



Research article

# Cooperation between development NGOs and schools in education for sustainable development and global learning

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## Abstract

This article investigates the cooperation between schools and development-oriented non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in the context of education for sustainable development and global learning. It focuses on the potential and challenges of such partnerships for fostering meaningful social learning in a global context. It also draws on two empirical studies based on the documentary method: one analysing the orientations of NGO professionals involved in school cooperation; the other examining student learning outcomes in charity-based NGO–school settings. The findings highlight how different orientations among NGO professionals shape their approaches to school cooperation, ranging from normative messaging to action-based engagement. On the student side, charity-based learning settings often foster personalised or generalised

understandings of global inequalities, which may reproduce asymmetries and hinder reflective engagement with complex global issues. Three key tensions are identified and discussed: the challenge of balancing authenticity with abstraction, the influence of NGO positionality on educational content and the risk of reinforcing simplified, rather than reflective and complex, understandings of global challenges. Based on these findings, the article argues for learning settings that critically contextualise NGO contributions, support abstraction and reflexivity and address power asymmetries to enable more nuanced global social learning. Implications for cooperation practice and future research are discussed.

**Keywords** global learning; education for sustainable development; cooperation of schools and NGOs; qualitative research; social learning in global contexts

## Introduction

This article explores the cooperation between schools and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in education for sustainable development (ESD) and global learning, with a particular focus on social learning in a global context. The integration of NGOs into school programmes is a growing trend in sustainability education and global learning, which also includes those NGOs working to address global developmental issues and social inequalities in the world (Development NGOs). Because enabling learning is the primary objective of schools, NGOs engaged in ESD and global learning are naturally keen to enlist them as cooperation partners. Moreover, they see their involvement in schools as an invaluable chance to reach out to young people and, thus, an excellent opportunity for raising awareness, as well as for charity. In that respect, schools provide a context for NGOs to find supporters for their concerns and the intended societal transformation processes. Schools perceive NGOs as organisations that provide authentic information based on their own experiences in developmental work, and that can thus support teachers in the field of global development, which is often considered to be an area that is challenging to teach. In this respect, NGOs can be attractive partners for engaging with civil society.

This article explores NGO–school cooperation based on empirical findings from two studies which examined different aspects of NGO–school cooperation. Both researchers carried out the respective study as part of their doctorates, with the motivation to research NGO–school cooperation stemming from their previous practical activities: the team of authors has extensive experience in the practice of global learning on the part of various NGOs that work with schools, as well as experience with teaching at school and cooperating with development NGOs. Lena Eich (2021) conducted the first study, focusing on the acting of NGO professionals involved in school cooperation. Marina Wagener (2018a, 2018b) conducted the second study, focusing on the learning outcomes enabled by (charity-based) NGO–school cooperation. This article aims to use the findings of the two studies to shed more light on the research topic of cooperation between NGOs and schools. To this end, the detailed view of the two studies is broadened and their common framework is considered: the aim is to identify the potentials of and challenges to cooperation in terms of promoting meaningful social learning in a global context (that is, global learning). The study specifically examines charity-based learning settings, where learners engage in charitable activities such as collecting donations or donating money to an NGO.

To this end, the article begins with a description of the research context, in which we present a specially developed model of NGO–school cooperation, alongside a clarification of the research area and an overview of the state of research on the potential and challenges of cooperation. Next, it explains the methodological approach used in both studies and presents the empirical results of both studies in turn. This analysis leads to the identification of areas of tension in the cooperation between NGOs and schools, in which the potentials and challenges of this cooperation become visible. The article ends with recommendations for cooperation practice and implications for further research in this area.

## Research context

This article explores the field of ESD and global learning, with a primary focus on social learning in the global context. Within the discourse on ESD and global learning, and especially from the perspective of system and evolutionary theory, the increasing complexity of world society (see Luhmann, 2015, for world society theory) and corresponding global challenges is considered to be a core learning challenge in times of advancing globalisation. Learning therefore focuses on justice and sustainability, and it aims to equip individuals with competences for life in a world society, primarily competences to perceive, understand and deal with complexity (see Scheunpflug, 2011; Scheunpflug and Asbrand, 2006). Meaningful social learning in a global context therefore means fostering differentiated perspectives on complex social contexts in the world, and learning how to deal with abstract social relationships (that is, with one's own social interdependence regardless of spatial and personal proximity and with regard to future generations) (Scheunpflug, 2011; Scheunpflug and Schröck, 2000; Marina Wagener, 2018a).

The authors examine the cooperation between schools and NGOs to promote social learning in the global society on the basis of two empirical studies conducted in the German context. The German educational landscape is characterised by compulsory school attendance (as a formal place of learning). Non-formal places and extracurricular actors such as NGOs complement the school context. For example, teachers invite NGO employees to school to organise project days, or students get involved in NGO projects. Theoretically, school–NGO cooperation can be described as follows. There are several similarities between the two organisations. Both organisations share a reflective perspective on society. Since schools have a socially legitimised educational mandate, they are always related to society, and they reflect social reality regarding questions of education (for example, with regard to the norms that apply there and that are to be conveyed in the school setting). As crucial civil society actors, NGOs analyse social phenomena and try to shape the future of society in a certain way. In that way, both institutions are motivated to contribute to values such as (global) social justice, enhance awareness of developmental issues and encourage social learning in a global context.

At the same time, fundamental differences between schools and NGOs must be considered when evaluating their cooperation. Many countries require all young people to attend school and study specific subjects based on a nationally agreed curriculum. In contrast, NGOs are based on voluntary engagement and set their own learning objectives in the context of their involvement in global justice and their specific development policy. Thus, the two organisations differ regarding their self-understanding in an educational context and, consequently, concerning their perspective on learning. Schools are institutions set up to foster *Bildung*, while NGOs aim at raising awareness in favour of certain (political) positions. In this context, *Bildung* refers to a concept of education aimed at fostering critical thinking, self-reflection and the development of autonomous judgement. It is distinct from (pedagogical) approaches that primarily seek to promote specific opinions or attitudes (see Scheunpflug and Asbrand, 2006). Acknowledging this difference is essential when it comes to the cooperation of both institutions. For the German context, the Beutelsbach Consensus and, in particular, the prohibition of overwhelming students in order to impart desirable opinions is of relevance here (see Reinhardt, 2016). School-based learning must therefore contribute to a more differentiated understanding of, and reflection on, global issues, and the commitment of NGOs in schools should be justified based on the learning processes that it initiates (Scheunpflug, 2007).

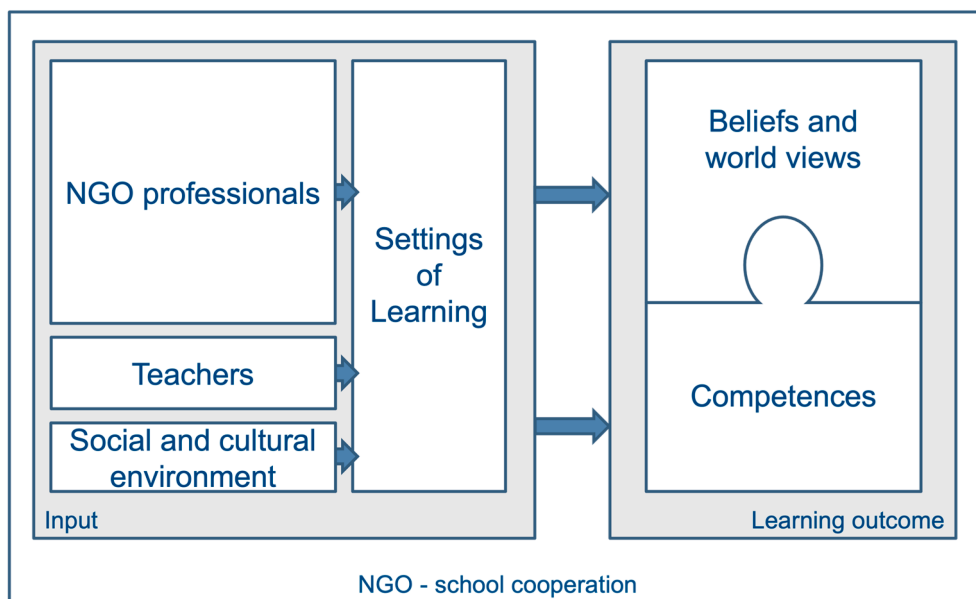
## State of research and theoretical model

Researchers have examined the cooperation between schools and NGOs in fostering social learning in a global context from various perspectives. Research by Bentall and Hunt (2022) shows how teachers benefit from working with NGOs for their professional development in global learning (for example, with regard to external expertise). Similarly, Bludau's (2016) empirical findings indicate that NGO authenticity and expertise enhance school-based learning. However, empirical research also highlights challenges to cooperation, such as time constraints, unequal power relations between partners, teachers feeling overwhelmed by NGO materials and tensions concerning represented values and contrasting cultures (Béneker and Van der Vaart, 2008; Bludau, 2016; Mundy and Manion, 2008; Smith, 2008; Tarozzi and Mallon, 2019). Furthermore, empirical evidence suggests that the organisational differences between NGOs and schools in educational contexts, mentioned above, (for example, different goals) shape

organisational cooperation (Asbrand, 2009; Bergmüller, 2016; Yemini et al., 2018). In that respect, the specific orientation of an individual NGO seems important; for example, whether the focus is on advocacy or charity. With regard to the learning processes of students in settings of NGO–school collaboration, there is empirical evidence that a charity approach of NGOs is likely to contribute to a consolidation of stereotypes (see Andreotti, 2011; Asbrand, 2009; Danielzik et al., 2013; Tallon, 2011, 2012a, 2012b; Marina Wagener, 2018a, 2018b). In contrast, it is evident in empirical studies that NGOs allowing for possibilities to act in a global context, for example, through a fair-trade setting, can initiate learning processes regarding the complexity of global social challenges (Asbrand, 2009; Krogull, 2018).

To get a differentiated understanding of learning within NGO–school cooperation, the authors developed a model that illustrates relevant connections and aspects in the context of global learning at schools (see Figure 1). This model builds on Helmke's (2003) 'offer-and-use model for teaching effectiveness', one of the most prominent frameworks in current educational research (see Vieluf et al., 2020) and describes the relationship between input and learning outcomes. It defines input as a learning opportunity shaped by various factors, including the specific learning setting and the individuals who design and implement it – namely, NGO professionals and teachers. As empirical studies point to the correlation between global perspectives and different educational milieus (for example, Asbrand, 2009; Marina Wagener, 2018a), the social and cultural environment of the learning setting (for example, different types of schools, school districts and social situation in the specific district) is also a central aspect of the input provided. Learning outcomes refer to students' beliefs and world views on global justice and sustainability, as well as to their competences for navigating life in a complex, globalised world. These aspects develop within specific learning settings and are closely interlinked (for the discourse on competences in global and sustainability education, see, for example, Asbrand, 2014; OECD, 2015; Rieckmann, 2018).

**Figure 1. Global learning within NGO–school cooperation (Source: based on Helmke, 2003)**



Building on a detailed analysis of empirical findings on school–NGO cooperation, this article examines two aspects: (1) NGO professionals and their contributions to learning settings created through cooperation with schools (input); and (2) the learning experiences of students who took part in learning settings shaped by charity-based programmes run by NGOs (learning outcome). The article focuses on learning in NGO–school cooperation from these two perspectives. By examining both perspectives together, the authors identify overarching aspects and questions that emerge from both. This allows them to highlight challenges and potentials of learning settings facilitated by NGO–school collaboration (described as tensions in the conclusion). The article does not address other potential focal points evident in the presented model, such as the role of teachers or the social and cultural environment,

and it does not seek to provide a definitive examination of the research topic. However, it is intended as a contribution to its exploration, and aims to encourage further contributions (see the 'Implications for further research' section).

## Methodological approach

The empirical findings that form the basis of this article were obtained in two qualitative empirical studies that were carried out using a reconstructive methodology, called the documentary method (see Bohnsack, 2010; Scheunpflug et al., 2016; Wagener, 2018b), which analyses empirical data collected in narrative interviews (see Nohl, 2012) or group discussions (see Loos and Schäffer, 2001). Ralf Bohnsack originally developed the documentary method in Germany, where researchers have frequently applied it. However, in recent years, researchers in English-speaking academic contexts have increasingly recognised and applied the method in educational research (see Hinzke et al., 2023). The approach follows Mannheim's (1980) sociology of knowledge and distinguishes between two types of knowledge: communicative-generalising and conjunctive knowledge. While the notion of the former refers to explicitly available knowledge, the latter refers to implicit, action-guiding knowledge, which is 'not located on the surface of conscious and clear explicable attitudes and values, but which [is] beneath the surface and affect[s] behaviour indirectly' (Scheunpflug et al., 2016: 10). Through a two-step analysis, researchers can identify both explicit and tacit knowledge structures, known as orientations. First, our analysis focused on 'what' the participants talk about and on what they say in terms of content, thereby extracting explicit knowledge (formulating interpretation). In a second step, the focus shifted towards 'how' participants talk about and discuss certain issues (reflecting interpretation). The methodological assumption is that this approach reveals implicit orientations (see Scheunpflug et al., 2016 for a detailed description of the process of analysis in the documentary method). A comparative approach of analysis of all interviews or group discussions then allows for the reconstruction of dominant patterns of orientation and the development of a typology of orientations within the specific research context (for information on different processes of typification within the documentary method, see Bohnsack, 2007; Nentwig-Gesemann, 2013; Nohl, 2013).

The findings on the action of NGO professionals involved in school cooperation are based on 16 narrative interviews with professionals in Germany (Lena Eich, 2021). The interviews took place at the NGOs or in a public space. The researcher asked open questions, which enabled the NGO professionals to set their own priorities and encouraged them to report on their personal, and very different, experiences of working with schools. For example, the interviewer asked about particular experiences they had in cooperation with schools. Rich stories about NGO-school cooperation unfolded, for example, stories about lectures in school lessons, the organisation of project days for students or further training for teachers, and the implementation of competitions for students or cooperation with schools in the context of charity campaigns by schools for NGOs. Sampling criteria in a theoretical sampling process (see Glaser and Strauss, 1967) included varying institutional objectives (for example, development cooperation, development education in Germany, fair trade), different NGO sizes and ideological characteristics (religious or secular). Professionals differed in terms of their age, gender, professional background and type of employment. The findings on learning processes facilitated through (charity-based) NGO-school cooperation were obtained through 29 group discussions with students at secondary schools in Germany, aged between 13 and 18 (119 students in total), who as a group sponsor a child in a country in the Global South. The focus was on young sponsors that engage with child sponsoring in the context of their school, meaning that their school class, or sometimes even the whole school, is sponsoring a child (Marina Wagener, 2018a, 2018b). Because the study focused on young people engaged in child sponsorship, the NGO-facilitated setting primarily involved donations for a person in the Global South (for example, collected through school fairs) and contact with that individual (for example, through letters and information provided by the NGO). The charity-based setting establishes an asymmetrical relationship with people living in the Global South. The group discussions were conducted at the students' schools without teachers present. The idea of collecting data through group discussions like this is to give participants the chance to express what is important to them and to not restrict their expressions with pre-formulated questions or through teachers' expectations (for information on group discussions, see Loos and Schäffer, 2001). At the beginning of each discussion, the researcher provided an open stimulus (for example, 'Can you tell me about your sponsorship?')

and introduced further prompts only after the students had finished their discussion (for example, 'Can you tell me about the child you sponsor?'). Sampling was also carried out according to the principle of theoretical sampling, and crucial sampling criteria were the school type (that is, educational background of students), the age of students involved and the form and degree of student participation in charity activities (for example, collecting donations, writing letters). In the context of this article, the two study samples remain completely independent, as researchers did not specifically interview NGO professionals from organisations designing the sponsorship settings in the other study. Nevertheless, it is the case that NGO professionals from organisations that facilitate charity-based learning at schools were also interviewed.

In both studies, the analysis of empirical data followed the two steps of analysis explained above: in the research project focusing on learning experiences of students in a child sponsorship setting, the analysis first explored what students told about their sponsorship activities (showing their explicit knowledge) and then analysed 'how' students discussed their sponsorship, for example, how they talked about their sponsored children or about their activities (analysing their implicit orientations). A typology of dominant patterns of orientations of students engaged in child sponsorship activities was then reconstructed in a comparative approach of analysis of all group discussions.

Researchers conducted both studies almost simultaneously as doctoral theses at the Department of General Education at Otto Friedrich University of Bamberg. A research group specialising in the documentary method validated the analysis and evaluation of the empirical material. In this context, the authors developed the idea of combining the two studies to generate insights into cooperation between NGOs and schools in the field of ESD. The different focuses of the studies – input (with a focus on NGO employees) and outcome (with a focus on learners) – complement each other and make it possible to identify challenges and potentials. The same methodological approach of the two studies offers a strong foundation for jointly considering their research findings in this article.

## Empirical findings

Empirically obtained results on the actions of NGO professionals in cooperation with schools and on learning outcomes of students involved in charity-based NGO–school cooperation will enrich the model described above. The article presents the empirical results of the two studies in turn and draws conclusions about their implications for NGO–school cooperation. It is important to emphasise that the empirical results are described as types reconstructed in the empirical analysis. This means that the article does not directly present the empirical material. Readers can find excerpts from the conducted interviews and group discussions in the study-related publications (see Eich, 2023, as well as Marina Wagener, 2018a, 2018b; Wagener and Krogull, 2018).

## The role of NGO professionals in NGO–school cooperation

As can be seen in the model above, NGO professionals play a central role in the input side of NGO–school cooperation. Their orientations towards schools and social learning in a global context, which are central to their actions in the cooperation context, were examined empirically (Lena Eich, 2021). The research covered many different learning settings and forms of cooperation, such as the teaching of NGO employees in schools about a specific global topic, NGO charity events or joint project days on global issues. Regarding the actions of the NGO professionals, empirical findings reveal that all interviewed NGO professionals implicitly perceive schools as a legitimate space for NGOs and their activities – even though NGOs are not part of the school system and there are differences between the organisations. Moreover, within the scope of the perception of legitimacy, the researcher identified three types of orientations of NGO professionals, shaping the actions of NGO employees in global education (Lena Eich, 2021, 2023):

1. *Transfer of truth*: For this type, it is characteristic that specific positions on global topics are transferred to students; for example, a position about global justice or options for actions on how to achieve more global justice. In their work at schools, the world views and values of NGOs therefore play an important role and are presented as representing a true and valid perspective on reality. In the understanding of NGO employees, teaching causally leads to learning, and their actions consequently follows a clear teaching mission. Thus, the learning setting functions as an advocacy setting focused on a specific global topic. Moreover, NGO professionals perceive schools as thematically oriented and compulsory institutions in which global topics must be addressed according to school curricula. Apart from that, they see the clear schedule of schools and the presence of students as a chance for the NGO's mission (Lena Eich, 2021).
2. *Engagement learning*: The main topic of this type of orientation is acting in a modus of global solidarity (that is, solidarity with marginalised and poor people in the world). It is important for the NGO employees to foster concrete action and the students' ability to act in solidarity with non-privileged people. The professionals' actions are guided by the concept that acting can be learnt through concrete action, for example, in charity projects introduced at schools. The NGO professionals perceive schools as places of global citizenship and global solidarity. From their point of view, students and teachers have freedom, free space and enough time available for global solidarity actions. Even though global solidarity is broader than charity, a focus on charity is visible (Lena Eich, 2021).
3. *Edutainment*: In contrast to the types *Transfer of truth* and *Engagement learning*, the third type of orientation is characterised by suspension. Neither content, specific for NGOs and their world view, nor the aim of initiating learning guide the NGO employees' acting in cooperation with schools. In this type, NGO professionals do not aim to enhance learning about specific global topics. Instead, there is a gap regarding the content of learning; rather the learning setting corresponds to a mode of entertaining students. Accordingly, NGO employees perceive schools as hollow structures that allow for access to an attentive audience (not to learners), with teachers as useful assistants (Lena Eich, 2021).

From a more general perspective, the three types point to different insights with regard to the cooperation between NGO professionals and schools. The first two types, *Transfer of truth* and *Engagement learning*, show that NGOs bring their authenticity and expertise in global development and civic engagement. In addition, NGOs convey their normative standpoints and ideals on global issues and problems. NGO perspectives on improving the world shape school learning settings. All these aspects can enrich global learning. However, it may not be overlooked that the NGOs' relevancies dominate the cooperation with schools. NGO professionals see learning at schools as an opportunity to transfer NGO contents: their positions, topics and values. The type *Edutainment* highlights that NGOs do not always prioritise learning, making education a potential blind spot in NGO–school cooperation. The empirical results clearly indicate that NGO professionals do not consider the objective of schools to initiate and enable *Bildung*, and it is therefore irrelevant to their acting (Lena Eich, 2021, 2023).

### Learning outcomes of students involved in NGO–school cooperation

With regard to the question of learning outcomes enabled through the cooperation of schools and NGOs, empirical findings provide insights into the learning experiences of high school students who participate in charity-based settings through school–NGO cooperation (Marina Wagener, 2018a, 2018b). The empirical analysis focused on learning experiences that relate to social learning in the complex global world, as described above.

The research first shows that the students experience the charity-based setting as a situation with a clear distribution of roles: they themselves participate as givers, and someone else acts as a recipient of help. The empirical evidence shows that primarily economic differences between the two sides are decisive for the construction of this asymmetry. The students experience themselves as materially and economically superior – and they see the other side as characterised by its neediness. This suggests that charity-based learning settings construct an asymmetrical relationship (Marina Wagener, 2018a, 2018b).

Second, within the charity-based setting, the students are guided by the expectation that the NGO enables authentic forms of action, that is, the charity setting is a real opportunity to do something and make a difference. Similarly, the students expect to be provided with authentic information allowing for a true and credible access to authentic information that they would not have access to without the NGO (Marina Wagener, 2018a, 2018b).

Third, while all students share the perception of being in an asymmetric relationship based on authenticity, the empirical data reveal three types of orientation patterns – concretisation, generalisation and distancing – in how students engage with asymmetry and authenticity within the charity setting. The first pattern, *concretisation*, describes an orientation with a specific focus on the charity context in which the students are involved. The students focus, for example, on the individual sponsored child living in Malawi, or on a certain project to which they are giving money, for example, to protect children's rights in a community in Indonesia. A central feature of this type is the idea of individual help, for example, in the context of a particular project. The students understand the charity setting as an opportunity to individually and personally make a difference in other people's lives by means of donating money. As a consequence, students do not put their experiences in the context of this charity-based setting in a broader context, for example, regarding causes of global inequalities and approaches to overcome them (Marina Wagener, 2018a, 2018b). In contrast, a second typical orientation is characterised by the *generalisation* of experiences from the specific charity situation. Students see the context as an authentic reflection of global relations, meaning an expression of an asymmetric, hierarchical welfare structure between North and South. Global North and Global South are constructed as contrasts, with the former being superior to the latter. Processes of generalisation are visible in students' perspectives that there is a general need for help and assistance in the South that can only be alleviated by support from the North. This dichotomy between North and South represents a simplified understanding of the world (Marina Wagener, 2018a, 2018b). The third typical orientation, *distancing*, fundamentally differs from the other two, as students do not perceive the charity situation provided by the NGO as an authentic setting. Instead, students question the credibility of the information given, and whether this information truly offers the special insight they are hoping for. In addition, they question the genuineness of their charitable actions as an authentic form of action in the global context. Due to their rejection of authenticity, students disengage from further reflection and dismiss the setting entirely. In consequence, students do not engage in further learning about inequalities in the world, as there is no reflection beyond authentic experiences (Marina Wagener, 2018a, 2018b).

On a more general level, these findings show that implicit structural aspects of the charity-based cooperation setting are reflected in students' learning. The unequal charity context clearly constructs asymmetry, and students' orientations reflect the assumption that NGOs provide authentic information (Wagener, 2018b). Moreover, the empirical results point to a reinforcement of stereotypical and simplified understandings of inequalities in the world (Marina Wagener, 2018a; Wagener and Krogull, 2018). Apparently, the charity settings enabled through NGO–school cooperation do not support the students in developing a more differentiated perspective on global issues which account for the complexity of global challenges. Consequently, these settings do not foster learning about the complexity of global issues. What is more, learning remains confined to individual charity activities, and the idea of individual help as experienced from the specific charity context are detached from the broader global context (Wagener, 2018b). Finally, this research demonstrates that NGO-provided charity contexts fail to promote abstract social learning in a global context beyond authentic experience. Students in these settings do not develop more abstract ways of thinking or engaging with global issues (Marina Wagener, 2018a, 2018b; Wagener and Krogull, 2018).

## **Discussion: areas of tension in NGO–school cooperation in sustainability education and social learning in the global context**

The article will now synthesise the empirical results previously presented separately to answer the overarching question as to what potentials and challenges lie in learning settings of NGO–school cooperation. The findings on the orientations of NGO professionals (Lena Eich, 2021) and the learning outcomes of students (Marina Wagener, 2018a) show that cooperation with NGOs can enrich learning in schools, but that it does not automatically lead to an enhanced learning setting in terms of learning regarding global social challenges as part of ESD. By looking at the empirical results of the two

independent studies, three areas of tension in the cooperation between NGOs and schools can be identified. These refer to aspects that emerged as relevant in both studies.

The first area of tension is concerned with the aspect of authenticity. NGO employees bring NGO values authentically into learning settings at schools: their advocacy for global justice, their expertise in development policy contexts and their solidarity-based commitment to change the world (Eich, 2023). On the one hand, this authenticity of NGOs holds potential for global learning in schools, as NGOs enrich the learning situation with their expert knowledge of global issues and, in particular, their concrete, real experiences in the context of development cooperation (see Bentall and Hunt, 2022; Bludau, 2016). This complements the perspective of teachers and school teaching materials. In addition, NGOs stand for certain world views and ideals, to which they are civically and politically committed. Their global fields of engagement are not only options for action; they are also settings in which the people involved learn about global contexts and acquire skills for action. On the other hand, empirical evidence (Wagener, 2018b) shows that NGO-facilitated learning is at risk of remaining confined to the concrete and illustrative realm of specific NGO involvement (for example, NGO aid projects in countries of the Global South), or to the real experiences of NGO employees. More abstract approaches to global issues are clearly not self-evident in the cooperation between schools and NGOs, which emphasises authenticity (Lena Eich, 2021; Marina Wagener, 2018a, 2018b). However, as pointed out in the 'Research context' section, the increasing complexity of world society and corresponding global challenges is considered to be a core learning challenge in times of advancing globalisation. Promoting abstract perspectives – those detached from specific experiences and extending beyond concrete examples – is therefore central to fostering a deeper understanding of complex contexts in global society (see Scheunpflug, 2011; Wagener, 2018b). This particularly applies to the school context, in which the socially legitimised educational mandate of schools demands the facilitation of learning perspectives that address the complexity of sustainability and globalisation issues appropriately (see the 'Research context' section).

In relation to this, the second area of tension is concerned with the positionality of NGOs. The research results presented show that the perspectives of the NGO shape the cooperation with schools, and that NGOs tend to instrumentalise school learning in order to pass on specific positions, topics and values to students, or even to use the school context to collect donations. The positionality of NGOs, which thus dominates the learning setting, is a challenge for learning regarding developments in global world society, which involves controversial perspectives. Social learning in a global context requires an exploration that is broader than one single NGO can represent and, as stated above, school-based learning must promote a more differentiated understanding of, and reflection on, global issues (see the 'Research context' section). In view of the educational focus of schools, it is therefore significant that learning at school takes account of the controversy of perspectives on global issues beyond the specific standpoint of one NGO. It is clearly a challenge for the cooperation between NGOs and schools that it is not a guiding principle for NGO employees to take positions other than their own into account, and that they therefore sometimes do *not* aim to initiate and stimulate educational processes appropriate in the school sense (Lena Eich, 2021, 2023).

The third area of tension emerges during the cooperation between schools and NGOs that pursue charitable or benevolent purposes on an international level and support project work in countries of the Global South. The authentic expression of international solidarity can enrich settings for social learning in a global perspective, that is, social learning in a world society characterised by massive inequalities. At the same time, the charitable orientation is also conveyed in learning settings organised by NGOs (Lena Eich, 2021, 2023), and it plays a central role in charity-based settings. The empirical evidence provided supports findings from other studies (Asbrand, 2009; Tallon, 2011, 2012a, 2012b) in clearly showing that students' learning experiences reflect the asymmetrical nature of these learning opportunities in the form of feelings of superiority and charitable attitudes towards people in the Global South (Marina Wagener, 2018a, 2018b). Learning remains confined to (concrete) charitable actions, reinforcing stereotypical perspectives on global development issues, in which the South is perceived as deficient and dependent on charity from the North. Such simple ideas hinder the development of a more differentiated view of the complexity of global social challenges (Marina Wagener, 2018a, 2018b).

## Suggestions for NGO–school cooperation in sustainability education and global learning

These findings on empirically visible areas of tension in the cooperation between schools and NGOs in the field of global learning have implications for designing fruitful learning settings for this area of learning. The studies presented thus provide evidence of how this specific form of cooperation can engage learners in productive learning processes in the field of global development.

First, teachers should design a learning setting that encourages learners to adopt abstract perspectives on development policy and global challenges, develop background information and broaden their perspectives. Concrete examples of NGO projects or specific experiences of NGO employees should be integrated into a broader context that allows them to abstract from these concrete references. This also includes discussing controversial perspectives on a topic that go beyond the point of view of an NGO. This should help students to grasp the complexity of global issues, rather than focusing solely on action-based perspectives or a single position on an issue.

Second, it is crucial that learning settings encourage learners to develop perspectives on global challenges that go beyond a stereotypical charity-based approach to development. When learning takes place in action settings and students primarily learn (informally) through involvement in NGO projects, then educators must explicitly promote learning that extends beyond charity and fosters participation with more differentiated perspectives. Learning settings should avoid asymmetry, and they should not be based on the idea that one side assumes responsibility for the other through financial support, as seen in charity campaigns.

Third, global learning facilitated in cooperation between schools and NGOs must be designed as a complex and reflective process. When it comes to situations in which learners take action, it is therefore important that they reflect on the limits of their own actions, form an opinion about engagement opportunities and reconsider the background and meaningfulness of the forms of engagement. Moreover, it is crucial that educators promote intensive reflection on cultural and economic differences to provide learners with other ways of dealing with differences beyond stereotypes.

In that way, NGOs can offer not only their expertise, ideals and world views but also opportunities for 'real' and shared (rather than asymmetrical) participation in a globalised world, such as cultural work, global networking and volunteering with regard to global challenges. In this way, cooperation between NGOs and schools can contribute to global learning that increases the learners' own complexity (Scheunpflug and Schröck, 2000) and promotes a reflective attitude. The resources of both organisations can be fruitfully combined for this important and challenging area of learning.

## Implications for further research

Further research can expand and deepen the empirical findings on NGO–school cooperation related to global development issues discussed in this article. The relationship between professionals' beliefs and attitudes and the design of learning settings should be considered further. Examining both professional groups – teachers and NGO staff – and their cooperation is important. This could expand the empirical findings on the input side of NGO–school cooperation presented in this article (Lena Eich, 2021). Furthermore, the relationship between learning settings co-designed by NGOs on global issues and the learning experiences they facilitate should also be researched in learning settings other than charity-based settings (Marina Wagener, 2018a). This could build on findings from other studies in the context of sustainability education and global learning, which point to the potential of more complex learning opportunities (for example, in fair trade; see Asbrand, 2009).

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## Declarations and conflicts of interest

### Research ethics statement

Not applicable to this article.

### Consent for publication statement

Not applicable to this article.

### Conflicts of interest statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest with this work. All efforts to sufficiently anonymise the authors during peer review of this article have been made. The authors declare no further conflicts with this article.

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