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Global Network of  
Learning Cities

# UNESCO Global Network of Learning Cities

## Strategy, 2021-2023



Education  
2030



# Strategy of the UNESCO Global Network of Learning Cities (2021–2023)

‘Implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in learning cities through thematic clusters and a renewed funding modality’

## Background

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development represents an ambitious and transformational programme for a world free of poverty, hunger, violence and war; a world in which equity, inclusion and a healthy environment are assured for everyone. Governments, businesses and civil society, together with the United Nations, are mobilizing efforts to achieve this vision by 2030. Universal, inclusive and indivisible, the 2030 Agenda calls for action by all countries to improve the lives of people everywhere.

Although primary responsibility for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is at country level, local governments, as the closest level of government to people, are best placed to make cities more sustainable. The number of city dwellers around the world has been growing rapidly in recent years: more than half the world’s population lives in cities today; by 2030, this figure is predicted to have risen to 60 per cent.

Cities have played an increasingly influential role in achieving those goals. It is against this backdrop that the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL) – the only organizational unit in the UN family with a global mandate for lifelong learning – initiated the UNESCO Global Network of Learning Cities (GNLC) to help local governments develop lifelong learning strategies. Launched in 2012, the UNESCO GNLC is an international policy-oriented network providing inspiration, expertise and best practice. It promotes knowledge production and exchange, peer learning and capacity-building among its members, enabling them to improve lifelong learning practices in their cities. The network currently comprises 229 member cities from 64 countries, with an increasing number of UNESCO Member States expressing interest in joining the initiative.

In 2019, the GNLC adopted a strategy through which seven thematic clusters were established, composed of learning cities concerned with the respective topics. These topics were identified through a survey of member cities and were designed to better serve member cities by enabling them to network more closely with those learning cities that share their concerns and face similar challenges.

The seven thematic clusters were: Education for Sustainable Development (112 cities); Literacy (30 cities); Entrepreneurship (30 cities); Health and Well-Being (40 cities); Inclusion and Equity (66 cities); Global Citizenship Education (57 cities); and Educational Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation (57 cities).

The topics chosen have proven to be of high relevance to the entire network. However, the COVID-19 pandemic affected the implementation of the strategy, including the organization of in-person meetings for each cluster.

The relevance of topics chosen by city members, as well as the mechanisms used, was further confirmed by the results of a survey conducted by the GNLC secretariat in 2021.<sup>1</sup> The survey had

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<sup>1</sup> The survey was conducted by each cluster on an individual basis with varying response rates due to the pandemic.

three purposes: (1) learn from the implementation of the strategy; (2) better understand the strengths and weaknesses of the actions launched in order to make them more relevant and responsive to the needs of network members; and (3) identify the next steps for the GNLC strategy.

Recognizing that, during these two years, cities' efforts were to a large extent diverted to attend to the emergency needs resulting from the COVID-19 crisis, the proposed approach for the next two years is to maintain the parameters established in 2019 while refocusing the scope of the strategy.



**Strengthening the network's strategy  
(2021-2023)**

Using the responses to the survey, the following section outlines key improvements to be implemented in the next two years of the strategy, along with opportunities for diversifying GNLC engagement methods. Hence, the second phase of the strategy aims to establish mechanisms to better support cities in their efforts to promote lifelong learning.

## Adjusting the clusters for 2021–2023

The aim of the strategy is to grow from experimentation to sustainability. The analysis of the survey responses and the assessment of the strategy show that most cities are in favour of maintaining the clusters. Nevertheless, some changes are needed to address the challenges faced over the past two years. More specifically, these improvements involve:

### Refining the thematic scope of the clusters

During cluster-specific activities, and during meetings, it became clear that concepts around which the work of the clusters evolved were not always understood in the same way, which at times led to confusion among cluster members (e.g. education for sustainable development). At times, topics were considered to be too abstract or too broad to be addressed by one cluster (e.g. inclusion and equity). To provide more conceptual clarity in the scope of the thematic clusters, an inception workshop on conceptual definition will be organized, with the support of external experts, at the beginning of each cluster's work phase.

### Reducing the number of clusters

The simultaneous coordination of seven clusters was difficult and participation was at times uneven. The number of clusters will be reduced to five, retaining those topics which emerged as priorities: 1. Global Citizenship Education; 2. Education for Sustainable Development; 3. Health and Well-being; 4. Planning; and 5. Inclusion (transversal with literacy and ICTs).

### Technical elements of the clusters

Coordinating cities of each cluster will be (re)elected for two years and will be responsible for ensuring that the cluster is on track with planned activities. They will also report during cluster coordinator meetings on the work accomplished. Cluster coordinators will work alongside UIL to ensure a high level of participation of cluster member cities.

### Empowering cities

To that effect, advisory sessions will be organized by the UIL coordination team for all cluster coordinator cities so that the leadership of thematic clusters be clearly owned by members.

### Better targeting of city representation within the clusters

Cluster member cities will be asked to ensure that the profile of their city cluster representative matches the thematic focus of the cluster.

### Defining more specific outputs and work plan (with targets)

The previous work structure and terms of reference provided for each cluster did not always align with clusters' outputs. Understanding the difference in concepts and in methods of work across cities, efforts will be made to better coordinate across the clusters to align in terms of outputs and timeline of work, through regular cluster coordinators meetings and status sharing.

### Further involving technical partners

The clusters in which the exchanges were most fruitful were supported by technical partners with strong expertise. In this new phase of the strategy, this technical support will be reinforced through cluster-related expert groups.

### Creating expert groups for clusters

Expert groups will be established including individuals with expertise in diverse aspects of each theme. A concrete example exists in the ESD expert network in Germany. The group includes an expert on ESD ready to construct materials to support cities in implementing an ESD strategy or policies. The expert networks aim to develop concrete plans, as one of their main purposes is to construct support material and actions in areas such as: mentoring for cities, training specialists in administration and NGOs, materials and lectures, and a masterplan for cities. This methodology will be adapted to other chosen themes.

### Enhancing the collective learning experience

#### Developing a database for peer learning

A database for peer learning could also be created based on developments across different workshops organized by clusters. This could also include creating a common schedule with an overview of activities per year. Inter-city knowledge sharing and support concerning success and challenges will also be promoted through the database and beyond.

#### Providing support to learning cities in Africa

Member cities of the GNLC will be encouraged to use existing partnerships (e.g. twin cities) and networks to provide targeted support and capacity development to African cities to develop and implement local lifelong learning policies and strategies to become learning cities and join the GNLC. The overall network would play a role in the promotion of lifelong learning in Africa through decentralized cooperation.

7,510.00	25,872.00	3,345,345.00	23,442.00	534,454.00
3,445.00	34,557.00	345.00	234,768.00	42,343.00
45,534.00	7,566.00	42,456.00	234,234.00	5,564.00
38,484.00	38,484.00	5,345.00	634,567.00	234,676.00
16,164.00	16,164.00	16,164.00	10,776.00	234,423.00
15,256.00	33,245.00	3,423.00	34,423.00	42,234.00
25,412.00	54,322.00	2,342.00	7,552.00	1,000.00
3,654.00	23,312.00	3,423.00	23,423.00	34,557.00
55,320.00	9,220.00	234,423.00	234,233.00	45,344.00
31,428.00	31,428.00	31,428.00	534,457.00	45,573.00
14,772.00	14,772.00	14,772.00	14,772.00	14,772.00
16,392.00	16,392.00	16,392.00	16,392.00	16,392.00
15,168.00	15,168.00	15,168.00	15,168.00	15,168.00
58,680.00	58,680.00	58,680.00	58,680.00	58,680.00
13,704.00	13,704.00	13,704.00	13,704.00	13,704.00
15,924.00	15,924.00	15,924.00	15,924.00	15,924.00
51,000.00	51,000.00	51,000.00	51,000.00	51,000.00
46,884.00	46,884.00	46,884.00	46,884.00	46,884.00
37,872.00	37,872.00	37,872.00	37,872.00	37,872.00
<b>512,603.00</b>	<b>550,009.00</b>	<b>3,955,345.00</b>	<b>2,580,255.00</b>	<b>1,835,094.00</b>



**Funding options for the strategy of the UNESCO Global Network of Learning Cities**

15,72	2,276	18,17	55,32	31,42	14,77	16,39	15,16	58,68	13,70	15,9
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In 2019, a multi-donor funding modality (MDFM) was launched as the funding mechanism for the UNESCO GNLC at the fourth International Conference on Learning Cities, in Medellín, Colombia. The renewed funding options aim to fit the individual interests and needs of potential donors and partners through flexible, customized funding (financial or in-kind) and partnership opportunities to the MDFM.

## Who can be a funding partner of the GNLC?

Member cities of the UNESCO GNLC are encouraged and welcome to fund relevant GNLC activities. However, the funding partnership is not limited to member cities, but also open to the following actors:

- National, regional and sub-regional governments of UNESCO Member States;
- International financial institutions and other multilateral organizations;
- Corporate sector, philanthropies, foundations and others;
- Civil society partners such as non-governmental organizations, educational institutions, think tanks and research institutes.

## What are the available funding options (financial or in-kind support) and their expected outcomes?

### *Contribute to the MDFM launched in 2019*

The aim of the MDFM is to support the UNESCO GNLC's future strategy and benefit member cities, with a focus on cities in Africa and in low-income countries. The initial target amount for the MDFM is US \$1 million for each two-year term. The MDFM is expected to strengthen alliances between partners across sectors who share an agenda, thereby increasing UNESCO GNLC members' capacities to implement lifelong learning for all.

### *Other types of voluntary contributions*

In addition to the MDFM pooled fund, there are other funding options for potential funding partners to consider, based on their individual interests.

Three areas are prioritized by the coordination team for funding partnership:

#### **1. Capacity-building and training for city policy makers in least developed countries**

It aims to provide support for city policy-makers<sup>3</sup> in least developed countries to develop and implement local lifelong learning policies and strategies with concrete objectives and outcomes. Interested funding partners are invited to fund the implementation of capacity-building activities.

#### **2. International/regional/sub-regional thematic study in the framework of learning cities**

It aims to formulate guidelines, recommendations and instruments on important thematic topics (e.g. monitoring the implementation of lifelong learning, participatory governance on lifelong learning, sustainable development through a lifelong learning approach) in the framework of learning cities to guide and inspire cities' efforts to develop and implement lifelong learning policies and strategies to cope with challenges of sustainable development. Interested funding partners are invited to fund the implementation of international/regional/sub-regional thematic studies.

#### **3. International/regional communication, sharing and exchange**

It aims to deepen the communication, sharing and exchange among member cities of the UNESCO GNLC at international/regional level on developing and implementing lifelong learning policies and strategies for sustainable development. Interested funding partners are invited to consider the following options:

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<sup>3</sup> From both member and non-member cities of the UNESCO GNLC.



- Host or provide funding for international/regional meetings/events of the GNLC to facilitate knowledge sharing and exchange;
- Provide funding for thematic publications of the GNLC;
- Provide funding for establishing a database for peer-learning among member cities;
- Send seconded staff to work at the coordination team of the GNLC to share local experience and participate in the management of the network.

The options listed above cannot exhaust all possible funding possibilities. All actors interested in exploring a funding partnership with the UNESCO GNLC are invited to contact its coordination team: [learningcities@unesco.org](mailto:learningcities@unesco.org). Details will be discussed on an individual basis.