



Education and the SDGs: Bridging Youth Leadership and Non-Formal Education to Address Global Challenges

**Cynthia Marquez-Pugelj
Hannah Graham
Nelson Opany**

**World Scout Bureau
Global Support Centre, Kuala Lumpur**

November 2025



© World Scouting
November 2025

World Scout Bureau
Global Support Centre
Kuala Lumpur

Suite 3, Level 17
Menara Sentral Vista
150 Jalan Sultan Abdul Samad
Brickfields
50470 Kuala Lumpur,
MALAYSIA

worldbureau@scout.org
scout.org

Reproduction is authorised to National Scout Organizations and Associations which are members of the World Organization of the Scout Movement. Credit for the source must be given.

Education and the SDGs: Bridging Youth Leadership and Non-Formal Education to Address Global Challenges

Abstract

This paper explores how the [Scouts for SDGs](#) initiative, launched by the [World Organization of the Scout Movement \(World Scouting\)](#) in 2018, exemplifies the transformative potential of non-formal education in addressing global challenges. Through the [Scout Method](#), over 112 million young people from 164 countries have engaged in more than 16 million actions supporting the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Built on the pillars of Inspire, Enable, and Deliver, the initiative integrates values-based learning, youth-led service, and culturally rooted action into a unified global framework. It promotes civic engagement, sustainable livelihoods, digital innovation, social inclusion, ethical leadership, and environmental stewardship.

With more than 2.7 billion hours of community service delivered, Scouts for SDGs showcases youth as active agents of change - knowledge amplifiers, community mobilizers, and transformation leaders. The paper analyses how this initiative sustains local wisdom while fostering global citizenship and resilience. Drawing from lived experiences and global best practices, it also highlights the importance of reimagining youth work and volunteer engagement models, providing insights into how Scouting fosters a lifelong continuum of learning, leadership, and civic participation in a rapidly evolving world.

Keywords

Scouting Education, Youth Leadership, Non-Formal Education, Lifelong Learning, Volunteering, Leadership Development, Scout Method, Sustainable Development Goals, Scouts

Introduction

In an era defined by complexity and rapid transformation, youth work must be adaptive, inclusive, and grounded in values that empower young people to navigate and shape the world around them. World Scouting - [present in over 170 countries and territories](#) - offers a century-old yet continually evolving model for holistic youth development. Rooted in the Scout Method, a unique and structured approach to progressive self-education, Scouting equips young people with essential life skills, fosters ethical leadership, and nurtures active citizenship through experiential learning. This paper examines how Scouting supports young people from their formative years through adulthood by promoting lifelong learning, civic engagement, and intergenerational collaboration. It explores the Scouts for SDGs initiative as a scalable and contextually grounded model of youth-led development, offering insights into how non-formal education can complement formal systems and contribute to sustainable, community-based change on a global scale.

Methodology / Approach

This paper adopts a mixed-methods and evidence-based approach to examine the *Scouts for SDGs Initiative* as a model for youth-led community transformation through non-formal education. It draws from multiple sources, including global data on youth participation, national-level case studies, testimonies from young people and adult volunteers, and institutional reports from World Scouting. The analysis focuses on both the outcomes and limitations of the initiative's implementation across diverse contexts. Central to the paper is an exploration of how the Scout Method - grounded in experiential education, values-based, and peer-led learning - serves as the foundation for more specialised educational opportunities that promote youth leadership, intergenerational collaboration, and cross-sector partnerships. By positioning young people as active agents of change, the paper illustrates how the Scouts for SDGs initiative fosters scalable, community-driven action aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), while offering lessons on how non-formal education can complement formal systems and catalyse sustainable development at local and global levels.

Findings and Argument

Scouting as an Educational Movement: World Scouting is a global educational youth movement focused on the holistic development of young people. Since 1907, it has adapted to changing realities, offering values-based, experiential learning rooted in the Scout Method: learning by doing, teamwork, personal progression, and service. Scouting complements formal education by building life skills, emotional intelligence, and resilience, while addressing contemporary issues like digital literacy, inclusion, and climate action. Scouting promotes lived values such as integrity and empathy through community service, making civic engagement part of everyday learning. Its flexibility allows local adaptation, reflecting cultural traditions and social norms, helping youth connect local identity with global citizenship. Scouting remains youth-led, giving young people real leadership roles. Initiatives like *Scouts for SDGs* and youth representation in several decision-making bodies ensure active youth participation. [The Scouts Youth Employability Report \(2023\)](#) confirms Scouting enhances key life and job skills.

Scouts for SDGs Initiative: Launched in 2018, [Scouts for SDGs](#) mobilizes youth to address global challenges through non-formal education aligned with the SDGs. With a three-pillar model - **Inspire, Enable, Deliver** - it empowers young people with knowledge, platforms, and leadership opportunities. Over 112 million Scouts across 164 countries have carried out 16 million actions and logged 2.7 billion service hours. The initiative integrates seamlessly with World Scouting's educational method and goals, advancing personal development and civic engagement. Its local adaptability is a core strength - National Scout Organisations (NSOs) contextualize SDG efforts to match community needs. Examples include environmental campaigns in Indonesia, gender equality workshops in Tunisia, and food security programs in Kenya. This local-global approach makes Scouts for SDGs scalable and impactful.

Scouts for SDGs as a Local-Global Model: Scouts engage in a diverse range of community interventions, from civic advocacy to peacebuilding, which are presented through the [Scouts for SDGs Final Evaluation 2023](#). Among youth-led projects, we observe young people influencing sanitation policy in India or representing youth in global policy forums. Economically, Scouts foster youth entrepreneurship (e.g., Tunisia) and skills aligned with green jobs. Initiatives activated in a collaboration of youth, elders or community advisors and local institutions promote inclusion, like intergenerational learning in Chile and gender reforms in Saudi Arabia. Technology enhances engagement through digital badges and platforms, such as Portugal's [Compromisso 2030 app](#), or India using technology to democratise access to a sense of global communities. Environmentally, Scouts lead reforestation, clean energy, and biodiversity efforts grounded in local knowledge.

Outcomes and Impact

Education and Personal Development: Scouts for SDGs promotes holistic, values-driven learning that complements formal education. Through hands-on experiences, young people gain leadership, teamwork, empathy, problem-solving, and systems thinking skills. The youth-led approach encourages autonomy, civic responsibility, and confidence. The Scouting Method - centered on learning by doing, peer learning, and personal progression - helps young people grow into ethical leaders and lifelong learners.

Community Transformation and Global Connectivity: Through locally relevant, globally aligned service, Scouts play an active role in transforming their communities. Projects addressing climate, gender equality, health, and peacebuilding foster local resilience and bridge generational and cultural divides. This engagement cultivates global solidarity and empowers youth to act locally while thinking globally.

Sustaining Cultural and Collective Wisdom in a Digital Age: Scouts for SDGs shows how a global movement can sustain cultural identity while scaling innovation. Its success comes from local adaptability, mentorship, and relevance. However, digital divides, limited resources, and a need for sustained capacity building remain ongoing challenges.

Scouting: Bridging Tradition and Modernity: Scouting fuses traditional values - service, leadership, and nature - with modern tools and the SDGs. The Scouting Method, rooted in intergenerational learning and cultural identity, adapts to current challenges through digital tools, advocacy, and systems thinking. For example, a clean-up project can evolve into a data-driven campaign on waste management, making local action globally relevant.

Evidence of Impact: Since 2018, the initiative has reached over 112 million youth across 164 countries, resulting in 16 million actions and over 2.7 billion service hours. Testimonials highlight personal and community transformation. For instance, a Scout in

Kenya led a tree-planting effort that developed their public speaking skills and inspired local environmental action. In Bangladesh, a hygiene project improved sanitation and challenged taboos. Here are some quantitative highlights: 164 NSOs integrated Scouts for SDGs into their youth programme, 73 NSOs received project funding, 60,000+ participants in funded projects, 112+ million in non-funded actions, 112 funded capacity/community projects, 16.4 million non-funded SDG actions, 2.7 billion service hours (non-funded), 521,000 service hours (funded projects), 5 million beneficiaries of funded projects, and 7.9 million beneficiaries via national SDG action plans.

Scalability and replication: Scouts for SDGs is scalable due to its flexible “Inspire, Enable, Deliver” model. NSOs adapt global goals to local contexts, supported by toolkits, peer education, and digital platforms. Strong partnerships with governments and civil society embed the initiative into national strategies, expanding impact and sustainability.

Challenges and key lessons: Scouts for SDGs faces challenges such as unequal digital access, volunteer burnout, and youth-adult power imbalances. Measuring impact beyond service hours also proves difficult. Lessons learned include the need for investing in mentorship and intergenerational support, recognising youth as solution co-creators, integrating storytelling and reflection to capture impact, and prioritizing digital inclusion for equitable access.

Conclusions

The powerful role of non-formal education and youth volunteer networks in advancing sustainable development. Scouting’s educational model, anchored in service and community engagement, has proven highly relevant for the future of youth work, especially in a changing world where adaptability, values, and global citizenship are increasingly essential.

Scouts for SDGs offers a scalable and inclusive model that merges experiential learning, with education for sustainable development and a global framework. Its integration into the youth educational programmes of 174 NSOs illustrates how non-formal education can equip youth with critical transferable competencies while reinforcing civic responsibility and cultural identity.

The Movement has become a dynamic platform for collaboration between youth, civil society, and multi-sector partners. Through initiatives and partnerships, Scouts co-create solutions, advocate at institutional levels, and strengthen local-global dialogue, with youth and volunteers at the center of implementation.

The Scouts for SDGs initiative’s 2.7 billion service hours underscore how volunteer-led networks can deliver wide-reaching, low-cost impact on local challenges - from climate action to social cohesion. These actions reflect not just participation, but ownership and leadership from young people.

By embedding SDG actions into real-life community service, Scouts engage in continuous, meaningful learning. Intergenerational mentorship, peer education, and locally rooted projects promote lifelong learning and reinforce traditional knowledge systems, making education a lived and shared experience.

By linking global frameworks with local background, context, and dynamics, Scouts for SDGs proves how non-formal education fosters active citizenship, sustainability, and intercultural understanding. It's a replicable model where youth are not just future leaders, but current agents of change, united by purpose and innovation.

Recommendations

Institutionalise and expand the Scouts for the SDGs model: For long term impact both in the development of young people and resilient communities, embedding Scouts for SDGs within national and regional youth strategies will strengthen non-formal education and promote experiential, service-based learning that builds critical life skills such as leadership, empathy, sustainability, and systems thinking, integrating efforts with other sectors of society to ensure a robust collaborative system.

Empower inclusive, multi-generational volunteer networks: Leverage emerging leaders through community action and invest in the full volunteer lifecycle, including training, leadership pipelines, and mentorship, to support youth leadership and intergenerational collaboration at the community level.

Foster cross-sector partnerships for scalable impact: Leverage Scouting's trusted reputation to build partnerships across civil society, government, and the private sector, co-designing culturally rooted and locally relevant solutions aligned with the SDGs.

Prioritise and resource youth-led action: Recognise youth as decision-makers by expanding access to microgrants, decentralised funding, and platforms that enable them to lead and scale innovative community solutions.

Promote lifelong and intergenerational learning: Link community service to personal development by recognising competencies gained in the broader educational sphere, encouraging intergenerational knowledge exchange, and fostering sustained engagement in civic life.

Ensure digital inclusion and equitable access: Provide all youth with the tools, connectivity, and digital literacy training needed to fully participate in local and global SDG actions through inclusive and youth-informed platforms.

Support holistic, values-based youth development: Advance research, policy integration, and recognition of non-formal education frameworks like the Scout Method as complementary to formal education and essential to nurturing global citizenship.

References

- McIvor, L. (2020, May 29). *The Scouting effect - Scouting builds resilience for life*. Scouts Australia. <https://scouts.com.au/blog/2020/05/29/the-scouting-effect-scouting-builds-resilience-for-life/#:~:text=In%20fact%2C%20the%20findings%20show,Self%2C%20Safe%2C%20Healthy%20Mind%20and>
- The Scout Association. (n.d.). *The Employability Badge Report | Scouts*. The Scout Association. <https://www.scouts.org.uk/scouts-and-employability/the-employability-badge-report>
- UNESCO. (2017). *Education for Sustainable Development Goals: Learning Objectives*. UNESCO.org. <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/education-sustainable-development-goals-learning-objectives>
- World Scouting. (2019). *The Essential Characteristics of Scouting*. The Essential Characteristics of Scouting | Scout Learning Zone. <https://learn.scout.org/resource/essential-characteristics-scouting>
- World Scouting. (2023, July). *Scouts for SDGs Final Evaluation*. Scouts for SDGs Final Evaluation | Scout Learning Zone. <https://learn.scout.org/resource/scouts-sdgs-final-evaluation>

About the Authors

Cynthia Marquez-Pugelj is a specialist in project management, innovation, non-formal education, and education for sustainability with over 15+ years' experience leading the development of impactful educational programmes that empower youth and professionals globally. She is the Director, Education and Innovation at World Scouting.

Hannah Graham is a computing professional with a deep passion for helping others to shape their own learning through international campaigning and consulting in education, youth empowerment and community development for 10+ years. She is the Manager, Advocacy, Policy and Campaigns at World Scouting.

Nelson Opany is an international development communications and partnerships leader with over 12+ years of experience leading strategic communications, mobilizing resources, building cross-sector partnerships, and leading advocacy strategies across Africa and the world. He is the Senior Manager, Strategic Partnerships and Fundraising at World Scouting.

Citation

Marquez-Pugelj, C., Graham, H., & Opany, N. (2025). Education and the SDGs: Bridging youth leadership and non-formal education to address global challenges [Conference abstract]. World Organization of the Scout Movement.

This paper was first presented at the 5th Commonwealth Global Youth Work Conference held from 17-19 November 2025 in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.



© World Scouting
November 2025

World Scout Bureau
Global Support Centre
Kuala Lumpur

worldbureau@scout.org
scout.org