12 Reimagining Citizenship: Leveraging Global Citizenship Education for Planetary Belonging and Democratic Participation

> *Expanding democratic participation on a global scale has never been more crucial. Global citizenship education aims to transform students as agents of change to face the challenges of the 21st century.*
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The globalisation of the economy, politics, and societies, coupled with the resultant decline in the effective power of nation-states, has rendered the traditional idea of national citizenship, a cornerstone of the modern rule of law, increasingly obsolete. In this evolving landscape, the classic notion of active citizenship encounters significant challenges.

However, new opportunities and demands for citizenship also arise in post-national global societies. Key dimensions of this crisis that warrant attention include:

- The erosion of the spaces for exercising citizenship as participation in public space leads to a diminished sense of responsibility and solidarity.
- Environmental challenges bind humanity into a shared destiny, imposing collective global responsibilities toward the biosphere.
- Global migrations, driven by conflict, poverty, and climate change, challenge the concept of citizenship granted by nation-states. This dual nature of citizenship both includes (by granting rights) and excludes (by restricting those rights to some) based on varying perspectives in host countries.
- Global conflicts and tensions produce significant social and economic impacts, uniting humanity in a common destiny overshadowed by the nuclear threat.
- The digital revolution has engendered new risks, including misinformation and 'fake news', amplified by algorithmic filter bubbles and the emergence of echo chambers, not to mention the rise of new and old forms of exclusion and discrimination.

These challenges cannot be met by the governments and citizens of nation-states. But the new post-national scenarios also open up new opportunities for rethinking the idea of citizenship as democratic participation, provided that it is expressed as planetary belonging:

- The development of active, critical, responsible and solidary citizens capable of exercising political virtues and practicing the art of politics to meet planetary challenges.
- The emergence of global citizenship as ecological and social belonging to the planet which expands the sense of belonging from national society to the biosphere and foreshadows an environmental ethic.
- The construction of intercultural and solidarity-based citizenships that address the cultural diversity of contemporary societies and manage conflicts in a non-violent way;
- Digital citizenship, understood as the ability to exercise the rights and duties associated with a critical use of the resources generated by the digital revolution, which has introduced new tools for engagement, reducing traditional hierarchies and widening opportunities for social and political entrepreneurship by reframing individual and social relations as well as the interactions between citizens and governments;
- The new frontiers of citizen science envisage a paradigm shift in scientific research encompassing an active, participatory and critical perspective.

The possibility of transforming the challenges outlined above into opportunities for broadening global democratic participation lies largely in the opportunities offered by global citizenship education (GCED).

Global citizenship education is an approach that aims to develop knowledge, skills, and attitudes that enable students to understand and face the challenges of globalisation and to benefit from its opportunities.

It does not focus on new educational content but mainly on nurturing the students' worldview, enabling them to see the connections between phenomena and learning contents. It is a transformative approach, that aims to make learners agents of change to transform the reality in which they live.

Over the past two decades, the international community has been strongly engaged in this direction, following the 2012 Global Education First Initiative which identified three priorities: put every child in school; improve the quality of learning; and foster global citizenship. Since then, international organisations, followed by national governments, have begun to engage with this topic, striving to translate these priorities into educational policies and practices.

Even if the legal status of a "global citizen" does not yet exist, nevertheless global citizenship education is needed as an educational approach to foster citizens' participation. It is a transformative rather than a merely transmissive approach; in this sense, it constitutes a political practice. It aims at transforming students as agents of change because to face the challenges of the 21st century, top-down solutions are essential but not sufficient; a push from below is also needed to support democracies that require active, solidary and responsible citizens. In this vein, UNESCO advocates for a new social contract for education so that education systems can be well-equipped to meet the challenges of the XXI century.

However, the emergence of right-wing populism and the politics of ethno-nationalism worldwide tend to undermine the global citizenship discourse by enhancing anti-globalisation sentiments. Populist right claims that the loss of people's political voice and economic welfare is largely due to globalisation, combined with an anti-migration narrative, blames cultural diversity for people's social and economic insecurity.

In this context, expanding democratic participation on a global scale has never been more crucial and timely.

I have been teaching global citizenship education as a transversal global skill at various levels in higher education by developing an original teaching approach, which is both participative and experiential. A practical example of this approach is the recent Advanced Training Course in "Developing Governance Skills for GCED", for senior regional civil servants and policymakers, delivered by the University of Bologna in co-operation with the Region of Emilia-Romagna and organised as part of a national project funded by the Italian Agency for Cooperation and Development under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The course was an integral component of the R-Educ project (Regions for Global Citizenship Education: Models of Governance and Good Practices). This project aimed to facilitate the integration of global citizenship education into the strategic and programming frameworks of regional authorities and their stakeholders. It sought to achieve this through the creation of territorial co-ordination models, the exchange of best practices among territories, training for civil servants, and the development of innovative territorial synergies to promote activation and engagement in informal contexts.

The course on global citizenship education was delivered in early 2024 to 32 regional decision-makers and civil servants from 7 regional public authorities. The training course had an explicit active, participatory and reflexive approach aimed at enhancing the awareness, reflexivity and – above all – the agency of managers working in local authorities. The goal was not only to provide a general understanding of global citizenship education but also to empower participants by raising their awareness of being agents of change.

The training consisted of three modules:

- *Global citizenship skills*: face-to-face multidisciplinary teaching: law, sociology, biology, anthropology, pedagogy, and political science. This segment featured an intensive residential module, of a deeply experiential and immersive nature held at the Marzabotto Peace School in the mountains near Bologna. This setting provided an ideal learning environment conducive to transformative education.

- *Finding global citizenship education in one's own sphere of competence*: analysis of strategic and planning documents in one's own professional sphere.
- *Global citizenship education and other spheres of competence*: ethnographic visits to other professional contexts to identify links and synergies.

Global citizenship education offers a cohesive framework that integrates various regional policy fields, creating a common ground for exchange. Beyond formal educational contexts, it presents a transformative perspective that fosters a change in viewpoint. This equips public sector managers and decision-makers with the essential knowledge and, more importantly, the socio-relational and behavioural skills necessary to encourage global political participation at the local level.

In sum, while global citizenship education is not a legal status, it is a powerful educational framing paradigm deeply intertwined with politics, capable of strengthening democracies in various ways by:

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- offering an integrated framework for local authority policies;
- facilitating citizens' ability to exercise their rights;
- empowering individuals to meet global challenges by integrating social, political and environmental issues;
- countering the despair and hopelessness of new generations and instilling an ethos of hope to help them shape their futures.

Today, the global dimension of education is at risk. The emergence of ethno-nationalism and populism threatens multilateralism and the very idea of belonging to global society and Planet Earth. Moreover, the younger generations seem to be stuck in a pessimistic fatalism that prevents them from looking to the future with critical hope. The future of education to foster democratic participation and global civic engagement require the support of national governments, but especially of supranational organisations. It is my hope that the OECD, UNESCO and other multilateral organisations, as well as global civil society, will step up strongly to create the conditions for global citizenship education.