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# Negotiating Common Goals Among Diverse Stakeholders: An Ethnography of the Czech Environmental Education's Organisational Field

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## Abstract

The development of environmental education (EE) goals has rarely been problematised. To shed light on this process, we focused on EE in the Czech Republic. Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) play a key role there, facilitating the process in coordination with government institutions, schools and for-profit companies. Drawing on three theoretical perspectives that explain the formation of organisational goals (consensus building, community of discourse and practice and governmentality), we examined how different stakeholders contribute to the definition of common goals for EE. Through ethnographic research in an NGO and at EE events, complemented by interviews with lecturers and leaders, our research revealed that despite the high diversity of stakeholder positions and interests, the organisational field of EE is highly inclusive and shows few internal conflicts. Using chosen theoretical perspectives, we explain how vaguely defined common goals and weak manifestations of conflict contribute to the sharing of knowledge, practices and ethical responsibilities in the EE field.

**Keywords:** Czech Republic; environmental education; goal negotiation; non-governmental organisations; organisational field

## Introduction

People involved in environmental education (EE) come from many different backgrounds. They include scientists who highlight environmental problems, teachers who share their expertise with the public, politicians who develop environmental policies, and businesses that offer authentic commercial solutions. Such diversity originates in the inherently political mission of EE to create “a *citizenry* that is knowledgeable concerning the biophysical environment and its associated problems, aware of how to help solve these problems, and motivated to work toward their solution” (Stapp et al., 1969, p. 34; emphasis added). Diverse actors in EE often employ different approaches and perspectives, leading to significant variations in their focus areas — conservation (see Fien et al., 2001), climate protection (see Reid, 2019), sustainability (Harpe & Thomas, 2009; Stevenson, 2007a), biodiversity (Navarro-Perez & Tidball, 2012, p. 18) or environmental justice (McGregor & Christie, 2021). Furthermore, they may hold distinct and, at times, conflicting principles and attitudes, resulting in disparate expectations regarding the outcomes of the educational process, and none of these stakeholders have a privileged position from which to shape the EE agenda. When the stakeholders need to establish a shared objective or devise a strategic document, negotiation becomes essential (Haak et al., 2022; Ishiyama et al., 2019), whether explicitly or implicitly. This research paper thus examines the process of negotiating common goals of EE among diverse stakeholders.

A large body of literature focuses on how successful EE is in achieving its goals (e.g. Dandi & Heimlich, 2002; Stern et al., 2008; Čincera & Krajhanzl, 2013; Ardoin et al., 2020; Lindgren et al., 2021). Less is known about the process of shaping these goals; there are a handful of studies that critically analyse the gradual transformation of the global aims of EE (Knapp, 2000; Kopnina, 2020; Rodrigues & Arenas, 2022). However, the actual process of shaping common goals in the field of EE at a local level has not yet received much attention, which is surprising given that sharing goals among stakeholders with different interests is an essential condition for the successful implementation of EE programmes (Prior, 2013). In the Czech case studied in this paper, the government's role in controlling the educational content (curriculum) is significantly weakened because it is dominantly non-government actors who provide EE. On the other hand, involved NGOs depend on support from public (state) structures that can therefore raise curricular requirements. It is, therefore, a research opportunity to examine whether the educational curriculum emerges in a classic top-down organisational structure where the dominant parties task those below or whether the positions of the various parties are relatively equal in this respect. Nevertheless, government officials and NGO representatives are not the sole entities exhibiting distinct positions. Within the diverse range of organisations they represent, various stakeholders prioritise their specific concerns and hold differing viewpoints. The disparities in experience then contribute to conflicting interpretations of environmental and educational issues and the promotion of particular goals as common, impeding collective efforts toward shared objectives (Santos Jara & Bouwen, 2006, pp. 23–24).

The findings presented in this paper draw on ethnographic research conducted in the span of five years from 2017 to 2022 in the field of EE providers, relevant policymakers and other stakeholders in the Czech Republic. Our fieldwork took place primarily at regular EE conferences and other field-wide events (contests, courses, fairs, etc.) attended by representatives of various stakeholders from different organisations since we considered them a prominent place of goal negotiation. At common EE stakeholders' meetings, organisations and their members employ consensus negotiation strategies to assert and promote their visions. These conferences thus provided us with an excellent opportunity to observe values, goals, expectations and ambitions circulation and interaction (Clarke, 2005, p. 31) and the inclusion or exclusion of organisations in the EE network (Zhao, 2020, p. 56). As the Czech situation is characterised by the fact that the provision of EE is dominated by NGOs, and their entry into the national education system has an institutionalised basis, their functioning also largely depends on public subsidies. Due to the interdependency of the public and non-government spheres, the setting provides a perfect opportunity to study interactions between government, non-government and private organisations and a suitable place to observe techniques, processes and practices via which diverse stakeholders reach a consensus on what the aims of their efforts should be.

However, what is said at conferences and other gatherings within the EE field does not usually make it into actual educational practice (Stevenson, 2007b). Thus, the communication of knowledge may not have the same impact as the adoption of specific educational practices. This opens up a second perspective for research on the environment in which EE organisations and their stakeholders meet and negotiate common goals. If the first focuses on the knowledge standards that EE actors co-create and, more broadly, the knowledge they communicate to each other, the second perspective explores collaboration as a process of sharing, adopting and rejecting actual learning practices. In other words, in our research we have asked the twin questions of how shared goals are achieved in a community of discourse (Swales, 1990) and simultaneously how the same occurs in a community of practice (Lave, 1991).

### ***Theories of achieving common goals in the organisational field***

In referring to a long-lasting collaboration involving various organisations that share a common point of interest, social scientists use the term “organisational field.” This notion allows us to

examine inter-organisational dynamics, cohesion processes, the level of their involvement in the field's matters, and the inter-organisational space constructed and shared by organisational communities (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991; Wooten & Hoffman, 2017; Zilber, 2014). Since the collaboration of various organisations is an increasingly important feature of their existence, social research has focused on this phenomenon (Berends & Sydow, 2020). Stakeholders in an organisational field highly interact (Scott, 2013, p. 56), which we can observe through deal-making, discursive dynamics, conflicts and conflict-solving (Zilber, 2014, pp. 103–104), or ideological material production aiming to strengthen the goal-identification (Morrill & Fine, 1997, pp. 428–431). These interactions are, in essence, tools organisations employ to achieve consensus on their common goals. In the literature, we find three theoretical perspectives explaining organisational goal negotiation. It is necessary to review them in order to identify the most suitable for understanding how common goals are interactively achieved at conferences and other collective events in the EE organisational field.

*Goals negotiation as consensus-building* is a theory that looks at organisational interaction from the position of a policymaker or a significant stakeholder (Susskind et al., 1999). It suggests that it is more complicated today to assert one's goals because governance relies on the voice of an ever-increasing number of stakeholders. This is obviously true for the EE organisational field. Therefore, negotiating consensus among relevant stakeholders is crucial (Braus et al., 2022). Since the consensus building process is usually initiated by organisational leaders (Carpenter, 1999, p. 63), it has been studied mainly as a rhetorical strategy of higher executives for achieving changes in their organisation (e.g., Sorsa & Vaara, 2020). With the help of discursive techniques, “leaders and managers gain the active participation of people at all levels of their organisations and, ultimately, secure broad endorsement for important policies, procedures and strategic directions” (Moore & Woodrow, 1999, p. 593). To study consensus-building in an inter-organisational setting, certain preconditions need to be accomplished, namely that individuals hold different goals, their actions aim to achieve them because they expect to benefit from achieving them, and they subconsciously evaluate the likelihood of achieving these goals and the yield from their achievement (Briggs, Kolfshoten & Vreede 2005, pp. 103–104).

*Goals production as discourse (re)production* represents a broad stream of thinking drawing on the ideas of Michel Foucault about the crucial role of discourse in establishing social realities. According to Foucault (1971, p. 8), a discourse gains the power to create its object by employing certain procedures controlling what may or may not be said and when it may or may not be said. From the sociological perspective, a collectivity bound together by the use of the same discourse, i.e. following a particular set of rules about who can say what, when and how, can be described as a “discourse community.” Producing a common goal is one of the typical features of a discourse community, along with specific and participatory communication methods, genres, vocabulary and a standard of knowledge (Swales, 1990, pp. 471–473). We can describe two discourse communities important for EE: a community consisting of school members and a community consisting of external educators and other agents, such as NGOs, university and government specialists, etc. External educators and other agents play a significant role in supplying teachers with the necessary knowledge for EE (Stevenson, 2007b, p. 279).

Dissemination of knowledge among discourse community members brings along the possibility for stakeholders to influence the content of the curriculum and, thus, in a broader sense, to determine educational goals. Discursive knowledge work allows for negotiating changes (Newman, 2012, p. 107) because it is an inconspicuous kind of power that can determine what is true (Stoddart, 2007, pp. 204–205), what are the conditions of intelligibility (Butler, 2021, p. 134), what educators dare to say in classes (the domain of the sayable) (Teague, 2018), and, as a result, it can form the subjectivities of pupils and students according to organisational goals (Doherty, 2006). The process of learning new knowledge can be attributed not only to individuals but also to organisations. If this process goes deep enough, it can involve changing the goals and norms of organisations (Santos Jara & Bouwen, 2006, pp. 28–29). If discursive practices are complemented

with non-discursive ones in a setting where knowledge, rather than being imposed by someone, emerges through the shared practices of experts in various fields, we can talk about a community of practice (Bouwen & Taillieu, 2004, p. 137).

*Goals achievement as governmentality* is a theoretical perspective considering the goal-shaping process as a form of weak power interplay among participating parties. Grounded in the idea of neoliberal governmentality, it is argued that contemporary governing is directed at aligning individual practices with the interests of political authorities (Foucault, 2009). The power is not imposed on population directly by the state apparatus but it is scattered in a network of actors who mediate it (media, businesses, NGOs, regulatory agencies and others) (Hursh & Henderson, 2011). These actors produce various stimuli that cause individuals to form a sense of responsibility (Foucault, 2008; Rose, 1999a; Shamir, 2008). Therefore, governmentality operates more with responsible personal choices, lifestyles and individual consumption (Rose, 1999b, p. 166).

One of the motives driving EE field's stakeholders — especially from the government or corporate sphere — may, in Beck's terms (1992), be the intention to get rid of the responsibility for environmental risks by placing them on the shoulders of individual consumers. As governments fail to address environmental issues which transcend their territory, "green governmentality" seems like a suitable approach to transfer responsibility for solving environmental crises onto individuals while, perhaps seemingly, preserving the principle of free will (Soneryd & Ugglå, 2015, pp. 1–2).

Consequently, environmentally conditioned personal ethics emerge, closely connected to the process of consumer responsabilisation for environmental issues. To put it differently, this indirect governing shapes individual practices by creating individual ethical self-understanding ("technology of self," Foucault, 2008) through the principles of market competition. Social institutions give citizens guidelines when searching for their 'selves' through alterations of their lifestyles, purchases and so on (Taylor, 2014, pp. 132–133). If we apply this perspective to the research of goal-shaping processes, it opens the way for us to understand the collective resources of agreement on common goals through the sharing of stimuli encouraging the participants of the EE field to accept personal moral responsibility — the responsibility related to an educational goal.

To summarise, we consider the social space where educators from environmentally educational NGOs, government officials and policymakers, teachers and school representatives, and private companies cooperate as an organisational field. In this EE field, actors create and modify meanings of EE, including its goals, in a mix of top-down and bottom-up processes. We will employ multiple theoretical perspectives to understand how these processes of establishing common goals take place. Firstly, we will focus on consensus building as the strategy of negotiating a unified view of a common goal devised by an important stakeholder or a group of stakeholders. Secondly, we will examine whether and how the provision of knowledge produces common goals. Either knowledge comes from a single source, creating a discourse community, or, if knowledge is not provided by a particular agent but is generated through the shared practices of different experts, a community of practice is developed. Thirdly, we will deal with the assumption that the institutional influence of various stakeholders in the EE field causes individuals to form a sense of responsibility related to a common goal.

## Research context and methods

EE conditions in the Czech Republic have enabled various organisations to get involved due to a particular extension of this field beyond standard curriculum-building procedures. EE is one of the cross-curricular objectives of the so-called Framework Educational Programmes (FEPs), under which themes that are not part of standard school subjects operate (see Svobodová, 2020 for details). Thus, EE is neither a separate subject nor a clearly defined part of the standard school curriculum. Teachers are only required to include elements of EE in their curricula. However,

teachers often lack specific expertise. It is therefore an attractive option to use the services of lecturers from environmental NGOs trained to deliver EE programmes. These organisations, although independent, mainly rely on public funding. They must meet the grant requirements to receive grants from local, regional or national authorities. Through these requirements, the government representatives can influence the content of EE as well as through specifications of the FEPs.

The general goal of EE, as defined by the Czech Ministry of the Environment, is the “development of competencies necessary for environmentally responsible behaviour” (Ministerstvo životního prostředí, 2011, p. 5). However, as the nature and focus of public, private and non-government organisations differ (Levin, 2008, pp. 15–17), their particular organisational goals may differ too. Engaging in the EE organisational field is thus an opportunity for them to shape the implemented educational goals according to their preferences. Furthermore, this motivation can translate into a more long-lasting engagement in the EE organisational field.

In our research, we examined how the motivations of organisations and individuals become the organisational field’s goals through observation of daily practices in the broader context of social organisation (Watson, 2012, pp. 16–21). When observing the practices and interactions, it is appropriate to look for “the middle ground” between looking at the activities of entire organisations and their individual members (Wohlgezogen & Hirsch, 2009). Field-level events can serve well in this way for research purposes. In particular, educational and professional conferences have proven helpful in studying organisational dynamics (Garud, 2008; Giami & Nayak, 2019; Mair & Frew, 2016; Meyer et al., 2005; Oliver & Montgomery, 2008). Conferences provide an excellent setting to study goal-shaping through knowledge sharing because they act as a “marketplace promoting an ideology” (Nicolson, 2016, p. 66). Views and attitudes spread not just through keynote speeches but also during side events (Hjerpe & Linnér, 2010) or quite informally, for example, during coffee and lunch breaks, where so-called “soft spaces of governance” emerge (Haughton et al., 2013, p. 217). Due to the previously described local interdependencies among EE NGOs, government officials, and to some extent, private enterprises, representatives from all these organisations have a high presence at the Czech EE field-wide events.

Ethnographic research is suitable for studying the development of group interactions at both the informal level (Morrill & Fine, 1997) and the level of the organisational field (Watson, 2012; Zilber, 2014). In order to observe goal formation in the process of sharing knowledge and practices while reaching consensus, we used four data acquisition methods to make our ethnography multi-sited (Zilber, 2014, pp. 103–104) and to achieve data triangulation.

1. A calendar and personal diary. IC worked for an EE NGO from 2017 to 2020. As a lecturer and event organiser, he experienced how educational programmes were changed or replaced, and how knowledge and practices shared in the EE field were reshaped according to changing goals. The diary also includes notes and documents from six EE field events (students’ competition, an EE fair, a lecturers’ course and three local conferences). Prior to analysis, all sensitive personal data was removed from the documents.
2. Field notes from organisational ethnography in an EE NGO (2021 to 2022). The same researcher as in (1) continued his work in the NGO, but this time he also conducted an overt participant observation. The research focus was on the development of environmentally responsible subjectivities, which was the topic of his dissertation. As part of his work, he helped innovate some of the educational programmes and participated in the transformation of educational goals into EE practices. All members of the NGO were informed about and agreed to the research. In addition, formal informed consent was obtained from the managers of the NGO as they also participated in the in-depth interviews (see 4).
3. Field notes from participant observation at seven field events (2021–2022). These were mainly regional EE conferences, but also an international conference and a seminar on water management, and were sampled according to time and location availability. The conferences

**Table 1.** Summary of data from environmental education events used in the analysis

Event	Keynote speeches*	Sessions*	Coffee/Lunch break or other conversations	Workshops and field trips
Course	–	–	Innumerable	3 days
Fair	–	–	3	–
Students' competition	–	7	–	–
Online seminar	3	–	–	2
Regional conferences (7)	60	–	21	6
Permaculture conference	7	–	4	–
International conference	16	14	10	1

\*Analysed public recordings of speeches/sessions are included.

\*\*Regional EE conferences usually do not have parallel sessions.

were attended by representatives of ministries, non-profit and educational organisations, entrepreneurs, academics and interested lay people. We gathered field notes and transcripts of keynote speeches, side events (workshops and field trips), lunch/coffee breaks or end-of-day interviews with participants. Since it was not possible to cover all conference sections, we included transcribed video quotes as suggested by other researchers (Islam, 2015). Because securing informed consent is problematic at events with many participants, we informed both the event organisers and the participants we interviewed about our research and obtained their consent (Plankey-Videla, 2012).

4. Transcripts of twenty-one in-depth interviews about the organisation and experience of failure in EE. These interviews were conducted by the same researchers but as part of a related project focusing on the organisation and experience of failure in EE. Here they were used to explore individual perspectives on what EE goals are, what they should be, and how they are shaped. The majority of interviewees were EE lecturers or NGO managers; two were representatives of professional EE organisations that manage and regulate NGOs, e.g. through certification; and two were government officials who control the distribution of grants to EE educators. Interviewees were selected using snowball sampling, but with an attempt to ensure spatial and organisational diversity across the country. Interviews were conducted online and face-to-face, with the majority of interviews conducted online. Informed consent was obtained from all interviewees prior to the interview.

All interviews and audio-visual recordings were transcribed verbatim, and analysed together with the diaries and field notes in the open-source Requal package (<https://github.com/RE-QDA/requal/>). To ensure confidentiality, we have anonymised all data. The analytic procedure was inspired by Grace Spencer's article on at-risk youth (Spencer, 2013, pp. 452–454). We first read all the data carefully to familiarise ourselves with them. We then coded the data using deductive codes based on the concepts described in the theoretical section of this paper and inductive codes that emerged during the coding process. Disagreements between coders were repeatedly discussed and the use of codes was adjusted. Finally, we looked for theoretically relevant patterns and their interrelationships in the coded passages and confronted them with existing findings in the literature.

### Organised tolerance and consensus building

Our first assumption was that conferences and meetings could be considered consensus-building events regarding the goals of EE. However, we found that consensus-making activity was implied

rather than openly manifested in presentations and discussions. See the following extracts from the conference field notes:

A high-ranking politician: “Education for austerity, “being frugal” - it’s like honesty - it must permeate the whole of life.” (paraphrased)

(...)

A global businessman: “Some say we need to de-grow the economy; others say that by doing so, we will destroy solid systems, including education.” Showing a picture of a solar aeroplane flying. (...) “EE is about teaching people new things to do and to think.”

(...)

A university professor: Displaying a picture of one Extinction Rebellion’s protest action. “We must listen to these voices.”

(field notes, International EE conference, Prague, 14.3.2022)

Substantively speaking, the above speakers differ on what they see as the goal of EE: to educate in the morality of thrift, or technological development, or civic activism. The difference in views is related to their different positions: politicians like to appeal to morality, entrepreneurs to innovation and university professors to civil society. However, all the contributions evoked a positive response in the conference hall. Moreover, there were no disagreements among the respective speakers when they subsequently participated in a panel discussion. Can we say that such a conference is a consensus-building event?

Judith Innes (2004, p. 7) listed the conditions that must be met in order for a process to be described as consensus building. When applied to our data, EE actions seem to meet them all: the actions were inclusive of stakeholders, they participated meaningfully with the right to freely express their views to which others listened, dialogue developed about the positions presented, and efforts were made to satisfy their concerns. On the other hand, consensus was reached only at a very general level, i.e. that the aim of EE is to educate the public, particularly young people, in order to raise their environmental awareness, and that EE has a positive impact. Thus, we could observe significant discrepancies in the speakers’ conceptions of EE in all the conferences we observed. Even when conflict seemed imminent, it was unlikely to transpire.

It would be more accurate to say that such a consensus was not reached but only confirmed given the selection of speakers known for their support of EE and their temporal and spatial ordering. On a more subtle level, organisers promoted consensus by designing pro-EE features of the events. In one case, conference organisers hung papers with zero-waste tips around the main corridor. Similarly, suggestions on, e.g., how to use less tap water, were placed around the offices of the examined NGO. Adjustments of daily interactions, rituals and ideological material production (posters, leaflets, emails and other forms of communication) are commonly used to achieve identification with an organisation’s goals (Morrill & Fine, 1997, pp. 430–431).

Another possible explanation of this pseudo-consensus is the idea that cooperation and connection between different organisations and stakeholders is more important than pursuing individual goals. In this way, the better utilisation of each organisation’s potential becomes possible as different stakeholders from different backgrounds can bring different knowledge into the collaboration (Prior, 2013, pp. 168–170). A strategy of reducing efforts to enforce individual goals is put in place to facilitate willingness to cooperate. As an illustration, we present a brief transcript of field notes from participant observation at one conference. These notes were added to a keynote speaker’s presentation points:

“Building stronger networks: collaborate generously” - The speaker’s main message is that we should share goals and not just promote our own.

“Humility, not brand” - The shared goal is more important than promoting a single organisation. (field notes, International EE conference, Prague, 14.3.2022)

The speaker refers to brand-building impeding the general efforts of EE. In doing so, she asserts that behind all EE stakeholders' efforts, there is indisputably some common goal.

As stated before, we expected conflicts arising from various stakeholders' interests and experiences in the process of reaching common goals. Julian Prior proposes cognitive frame analysis as one of the approaches to solving environmental conflicts. He describes cognitive frames as "conceptual filters through which parties to a conflict or negotiation interpret and process their lived experiences" (2013, p. 172). While the conflict is not apparent in the EE field we studied, contrasts between the interests of various organisations remain and are peacefully vocalised at joint events. Despite these contrasts, an air of joint effort prevails. The "filters" through which stakeholders perceive their shared experience are, therefore, consensually reflecting on the assumption that they need to connect to face an undefined common goal.

The unimposed consensus on the benefits of educational efforts to goals whose contours are not clearly defined is especially noticeable in how tenaciously educators develop their endeavours despite obstacles. Whether it is the constant necessity to overcome financial hardship, the pervasive need to update environmental knowledge, the pressure to accept non-educational roles, or the endurance during COVID-19 times, their resilience reveals a responsibility towards some higher goal, however flexible the idea of such goal is. It is also apparent from the researcher's summary of his experience as a lecturer in one of the EE NGOs:

Working at [the organisation] was surprisingly demanding and exhausting, so much so that I hit rock bottom. Tutoring in overheated and poorly ventilated classrooms under an asphalt roof, or tutoring unmanageable children in the junior high for many days in a row, when I lost my voice and was shocked by the school staff's unwillingness to help in any way. (. . .) Despite these and other difficulties, among the lecturers, there is enthusiasm for this work, and I rarely noticed any doubts about its merit. Such an unspoken assumption is that we are all after the same thing, which is good, and we have to manage it somehow. (field notes from participant observation in an EE NGO, November 2022)

To summarise, the observed forms of consensus-building strategies at the EE events were relatively subtle. Consensus-oriented rhetoric was present, but as open conflict rarely occurs there, there was no need to involve conflict resolution strategies. It appears that stakeholders and generally all attendees are committing to any proposal which occurs in the field, even though they are conflicting in their nature. Therefore, consensus-building always ends in the first stage of this process (Briggs et al., 2005, p. 106). As the intentions of asserting one's proposals on other stakeholders were hardly observable, we shall grasp their presentations and dialogues as deliberation based on common cognitive frames rather than negotiation (Van de Kerkhof, 2006).

### **Discourse community or community of practice?**

In correspondence with the previous finding, we found that knowledge sharing takes place freely in the EE field without exclusion or restriction. Within this spirit of "everything goes," there are almost no appropriate vocabulary or knowledge limitations. Information about climate, water retention technologies or circular economy are as acceptable as knowledge produced by other disciplines, as the following conference contributions show:

Café owner: "We see cafés as an important meeting place, an opportunity for open, free and democratic discussion. We always strive to be a good partner to the local community and civil society, to support them and help them grow." (diary, local conference, Prague, 31.10.2018)



EE consultant: “Today’s youth may lack environmental knowledge, but they experience environmental grief that can result in depression and anxiety. However, this grief can be alleviated or prevented, for example by projects such as the Forest at School.” (field notes, local meeting, Vlašim, 11.11.2021)

Developer: “We still cannot quantify many aspects of quality and sustainable housing in monetary terms. However, many building parameters do not only affect the occupants of the houses, but also affect others in the near or distant surroundings. We are talking about so-called positive externalities.” (field notes, local conference, Prague, 11.2.2021)

The topics also include the importance of ecopsychology, visual literacy, effective communication, the need for democracy and many others. The diversity of speakers participating in these events raises doubts regarding their ability to establish a shared vocabulary, communication methods or knowledge standards. The stakeholders hold diverse grounds, experiences and needs, which pose significant challenges to establishing a common ground. However, what these heterogeneous statements unify is the more or less apparent link to EE. Thus, stakeholders may disagree on many substantial matters, but they all feel the commitment to transfer “it” to citizens, particularly the young ones. An example of that is a conference presentation called “What is and what is not EE: effective and ineffective practices”:

A speaker at the conference gave an “unfortunate” example of an EE lecturer talking too much about species extinction. At the end of the programme, which included a film about the destruction of the planet, the lecturer — according to the speaker - concluded as follows:

Lecturer: “And who is to blame?”

Pupils: “All of us.”

Lecturer: “And who is supposed to do something about it?”

Pupils: “All of us.”

The speaker then compared this procedure to how the Christian Church ensured obedience in the Middle Ages (diary, local conference, Prague, 17.10.2019)

The conference speaker very derisively referred to the lecturer’s way of presenting the educational programme. As he further stated, EE should avoid manipulation and lead to the transfer of competencies for the necessary action. But the normative assessment here refers to educational practices, not the vocabulary the lecturer employed or the knowledge behind it. The speaker does not object that the included issues were the extinction of species or the environmental destruction of the Earth. He is concerned about the level of negative messages and the effect of inducing guilt. This example is demonstrative of the discourse commonly shared among EE stakeholders.

A certain aspect of discursive exclusion can be seen in our data. Presenting information in alignment with the interests of the represented organisation was the main thread of the event’s main programme, as well as inside events and other presentations. Organisations also imbue the conveyed knowledge with connotations. Participating companies, for example, present their products as environmentally positive or emphasise only their positive aspects. However, we have no example in our data where these presentations have been directly challenged or contradicted as unreliable. Although occasionally, we have observed that someone in the audience has ironically quietly chuckled or someone has asked a doubting question. However, there was never an overt challenge to a statement if the speaker explicitly claimed that they or an organisation they were members of were concerned with improving the environment or raising awareness of environmental issues. When controversy threatens, the moderator intervenes, as in the following example:

In a discussion with a representative of a prominent developer, someone from the audience asked: “How does the proposed ‘green’ project compare financially with conventional

projects?” The representative responded unconvincingly: “It’s not important for us; it pays off in the long run.” The moderator then went on to say, in a highly lackey-like manner, that “There is nothing to compare it to because [developer] no longer does conventional projects.” (field notes, local conference, Prague, 11.2.2021)

Hence, our data suggest that conferences and meetings reproduce more of a community of EE practice than any robust discourse of EE in the Foucauldian sense. Speakers typically present EE knowledge only in connection with some corresponding practices – planting trees to which students could give names, promoting fair trade practices by a chain of cafés or an innovative grass irrigation method between the tracks by a construction company. Nonetheless, a community of practices encompasses more than mere sharing of practices in connection with relevant knowledge. Shared practices in such an environment subsequently produce knowledge (Bouwen & Taillieu, 2004, p. 147). This assumption can be verified in a situation where several organisations join together for a specific goal. One of the speakers representing the non-profit sector summarised such a case at the conference. His NGO issued a campaign in collaboration with over 80 schools nationwide aiming at sustainability. As he summarised, the results were underwhelming:

“Each challenge [in our campaign] aimed to prompt individuals to exert some self-restraint. And how did it turn out? Great, of course! (. . .) In that campaign, approximately 200 tons of carbon dioxide were saved just because those people limited their consumption. That’s a good, big number. But at the same time, the power plant [name of a coal electricity plant] produced 105,769 tons of carbon dioxide. The impact on the environment from this point of view is completely zero. (. . .) Individualism within a sustainable way of life has no effect. (. . .) We have to teach them to come out of their shell, give them the competencies of an active citizen and show them that they too can influence the society” (field notes, national meeting, Prague, 11.11.2021)

Through the campaign, the implementation of which involved various stakeholders from the public education system and educational NGOs, they concluded that sustainable decisions of individuals have only a marginal effect on improving the state of the environment. This knowledge led them to the conclusion that the real goal of EE should be the transfer of competencies for active citizenship. Thus, elements are present in the field of EE, based on which it is possible to say that this environment produces communities of practice. In the processes of shared practice, they subsequently formulate common goals. However, it still needs to be clarified what makes the individual participants of events in the EE field willing to participate in these common goals.

### **Responsibilisation for fulfilling EE goals**

The dependence of Czech NGOs in the field of EE on public funding creates space for authorities to intervene in the EE curriculum. In our research, we encountered multiple cases of this top-down power mechanism. For example, one official told us that applicants would now be required to list their climate education tutors as a condition of receiving a grant. Despite the dominance of public stakeholders, NGOs possess procedures to deal with this imbalance of positions, as the following excerpt from the interview with an EE NGO executive and lecturer shows:

Interviewer: “And does it make any difference when doing or approving the project whether you apply [for funding] to the ministry or the municipality?”

NGO Executive: “They want different things to accomplish the project. So it makes a bit of a difference, but basically not that much, I guess. We just have to pay attention to what kind of

things they want. And then we actually also have a lot of projects from [name of county]. We get from them as well. And so those are causing a lot of problems.” (laughs)

Interviewer: “In the sense that they don’t want to give [money] or that they’re spiking the criteria a lot?”

NGO Executive: “They require a lot” (Interview, 3.4.2022).

The disciplinary capacity of public authorities collides with the non-systemic nature of education provided by NGOs. Various means of disciplination are sometimes applied by stakeholders who are not in a superior position (Hargreaves, 2010). In our research, we found that reframing one’s goals into the individual responsibility of educators was a conventional means of disciplination in the EE organisational field. Decisive statements containing phrases such as “we must,” “we do,” “it is necessary,” or more implicitly, “for that, we do” create demands that educators are expected to live up to. Due to the number of such demands and their different nature arising from the diversity of stakeholders, it is increasingly difficult for educators to meet them. In the following example, an eco-psychologist explains what slogans like “Good communication as a bridge” or “We must find things that will appeal to the population” mean:

“Nowadays, when talking about environmental problems, I hear the phrase ‘people need to understand’ more often. (. . .) I think the sentence is completely wrong. (. . .) Because we cannot replace the people. (. . .) Our task is to convince those people as they are and as they think. To take their current attitudes and behaviour seriously.” This led him to the slogan “Good communication as a bridge.” “We must find things that will appeal to the population” (field notes, local conference, Prague, 17.10.2019).

The speaker shifts the role of educators from presenting knowledge to shaping attitudes - convincing, which is a much harder task. He points out the necessity of high-quality communication of pro-environmental messages in his contribution. In doing so, he places a demand on the educators in the conference audience to expand their competencies to the field of public communication. However, for them, it presents an additional requirement on their abilities which goes beyond the educational field in which they specialise. Hence, in addition to their educational role, school teachers and NGO lecturers are also expected to possess competence in public and crisis communication, event organising and expertise in various scientific fields, including biology, chemistry, physics, geology, sociology, jurisprudence, as well as influencers, lobbyists and other areas. These increasing expectations, encompassing areas beyond educators’ original domain and motivation, are predicated on the belief that they are essential for achieving a common goal, the definition of which differs among various stakeholders. Achieving such a goal - however undefined - is nevertheless placed as their individual responsibility.

The outcome of these demands for personal responsibility in environmental matters is limited. On the one hand, educators are not able to meet all the requirements placed on them. On the other hand, they are aware that their own initiative, which enriches the standard curriculum, has only a limited positive impact on the environment. It would be inaccurate to assert that Czech environmental educators refuse to be responsabilised for the effectiveness of their activities. However, concerns about the restricted effectiveness of this approach prompt consideration of whether responsibility should be directed more towards power structures, as the director of one EE NGO put it:

Interviewer: “What was your idea before, and how has it changed now?”

NGO director: “Just in that active citizenship, because I realised that it’s great when every single person does something, but that it’s just as important — I don’t want to say more important or less important, I don’t have a clear opinion on this — but that it’s actually just

as important that that behaviour and action in favour of the environment is passed on to politicians” (interview, 12. 4. 2022).

Our observation showed that tools for active citizenship are not considered a standard part of EE programmes. The transfer of competencies to generate political pressure is mainly the domain of public activism organisations, which provide EE only as one of their many activities. Some comments, such as the one quoted from the interview just above, suggest that pressure for personal responsibility on the part of environmental educators may lead to the opposite effect - namely, a demand that public and private institutions themselves take responsibility for environmentally positive action.

## Discussion and conclusion

Our findings indicate that although the studied field meets all conditions to observe consensus-building strategies (Briggs et al., 2005, pp. 103–104; Innes, 2004, p. 7), they are rarely applied. We have uncovered significant differences in the demands placed on educators by different stakeholders. Nevertheless, there are no open conflicts in the EE organisational field. However, as Innes explains: “Consensus building emerges as a practice exactly in the cases where controversy is high, where goals and interests conflict, and where contradictions prevent bureaucracies from acting and political deal makers from being successful. Conflict is ever present throughout a consensus building process” (ibid., pp. 13–14). Despite the observed conflicts of goals, the researched environment is very consensual, and stakeholders do not expect a discrepancy in their positions, which is why they employ consensus-building strategies only very rarely. The absence of practices aimed at achieving consensus also indicates that there are no clear dominant actors in this educational field who could more easily promote their goals from their position.

One way to examine the goal-shaping process among stakeholders of relatively equal footing is to concentrate on the shared vocabulary and knowledge. By doing so, we observed that stakeholders from the most diverse backgrounds enter the EE field, relying on different vocabularies, sets of knowledge and even cognitive methods. Normative displays are common but almost exclusively concern educational practices or individual conduct. Therefore, the “discourse community” concept does not fit the studied environment. Nevertheless, this does not mean that instrumental, i.e. community building, use of knowledge is not present in this educational field. Knowledge was often linked to practices from different expertises (Bouwen & Taillieu, 2004, p. 147). Sharing know-how is one of the most frequent activities we observed. However, there are notable limits to the extent to which knowledge and practices shared among EE stakeholders are incorporated into training programmes or practices. Our findings show that knowledge and practices coming from many different stakeholders have a greater chance of penetrating EE programmes. Educational organisations also implement especially those practices that are based on closer cooperation that goes beyond individual workshops or seminars. We can state that in the studied educational field, communities of practice do form around inter-organisational cooperation. Some stakeholders of the EE field participate in practices and knowledge sharing, while others form the outer circle of these communities to observe and possibly adopt their outputs. Interdependencies then emerge mostly only among the “inner-circles” organisations.

Another perspective we explored to explain how common EE goals arise is the ethical responsabilisation of subjects. Building on the work of M. Foucault (2008), we examined if environmental educators are led to accept individual or organisational responsibility for phenomena aligned with the interests of other stakeholders, especially government officials. In EE’s organisational field, many demands are placed on individual educators and the organisations representing them. These requirements go far beyond ordinary educational competencies, leading educators to accept responsibility for matters beyond the confines of the classroom. These

demands originate from stakeholders across the EE field, and they extend to educators and other groups targeted by EE, as explicitly stated by our research participants. Among these targeted groups, educators frequently mentioned parents, while other stakeholders engaged with different segments of the population. Thus, the process of responsabilisation in EE aims to extend responsibility to the youth and, more broadly, the entire population, in line with the relevant goals. To fully understand this dynamic, we must consider the organisational environment surrounding EE in the Czech Republic as an integral part of the social organisation it shapes (Watson, 2012, pp. 16–18).

As noted above, the EE organisational area under study shows a surprising degree of agreement despite the different goals of the involved stakeholders. Weak manifestations of conflict contribute to efforts to share knowledge, practices and ethical accountability.<sup>1</sup> In the background of these efforts lies the notion of an undefined goal common to all stakeholders. This notion facilitates a commitment to deepen inter-organisational cooperation, to suppress one's own goals at the expense of a common goal, and motivates stakeholders to continue in educational and other activities despite numerous obstacles. Building on the concept of cognitive frames, which refers to “the conceptual filters through which parties to a conflict or negotiation interpret and process their life experiences” (Prior, 2013, 172), we suggest considering “cognitive connections” applicable to situations of potential conflicts that do not erupt. Given the characteristics of cognitive frameworks, cognitive connections allow stakeholders with different interests and expectations about EE goals to interpret their actions consensually as generally beneficial, leading to productive inter-organisational linkages.

Our research has some limitations. Firstly, the sampling of respondents for in-depth interviews and selecting events for participant observation is burdened by the uneven representation of EE across Czech regions. We tried to achieve the highest possible representation of the country's spatial diversity. However, this was only partially feasible due to the lower number of EE NGOs in some parts of the country and limited research capacities. Thus, we may have missed partial aspects of inter-organisational dynamics in peripheral areas from EE's perspective. Secondly, although we disclosed the specific characteristics of the investigated environment, the findings are still specific to the Czech setting. There are many issues influencing stakeholders' actions that we cannot cover in one research. Research focusing on the problematic nature of common goals emerging in other educational contexts could help distinguish the particular from the general. Thirdly, our consideration of the non-conflictual nature of the studied inter-organisational space does not cover the potential conflicts below the surface. In our analysis, we took into account even what stakeholders avoided in their speeches. Our data encompass both the public presentation of organisations and their stakeholders and the internal functioning of an investigated NGO. However, it was not possible to capture the communication that takes place between individual stakeholders. It is, therefore, possible that there are hidden conflicts regarding the general direction of EE.

Throughout this research, we have assumed that the common goals of stakeholders in the EE environment are not universally agreed upon but are subject to negotiation. Multiple inter-organisational linkages emerge, and individual organisations and their stakeholders have the opportunity to adapt and redefine the overarching goals of the entire organisational domain according to their own goals. This may push some issues and concepts into the background while others come to the fore. The informality of the educational environment under study allows marginal stakeholders to intervene in common issues. Despite the reduced dominance of some stakeholders, it is clear that certain topics and issues gain more importance than others (Læssøe,

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<sup>1</sup>As this was not a focus of our interest, we found few intra-organisational discussions about common goals, specifically discussions about the direction of the NGO. Suggestions came mainly from senior members of the organisation, while instructors tended to end up adopting them. And, as with inter-organisational events, the atmosphere of the decision-making process was entirely consensual.

2010). To better understand how agreement is reached on the thematic areas of EE and its overall direction, further research should focus on the power dynamics involved in this process.

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**Ethical standard.** This research was conducted in accordance with the International Sociological Association's Code of Ethics (<https://www.isa-sociology.org/en/about-isa/code-of-ethics/>).

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