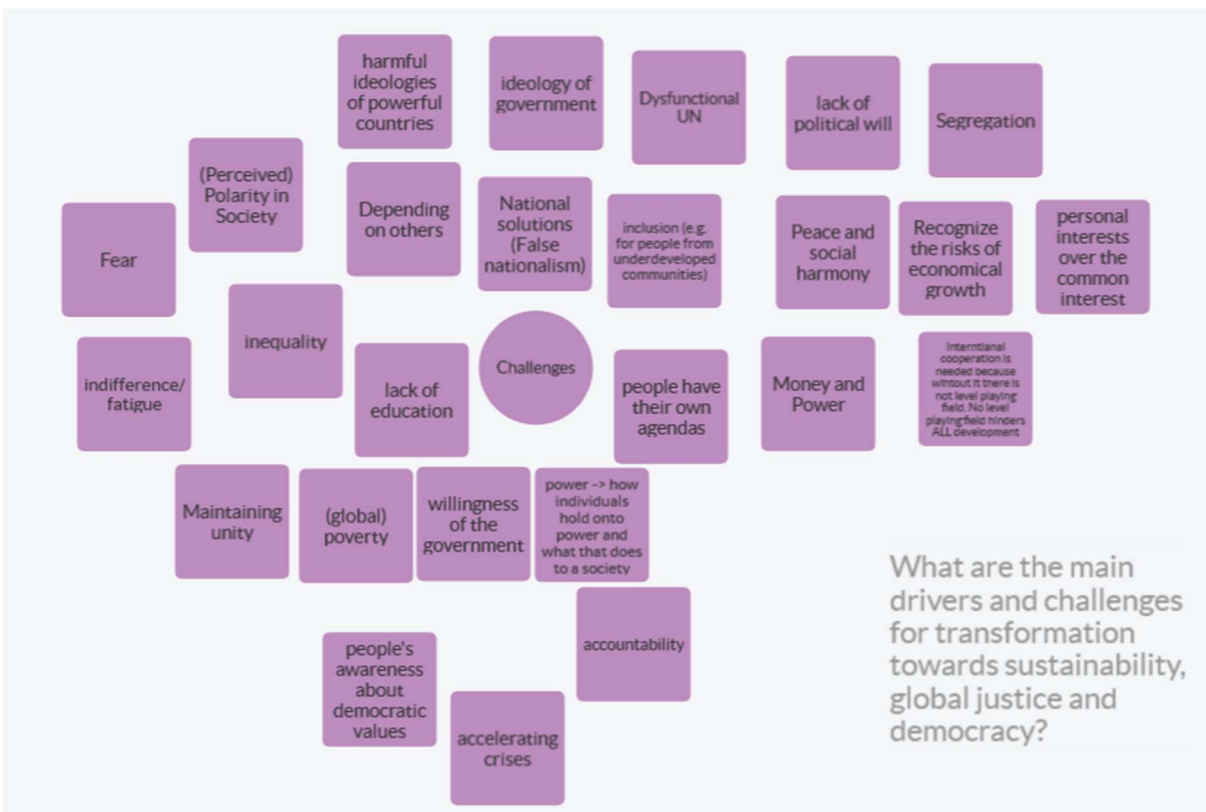
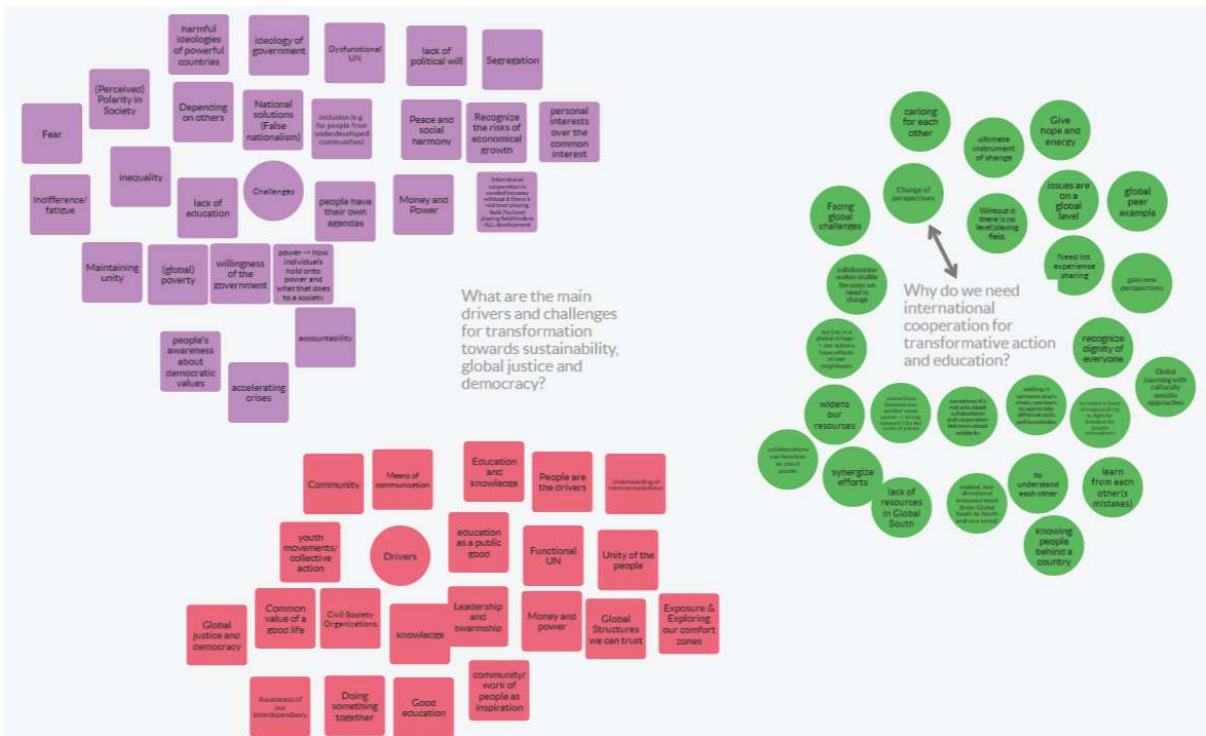
- What are the main drivers and challenges for transformation towards sustainability, global justice and democracy?
- Why do we need international cooperation for transformative action and education?

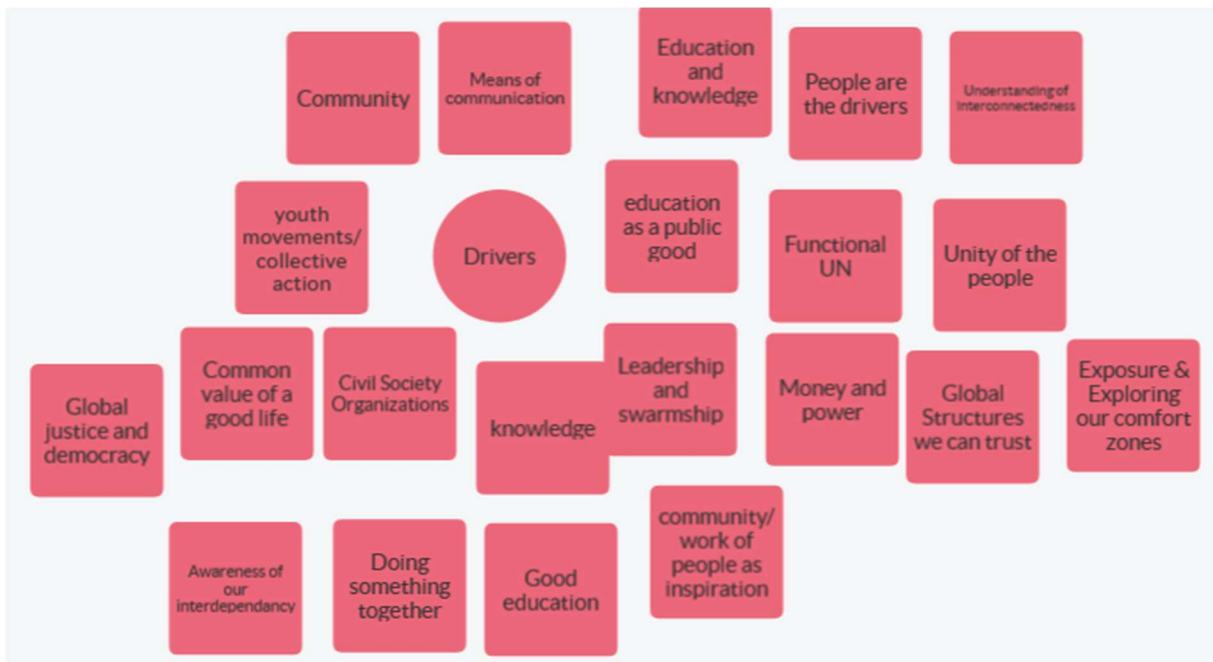
Afterwards all participants discussed the contributions on the Flinga Board, further points and open questions in the plenary.

One participant brought up the question why money and power were located as a challenge on the Flinga board, to which another participant responded that it is the root of development, and its presence or absence can have a huge influence on the outcome of projects.

A participant from the Global South called for the need to rethink empowerment. It does not necessarily need to be from Global North to Global South but can also be the other way around, for example when people from Sudan or Syria share their stories and knowledge on how to fight for freedom and freedom of others, which can create a sense of responsibility also in Germany. The participant continued that nationalism gives people an excuse to ignore the dignity and freedom fights of other people. They emphasised that empowerment goes into both directions and that we are all responsible. Another participant continued this discussion by bringing up concepts of leadership and swarmship. Leaders, most of whom old males, often created problems. This is contrasted by the idea of thinking like swarms of fishes or birds where always another individual is at the front and individuals take over different roles within a swarm. The participant suggested to learn from this, that there are many leaders at the same time who have different functions. Furthermore, leaders can change. Lastly, a participant highlighted that through seeing faces behind different countries through such a conference and the L2C network in general could foster developing care for each other and global issues affecting different countries.









## Impulse Ruby Hembrom: Leaving no one behind: the litmus test for the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

**Ruby Hembrom** is an Adivasi cultural documentarian and publisher. She currently does her PhD at the London School of Economics in the Social Policy department. She is also co-founder of Adivaani. In her talk she critically examined the SDGs from a postcolonial perspective and proposes alternative views on climate action.

Firstly, SDGs are not acknowledging the deeply and divided human society. While they claim to “Leave no one behind”, Ruby asked who was left behind to determine the 17 goals. She brought up the example that in India big corporations, responsible for the irresponsible extractivism in lands of indigenous and marginalized populations, were invited to discuss the SDGs. She questioned how these entities can have the moral or social right to decide how the sustainable development goals should be implemented? This then continued that frameworks of global action, as powerful, well-meaning and inclusive as possible in the articulations of what they should be, are conversations that take place in ivory towers, by the powerful and privileged. While the marginalized and the discriminated against, are talked about, and their issues discussed, they’re not consulted or share a seat at the deciding table. Furthermore, while they are supposed to be the beneficiaries of the SDGs, its phrasing suggests that they are the problem. So, when Goal 1 says ‘No poverty’, it clearly attacks the people who are poor, and not the mechanisms that propel poverty and create unequal socio-economic societies. Hence, Ruby calls for alternative narratives, where our vocabulary from the bottom addresses the oppressive system: How about instead of ‘No poverty’ we use ‘End capitalism’ or ‘End wealth accumulation in a few hands’. How about instead of ‘quality education’ we say: ‘Honour traditional knowledge systems’ or ‘Learn from lived wisdom and experiences’? She underlines the need to point out the roots of the problem and demand accountability.

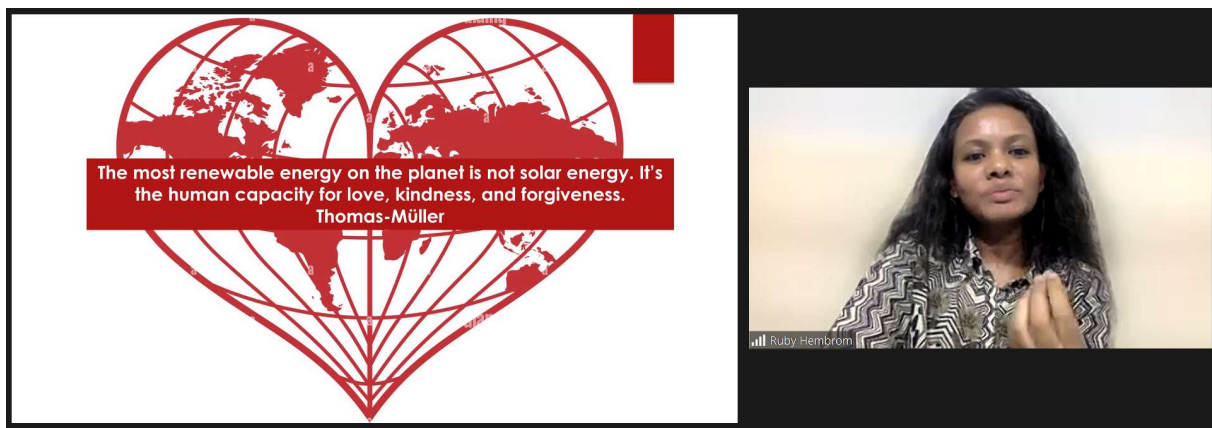
The SDGs are read as ‘aspirational’, hence for the agenda to be realised is contingent upon the commitment to action of member states and allied parties. However, for many, these SDGs read like a catalogue of the multidimensional inequalities and inequities in the world, and of the gaps in the human possibilities to simply live with essential needs met. Ruby continues by presenting a UN framework that key actors can use to accelerate progress towards the leave no one behind goal. This framework of change is driven by three key actions: Examine, Empower, and Enact. The model suggests that the disadvantages people face can be understood through the analysis of five factors: the discrimination they face; where they live (geography), socio-economic status; how they are governed; and vulnerability to shocks, such as being disproportionately exposed to the impacts of the climate collapse, natural hazards, violence, war, conflict, displacement, and economic downturns.

After that Ruby centred her own location in Adivasi communities, an Indigenous people from India. They are disproportionately impacted by the climate crisis because they maintain the closest ties to their natural environment. Most mainstream responses, approaches and solutions look at the crises as external to them, while the Adivasi people see themselves and the collapse as being part of the eco-system. This externalization translates to a distancing of responsibility and accountability, that allows fossil fuel companies to downplay their role in the climate crisis. Adivasi people are pushed away from their lands, often for extractivism activities but sometimes even under the guise of conservation. This displacement leads to a loss of traditional lifestyles and knowledge systems but also reduces possibilities for Adivasi people to engage in environmental protection. However, Ruby raises the question how Adivasis with fragile or no relationships with the land and their traditional knowledge can help restore the ecosystem, when capitalism and extractivism continue as usual. She

finds this expectation misplaced and paternalistic. Adaptation, and climate resilience, and the expectation to adopt new ways of living, are condescending and a mockery for marginalised peoples and communities, whose intergenerational, enduring struggles compounded with the emotional burdens of the climate crises, tells us that this is a feature of their existence.

Ruby links this to internal resistance of marginalized communities which is mainly about survival and coping mechanisms. Focussing on empowerment often overlooks the true struggles they face, assuming they will survive regardless, which justifies policies of abandonment and allows climate aggressors to avoid accountability. The external work of resilience highlights how solutions like adaptability are tied to wealth and bargaining power, making them inaccessible to the marginalized who cannot simply make lifestyle changes or build protective measures. Ultimately, these disparities in resilience represent tipping points that expose the inequalities in how climate impacts are experienced and managed.

We must enflame ourselves to interpret the goals to mean something personal to us, to our immediate realities and surroundings, and find small replicable, actions that we're proud to endorse, defend and safeguard. Actions that are grounded in such personal, relatable convictions are the ones that you'd commit to unflinchingly. Furthermore, transforming the world comes from centring the experiences from the margins, registering the voices and protests of the bottom, the left behind percentage, because when we imagine and build for the margins, we cover everyone, including the centre. *Just* adaptation is—or should be—about prioritizing vulnerable communities, and climate accountability is about regaining our collective humanity, acknowledging the skewed nature of impacts. In a polycrisis world - hope is a right we need to defend.



## Plenary Session Q&A

After discussing the impulse in short break-out sessions, the participants shared their main take-aways and questions in the plenary.

The first question was how to address obscene wealth and which role tax systems could play. Ruby responded that the rich are stuck with a poverty mindset, thinking they will never have enough, which is not something that happens in indigenous communities. She agreed that this topic will get more and more relevant, because in 10 years we might have the first trillionaire on the planet while at the same time many more people fall into poverty. Ruby emphasised that tax justice needs to be acknowledged more but its institutionalization will be difficult because rich people have been massively protected by governments in the past. Furthermore, she criticised that poorer people working in service jobs often bear the burden of taxes. Nevertheless, because the system is not working, we must keep trying and put in the effort to hold people accountable.

The next participant raised concerns about achieving the SDGs by 2030 given there are only a few years left. He asked what might happen after the SDGs, if it will just metamorphose into another political framework. Afterwards, the participant, who comes from the Global South, explained that in his county many young people can't dream of a future and educational opportunities are lacking. He valued the SDGs because they help holding countries accountable.

Ruby answered with a counter question, whether we act because of global agendas or because we want to fight inequalities. She thinks that we will continue our work and holding people accountable. This is challenging because there is an agenda to keep people deprived and deliberately marginalized. However, we do what we do because we want a better world. Summed up, global agendas will keep changing but the core to change is people's mindsets to fight for dignity for all, keep problematising structures. But Ruby admits that she also does not have all the answers.

Lastly, one participant underlined that development starts with the way how we develop our children. Hence it is important to focus our energy on children instead of on our current forms of leadership.

## Moderated plenary discussion

After a break, three network members gave discussion impulses responding to the following questions:

- (Why) do we need a common compass as a basis for international collaboration?
- Are the SDGs a suitable political and value framework for our common work?
- Which alternative frameworks / philosophies can serve as a shared compass?
- Which frameworks matter and work for you?
- Are the SDGs a suitable framework to represent our shared values in the network?

**Joseph Kenson Sakala** is an educational educator and activist from Malawi, who co-founded YSD. He started his impulse by underlining the importance of agreeing on shared values, because we need guidance and something that holds us together. However, it can still work to inform local actions. Joseph pointed out the challenge to integrate people coming from different backgrounds and having different experiences and therefore finding a framework and philosophies in which people find themselves represented but which is also practical. He introduced the philosophy of Ubuntu which focusses on communities of people and embraces diversities and dynamics of each other. He suggested to frame the SDGs in the thinking of Ubuntu, where every person is fully represented.



Jospeh called for putting humanity at the same table and instead of thinking about our individual interests, put first what humanity needs at large. He concluded by highlighting embracing diversity without classifying who is more capable over who is more vulnerable.

**Julia Wältring** works in transformational and global learning for VEN e. V. Germany. She positioned her impulse from a perspective of a German NGO that works for global justice. In her opinion, the SDGs are a good tool for her work but not the only one. She criticized that the SDGs are based on very analytical and efficiency-driven thinking which does not consider the complexities of the world and often neglects looking for alternatives. Through Audre Lorde, Julia introduced power relations and admits that the VEN is somehow the masters house and uses the master's tools because of having to ask for funding from the government. She raised the question how we can change the system while being trapped in it? As an organization the VEN has the responsibility to put the SDGs into practice but at the same time communicate other perspectives also to donors etc..

**Gilbert Kofi Germain** has founded the Young and Lonely Foundation in Ghana. His organization supports women and children through providing quality education in a charitable school project and creating economic opportunities in the communities. He stressed that agreeing on common values is essential for educational work as it can serve as a moral and practical compass for ensuring equity and unity among diverse actors. However, values should not be imposed but co-created to embrace the richness of diverse cultures. Gilbert thinks of the SDGs as a vital framework that also must be criticized. He proposes concepts of Sankofa and Ubuntu to complement the SDGs, because they stress interconnectedness and communal progress. Sankofa teaches the value of looking in the past to inform the present and future. This can emphasize learning from indigenous knowledge systems and ensure that global goals are not just imposed but contextualized to empower communities. Overall, Gilberts thinks it is important to foster dialogue and mutual understanding. Through adaptive strategies rooted in cultural context we can create an equitable and transformative education system.

## Open Discussion

The three inputs were followed by an open discussion with all participants. Initial prompts were: What has resonated with you? Do you have different angles or strong contradictions?

The first contribution criticized the approach of creating a new system due to big companies that have lobbied their way into the system. Instead, the participant called for being present e.g. at conferences about the SDGs and not leaving the place to the abusers. The next participant remembered an earlier L2C conference where the image of a volcano came up: There is something bubbling in all of us which needs a channel to come out. The SDGs are at the upper end of the crate. It may not be where our fire comes from, but they can serve as a tool to find common words. Another contribution followed up on that saying that we use the SGDs in a very pragmatic way for political advocacy to urge governments to fulfil them. However, the SDGs are not the only framework out there.

## Reflection and Check-Out

The first conference day ended with a brief check-out, asking participants to reflect how they are feeling now and comparing it to their feelings in the beginning.



## Thursday, 12 December 2024

The second day started with welcoming participants into a unique space with people from all over the globe. After the safety and technical issues were repeated, the facilitator, Timo Holthoff, presented and “Ode to International Educational Cooperation” written by Chat GPT with buzzwords like: sustainability, transformation, democracy, justice, partnership, equality, power gap, solidarity, decolonization, alliance and SDGs

### **Ode to International Educational Collaboration**

In the realm where knowledge flows like a river wide,  
We gather as one, with hearts open and eyes bright,  
A tapestry woven with threads of sustainability,  
Transforming minds, igniting dreams, a shared light.

Through the lens of democracy, we seek to empower,  
In classrooms and communities, justice takes its stand,  
A partnership forged in the spirit of equality,  
Bridging the power gap, hand in hand, we expand.

In solidarity, we rise, voices united and strong,  
Decolonization of thought, breaking chains of the past,  
An alliance of nations, diverse yet aligned,  
Together we strive, our vision steadfast.

With the SDGs as our guiding stars in the night,  
We cultivate futures where all can thrive,  
In this sacred journey of learning and growth,  
We nurture the seeds of hope, keeping dreams alive.

So let us celebrate this noble quest,  
For in education’s embrace, we find our way,  
A global community, bound by a common goal,  
In collaboration, we flourish, come what may.

**Geofrey Nsubuga** and **Sabine Meyer** presented a short recap of the main take-aways of the first day.

For an activation the participants were sent into break-out sessions to exchange about the following questions:

- How are you today?
- What is still on your mind from the first day?
- What emerged since yesterday?

An overview of the programme of the second day was presented.

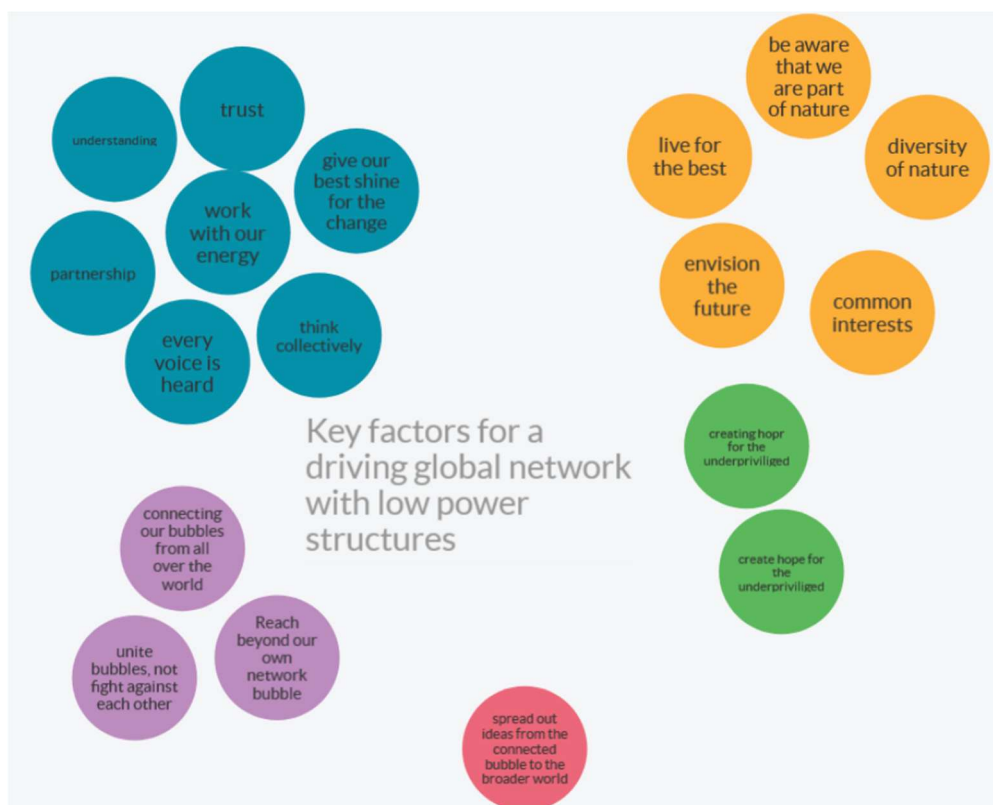
## Dream journey

Afterwards **Sabine Meyer** took the participants on a dream journey. She invited the participants to imagine the future in all its aspects, personal, as a society and planetary and encouraged them to find the courage and curiosity for that future. At the end she called participants back to the present and asked them to write down where they see seeds for this future today and what advice their future self would give to their present self from experiencing the future. The dream journey inspired the following task.

## Visioning global educational network in the future

The participants took time to draw their individual sketches about their vision of a global educational network in the future. These drawings were then shared in small break-out sessions. In the plenary important aspects of a future network were collected and discussed and documented on a Flamingo board.

### Key factors for a thriving global network that contributes to sustainability and democracy in our world



In addition to the Flamingo board, the following points were discussed: An important aspect mentioned was creating hope for the future and the younger generation to be productive for the future, like creating opportunities for underprivileged children that e.g. can't go to school. Envisioning the future would need to be critical and focus on justice instead of envisioning a future that is a continuity from the past. Relating to the terms of understanding and partnership, one participant was reminded of the biblical story of the Tower of Babel where people aimed to build a tall tower to reach God in

heaven. After God made them speak different languages, they were scattered but started new communities. Another participant expanded on this idea by bringing up thinking in bubbles. It would be important to connect our bubbles all over the world, because there is a lot of pressure on each bubble, and they could be stronger if they were combined. Additionally, the bubbles could still split up and spread out after they are united.

The next contribution brought up the image of the restoration tree. The experience from the past 10 years is represented in the energy from the soil, trust is important to make the tree/network strong, and network members that have died are represented in fallen leaves.

After that, a participant described their utopia as having empowered people, people who were hungry got fed and people would come together for common interests.

Then, another participant spoke about diversity of nature and that humans are part of nature. The vision would be to integrate voices from nature into local context and into our work as well with the aim to foster connections between people through strong connections to the natural world.

### **Impulse Ali Al-Nasani: Overcoming history and building fair structures together: Trust & Power Relations in an International Education Network**

After a break, **Acting Director at EIRENE** presented an impulse about overcoming power structures in an international education network.

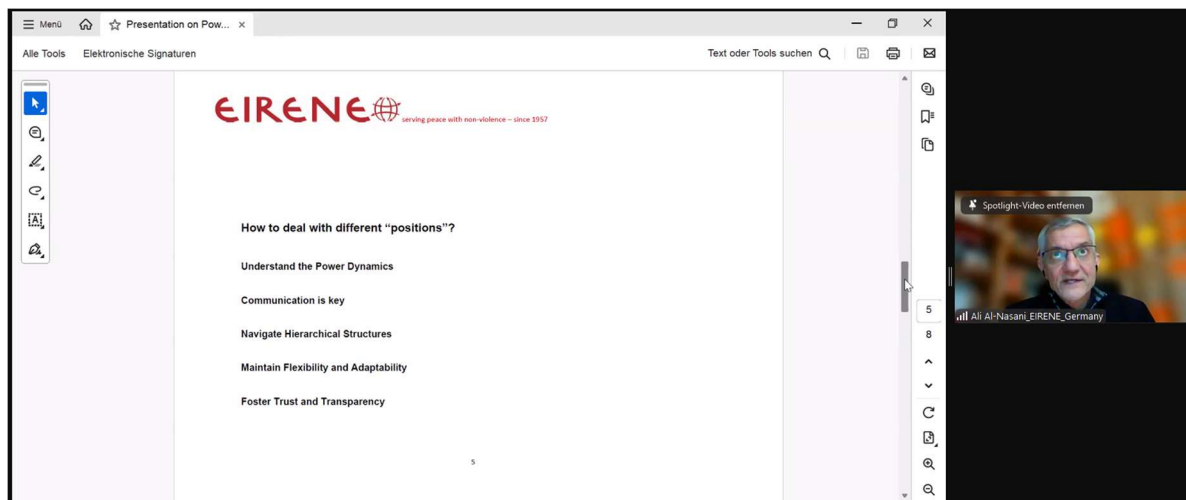
Ali started by introducing EIRENE and its work. The organization does peace work and was established in 1957 in the US and established branches in Germany, the Netherlands and Switzerland shortly after. Today the main pillars of the German branch are offering volunteer services in Germany but also abroad, e.g. in the US, Costa Rica, Belgium or Uganda. The Civil Peace Service focusses on government funded projects in Costa Rica and the Sahel Region. The Project Great Neighbours is a migrant project in Neuwied which offers support to migrants in different languages. It includes peer-to-peer support, workshops on learning and unlearning biases, stereotypes and racism.

#### **How to deal with power relations in an international network?**

Seven years ago, EIRENE entered a process of being sensitive to racism and colonial structures. Before the process started the staff was mainly *white* and German, now there is greater diversity also in the projects abroad with the majority of experts in projects abroad coming from the region. Ali said that it is important to acknowledge and understand the existence of power imbalances due to financial opportunities, access and other things. The goal of the process is to promote inclusivity and give equal space to all voices in decision-making processes. For example, in recruitment this process can be time-consuming and challenging because of the technical setup. But for EIRENE this is an effort they want to make. Furthermore, the decentralization of leadership to distribute power and responsibilities is crucial, e.g. that people in projects can take decisions without always having to feedback to headquarters. Reflexivity and self-awareness are encouraged, e.g. through doing a power analysis that looks at needs and power structures from different points of view in the organization. Lastly, Ali stressed that EIRENE tries to create a shared vision with partner, because the time has ended where visions and values are imposed on partners.

#### **How to deal with different “positions”?**

In order to deal with different positions, it is important to understand power dynamics, sources of power and hierarchy imbalances and acknowledge that there are different power structures. Communication is key to create transparency and avoid misunderstandings, hence EIRENE encourages communication between partner organizations themselves as well. To share information and spread knowledge they publish publications in languages of partner countries (English, French, Spanish). Navigating hierarchical structures is difficult but trying to focus on formal agreed processes and creating communication channels can help with that. Nevertheless, this needs time and resources. Overall maintaining flexibility and adaptability is important to be able to learn from each other. Developing long-term partnerships can help fostering trust and transparency and makes project planning more predictable.



### **How is an international network affected by colonialism?**

Perceptions and mindsets still affect the network through western patronizing, which is based on the idea that western models of governance etc. should apply everywhere or at least to the partner organizations. This goes along with cultural imperialism and insensitivity which undervalues local knowledge and not taking enough time to understand local history and social context. While people working at EIRENE might assume to be the good people, they are still subjected to biases because they grew up in a colonial society. The continuation of dependency is another aspect of colonialism in EIRENE's international network. As long as money goes from Germany to partner countries there is always the risk of dependency and resource control through a donor driven agenda. An example of overcoming this would be to give funds to an organization without prescribing a project and only giving some sort of orientation. To do this EIRENE raised funds instead of using German government money. Lastly, institutional biases might also push a western agenda, although that might not be of interest of the local population: "We cannot eat program plans".

### **How can such a network help to break down power structures and effects of (post)colonialism?**

One approach to overcome these structures would be to empower local voices by giving them channels and access to decision-making processes. Supporting local leadership is crucial to shift power from external forces to communities. One way could be to try to give as many decisions as possible to local partners. Furthermore, challenging unequal power structures as soon as becoming aware of them is important to deconstruct colonial stereotypes. Therefore, marginalized groups should be centred in decision-making processes and planning. Here Ali notes that there is room for

improvement to consider intersectional identities more. Lastly, advocating for an agenda of decolonization and a policy change in Germany is important.

Overall, such a process to look at the organisation's structures and features that are rooted in racism and colonialism is challenging and was met with resistance in the organization. So far, the process took seven years but it is not finished. EIRENE has published their experiences in several languages: <https://eirene.org/publikation/gemeinsam-rassismus-ueberwinden-eirene-magazin-sonderausgabe>

After the impulse participants were sent into breakout sessions in small groups to talk about the following questions:

- What did I not understand?
- What impressed/surprised me?
- What do I take away?
- What is my biggest question or remark?

### **Plenary Session Q&A to Impulse talk**

Next, the participants had the opportunity to ask questions to Ali. One participant brought up that it should be common practice in every educational organisation to address colonial continuities, however Ali responded that it is important not to underestimate the effort that such a process takes in terms of time, money and resources. Furthermore, the process is not finished, and it is impossible to undo effects of 500 years of colonialism and racism in 7 years.

Another participant asked for aspects of cultural colonialism and referred to how in Chile Indigenous People, like the Mapuche, are not respected and governments would not respect a treaty. Therefore, they were wondering if different cultures, like Germany might respect the countries that they colonized more. However, Ali doubted that that would be the case for Germany, because they did very cruel things which are not fully acknowledged by politicians. Additionally, Ali underlined that Indigenous People cannot wait for respect to be given to them voluntarily but that they must claim and demand it.

The next participant requested more information about effective ways to overcome internal resistance in the organisation. EIRENE uses consensus decision-making, which takes a lot of time, can be nerve wrecking but is the only way to get everybody on board and find solutions to move forward. Additionally, it is important to continue to raise awareness for old and new staff members and be open to the continuity of the process and learning experiences.

A participant raised the concern of discovering true interests of leaders and applicants, as they might pretend to care during recruiting face but will change after they have got the job. The participant asked how to determine interests of people you work with. Ali said that while it is important to learn from mistakes, mistakes regarding discrimination should be avoided. He suggested to determine interests through ongoing communication and underlined to listen to the needs and voices of the partner organisation.

After that another participant asked how to manage different resources and capacities in different countries and still ensure a balance where everyone is equally represented. Ali responded that one way would be to try to provide funds for technology and capacity building to empower partner organisation according to their needs. Also, aiming to co-create an agenda with the partner organisation to define needs and ways to support the fulfilment of needs. One participant added in

the chat that there are several axes of contribution and different countries have strength in different areas. They summed up: Money is but one of a thousand of axis. Why should one axis lead?

### **Plenary discussion: Building trust and equality in an unequal world**

After a break the participants were invited to listen to three impulses concerning the following three questions and afterwards contribute their views to the discussion.

- How do power relations and inequality manifest within our network / international education cooperation?
- How can we deal with these power imbalances actively and minimize them despite structural constraints?
- How can we build trust and equality within an unequal context?

**Geofrey Nsubuga** presented the first impulse. He started by highlighting that trust and equality have been the backbones of the network and for its inherent meaningful collaboration creating open and honest dialogue. Building trust and really understanding every member of the network and their feelings takes time, and L2C has now been building this trust for over 10 years. Equality is not about uniformity, but it also acknowledges diversity and understanding different strengths of network members. Geofrey said it is important to recognize and respect the resources that every network member brings and extend a view on resources beyond financial terms but also think about knowledge and skills. He underlined that participation and inclusiveness thrives when every small or big contribution is recognized. He concluded that networks are not built on strong and experienced leaders but on members that can take up space to lead.

The second impulse was from **Sarah Laustroer** from VNB. She stated that since the beginning L2C faced different challenges. Power relations has been a topic from the beginning, however at the first meetings people still struggled to share feelings about this imbalance. Sarah does not think that working on eyelevel is possible in an international context, because we are stuck in an unequal system. Besides larger issue like travel restrictions, she acknowledged imbalances in the network itself in that e. g. she is doing the work for the network in a paid job while others contribute voluntarily. Overall, finances and funding present a big challenge to implementing structures that enhance equality in the network. Furthermore, while the international steering group is a good step, VNB still takes the final decision in projects as the organisation is accountable to the donors. Finally, Sarah pointed out that sharing personal stories to build trust is one of the secrets of L2C.

Before the final impulse, participants got the chance to contribute their views to the discussion. One participant remembered the discussion about evolution vs. revolution on one of the last in-person meetings. The next contribution added to that that they think both evolution and revolution are needed. Furthermore, we should not only focus on empowerment but also de-powerment in our structures, minds and bodies. They acknowledged that overcoming power structures is challenging but possible. Afterwards a participant thanked the network for allowing them to not only learn about the SDGs but also creating spaces to share feelings of fear, disappointment and hopes. Having a common ground and combining our energies to fight injustices is important, but we also need to talk about concrete meanings of these abstract concepts. They pointed out the challenges to take action to be in solidarity with other network members in need. The next participant acknowledged that it is important to raise awareness of these issues and that we can use these personal stories as reference points in our own educational work. In the chat participants brought up including more young people



to bring in new ideas to overcome power structures. Another contribution in the chat highlighted the power of people against racism, injustice and denial.

After the discussion **Maissara Saeed** gave a short presentation on a roadmap for the future of the L2C network. His initial call was to stop talking and start doing. He then continued to present a strategic plan for the next five years to ensure the network's independency, which aims to answer the following questions:

- How can we build trust, equality, participation in "Learn2Change Network", even if inequalities abound in personal and location/geographical/country realities?
- What common ground enables the members of the "Learn2Change Network" to remain committed to the network?
- How can we set a good example as "Learn2Change Network"?

Maissara based his roadmap on fostering Bottom-up-ability (B.U.A.) to counter external power structures. Three of the main goal are fostering trust, equality and participation, commitment to common values and goals and creating financial independence and sustainability to realise goals. These goals should be translated into action. Furthermore, the roadmap includes registering the network as an NGO in Germany or somewhere else to have a legal identity. Maissara believes that in the next five years (2025 -2030), the Learn2ChangeNetwork has the potential to become an even more vibrant, resilient, and impactful global movement for social justice and sustainability. By building trust through inclusive practices, fostering equal participation in all aspects of network activities, and ensuring the network's independence, L2C will remain a space where members feel empowered to act collectively toward meaningful change.

Maissara is very motivated to go into action to empower ourselves and close the gaps instead of just talking about them. He hopes for empowerment of the network as a whole and calls for all member to go further and discuss the roadmap in the network.







## Wrap up

The conference was wrapped up by reminding the participants that they are meaningful and part of something big. They were asked what they feel more connected to after the two days. Many participants felt very connected to people in every corner of the world. The conference ended by thanking the participants for an enriching and inspiring meeting and their efforts to change the world. Lastly, upcoming conferences and regular meetings of the Learn2Change network were announced.

## Follow up

All participants are welcome to join the second part of the conference that will take place in May 8-9, 2025.

Main questions are:

- What does solidarity mean in and for an international education partnership? How can the work in education partnerships strengthen civil society?
- How do existing funding structures support and challenge our work? How can we overcome existing challenges?