

Summary of the Symposium

February 19th, 2026

Executive Summary

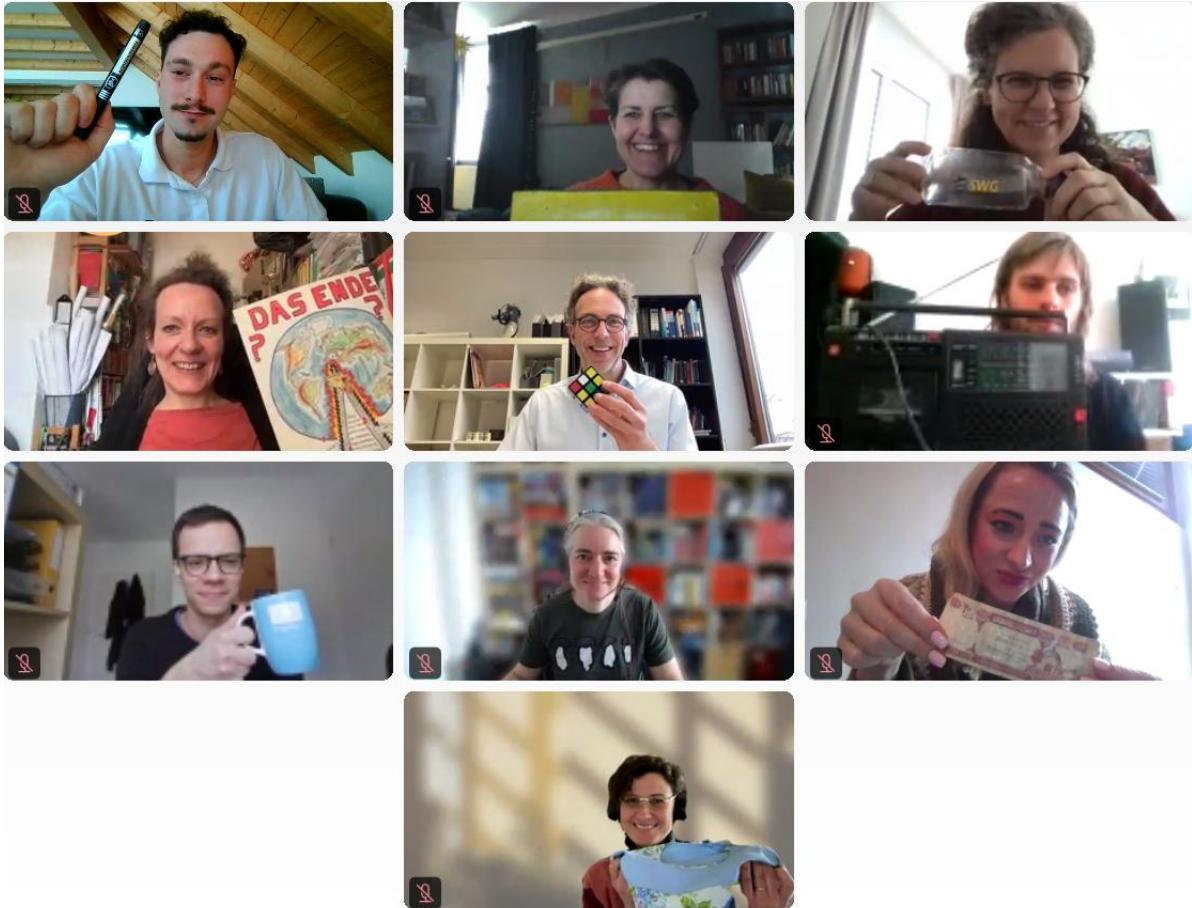
The symposium on February 19, 2026, brought together researchers and practitioners to discuss key issues surrounding Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), inclusion, and social transformation. The discussions made it clear that sustainability, education, and social justice are closely intertwined and require new forms of collaboration between research, practice, and policy. Particular emphasis was placed on the importance of critical perspectives on education, the role of non-formal learning spaces, and the challenges posed by social polarization and disinformation. The symposium highlighted the importance of shared spaces for reflection in bringing together different perspectives and developing future collaborations.

Introduction and Context of the Symposium

The symposium provided an open space for exchange, reflection, and collaborative thinking on key issues surrounding education for sustainable development, inclusion, and political and democratic education. The aim of the meeting was to bring together diverse perspectives from research, educational practice, and the political context, and to discuss shared challenges as well as potential starting points for future collaboration.

At the start of the event, personal artifacts were presented that highlighted individual approaches to the themes of sustainability, education, and social responsibility. These objects offered biographical perspectives and illustrated how strongly personal experiences, international encounters, and professional contexts shape the participants' commitment.

Even at this stage, it became clear that sustainability, inclusion, and democratic education are closely intertwined and cannot be viewed in isolation from one another. Rather, they are closely linked to social, political, and economic developments.



Plenary Discussion

During the ensuing discussion, different perspectives on current societal challenges came to light.

Maja spoke openly about her growing frustration with global developments in the area of sustainability. Despite numerous initiatives, she noted, the world seems to be moving in the wrong direction, while public interest and political will often appear limited. In this context, she referred to the book *I Want a Better Catastrophe* by Andrew Boyd, which explores how people can remain capable of taking action in the face of global crises.

Sven picked up on this idea and emphasized the importance of attitudes and mindsets for social change processes. In his work in the higher education context, he focuses, among other things, on approaches such as design thinking and the question of how people can move from thinking to acting. Social aspects and collaborative learning processes are particularly important in this regard.

Lena pointed out that many positive developments already exist—such as new forms of housing, civic movements, or social innovations. At the same time, she asked what role education plays in such transformation processes. It often remains unclear which educational backgrounds or experiences enable people to actively engage in social change processes. This raises the question of how education systems can support such developments and how relevant insights can be made more accessible to policymakers.

Rachel picked up on this idea and emphasized that many social learning processes take place outside formal educational institutions. Civic movements, community initiatives, and informal learning processes also represent forms of education. However, education for sustainable development is often conceived primarily within institutional and top-down organized programs, while informal and community-based learning processes are less visible.

Susanne introduced the topic of depoliticization into the discussion. Particularly in the fields of inclusion and special education, many problems are diagnosed and treated at the individual level, while societal and structural causes are frequently overlooked. Attempts to address such connections often met with resistance. At the same time, she expressed the hope that more interconnected, “rhizomatic” ways of thinking and working could emerge, making the connections between different topics and perspectives more visible.

Pascal also took up the topic of depoliticization and linked it to questions of socio-ecological transformation. In non-formal education, he noted, there is often the challenge of conveying complex social issues—such as climate change, energy policy, or disinformation—in a way that remains understandable and relevant to young people. At the same time, he said, the goal is to convey realistic perspectives without losing hope, and to encourage people to actively shape the future.

Over the course of the discussion, overarching themes also emerged, including questions about the role of knowledge, language, and power in educational and transformation processes. For example, participants discussed how scientific findings can be better translated into political decision-making processes and what role language and terminology play in social change.

Grassroots initiatives and local projects were also highlighted as important catalysts for social innovation. At the same time, the challenge of making such initiatives politically relevant and making their impacts visible was discussed.

Another topic was addressing new digital challenges, particularly in connection with disinformation and artificial intelligence. The question was raised as to how critical thinking skills can be strengthened when dealing with information and technologies.

Overall, it became clear how important spaces are where different perspectives can come together and be reflected upon collectively.

Results of the group work

Following the joint discussion, the participants worked in four groups on different thematic areas.

Group 1 – Epistemic Justice and Knowledge Production

This group addressed questions of epistemic justice and the role of knowledge production in educational and transformation processes.

Among other things, the group discussed the concept of epistemic violence and the question of whose knowledge is recognized in educational and research contexts and which perspectives may remain invisible. In doing so, they critically reflected on how dominant scientific and institutional perspectives can marginalize certain forms of knowledge.

Another focus was on young people's visions of the future. The group noted that the future is often portrayed in very negative terms and asked how alternative visions of the future can be made visible.

In addition, questions of methodology were discussed, particularly with regard to different knowledge systems, linguistic perspectives, and global power relations in knowledge production. It was emphasized that social and ecological issues must be considered together.

The role of non-formal educational spaces was also highlighted, as these often facilitate more reflective and dialogic learning processes.

Group 2 – Critical Perspectives on Education and Transformation

This group explored critical perspectives on education in the context of social transformation.

Among other things, the discussion focused on the common foundations shared by different approaches to critical education and where differences exist. The goal was to identify potential common perspectives without simplifying or depoliticizing the diversity of approaches.

A central point was the question of how critical thinking can be strengthened as a component of transformation processes and what role education plays in this.

Group 3 – Tension, Shared Agenda, and the Political Dimension of Education

This group focused in particular on the tension between neutrality and the political dimension of education.

Education is often understood as neutral—yet neutrality does not mean indifference. Rather, it was emphasized that a central task of political and non-formal education is to promote critical thinking and support people in verifying information, questioning arguments, and reflecting on their own positions.

This challenge is particularly evident in the context of climate education, as sustainability is closely linked to political and ethical issues. At the same time, debates on energy policy or climate protection are highly polarized in many European countries.

Disinformation and AI-generated content were also addressed as growing challenges. In this context, the importance of media literacy and critical judgment was highlighted.

Furthermore, differences between formal and non-formal education were discussed. While formal education is often shaped by curricula and exams, non-formal learning spaces frequently offer more opportunities for open exchange and collaborative learning.

Joint Reflection and Concluding Discussion

In the concluding reflection session, key ideas from the group work were synthesized.

It became clear that many initiatives already exist that drive social change from the bottom up. At the same time, it was noted that such grassroots structures are often weakened by institutional or political frameworks. A central question was therefore how such processes can be designed to be scalable.

Several contributions emphasized the importance of human-centered narratives to make social transformation more understandable. Trust was highlighted as a central prerequisite for change processes, while strong control mechanisms can tend to hinder innovation.

The discussion also addressed fundamental questions about how social change arises and what role education, research, and politics play in this. Sustainable development was not understood as a technical formula, but rather as a political and social negotiation process.

The perspective of political decision-makers was also considered. These decision-makers are often under considerable pressure and have only limited room for maneuver themselves. Against this backdrop, the discussion focused on the role research can play. Rather than offering immediate policy recommendations, the initial focus could be on better understanding and making visible transformation processes and educational trajectories.

It was emphasized repeatedly that education, just like sustainability, is not neutral but always contains normative and political dimensions.