

Chapter 3

Educating to Deliver Environmentally Focused Social Innovation



Richard Hazenberg

Abstract The United Nations 2030 Sustainable Development Goals provide clear direction for how we can develop a more sustainable world by 2030 and beyond, with key performance indicators across 17 goals. One of these goals, SDG15 Life on Land, aims to ‘protect, *restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss*’ (United Nations <https://sdgs.un.org/topics/forests>, 2021) and this has clear implications in the UK for the management of ancient woodland. In England ancient woodland is identified as those areas of woodland that have existed since the seventeenth century and they remain crucial areas of natural habitat and biodiversity in the English countryside (Woodland Trust <https://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/trees-woods-and-wildlife/habitats/ancient-woodland/>, 2021). However, outside of these ecosystem benefits, they also provide an environment for educating young people about sustainability and for delivering social innovations that support local communities socially and environmentally. This chapter explores how education within an ancient woodland setting can help to promote environmental awareness, as well as supporting the creation of social impact. Utilising the case-study of a social enterprise in England that maintains ancient woodland and educates socially excluded young people, the chapter seeks to argue that the hybrid mission of the organisation combined with its unique environmental location, provides the perfect model for supporting socially disadvantaged individuals to become the ‘changemakers’ of tomorrow.

R. Hazenberg (✉)

Institute for Social Innovation and Impact, University of Northampton, Development Hub 010,
Cliftonville Road, Northampton NN15FS, UK
e-mail: richard.hazenberg@northampton.ac.uk

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS



The UN Sustainable Development Goal 4.7 states that ‘By 2030, ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture’s contribution to sustainable development’.

Keywords Environmental education · Social innovation · Changemakers · Ancient woodland · Social impact

Introduction

Education provides a critical means for developing the citizens of tomorrow and ensuring that awareness of and discourse around sustainability issues are developed. This approach to creating ‘Changemakers’ has been embodied in a global programme led by Ashoka¹ focused on creating a global movement within which individuals and communities can come together to solve social (and environmental) problems [3]. However, outside of such programmes, the concept of sustainability education remains under-developed [4], particularly with regard to social innovation. Indeed, much sustainability education is focused on the wider world of ecosystems, technology and institutional structures, ignoring the role that internalised, personal development can have [5]. This focus on reflective learning centred on place-based and experiential learning, is a fundamental aspect of best practice in social innovation education [6], which can provide fertile learning for practitioners seeking

¹ See: <https://www.ashoka.org/en-gb/programme/ashoka-changemakers>.

to deliver environmentally focused social innovation education. Such approaches to informing young people around sustainability issues are key in helping to developing informed and independent democratic citizens [7]. This chapter seeks to explore this through the examination of an environmentally focused social enterprise in England that delivers education to disadvantaged young people within an ancient woodland setting. The author argues that by engaging young people in place-based environmental social innovation in an ancient woodland site, young people can be empowered to become Changemakers and to better understand sustainability. The chapter begins with an exploration of the concepts of social innovation and social enterprise, before moving on to discuss environmentally focused social innovations. The literature review is then completed with an examination of social innovation and sustainability education, before the methodological approach and social enterprise case-study is described. The results are discussed in relation to sustainable development and the SDG 2030 agenda, set within a Weberian [8] theoretical framework centred on individual empowerment.

Environmentally Focused Social Innovation Education: The Context

Social Innovation and Social Enterprise

Social innovation is defined as ‘changes in the cultural, normative or regulative structures (or classes) of the society which enhance its collective power resources and improve its economic and social performance’ [9]. A key feature of social innovation is the empowerment of disadvantaged individuals that enables them to solve social and/or environmental problems that afflict their community (locally or globally) [10]. Social enterprise represents one form of social innovation and can be identified as self-reliant, independent organisations that deliver non-economic outcomes [11]. Whilst social entrepreneurship and social enterprise are forms of social innovation, it should be noted that social innovations can be created by a wide variety of stakeholders, including government, NGOs, charities, corporates and educators [12]. The key originality of social enterprise interventions to drive social innovations, lies in their hybrid approaches to delivering social, environmental *and* economic value, as part of their institutional logics and value propositions [13].

Social innovation has a dichotomy that lies at its heart, in that its increasingly seen as a globalised term and one that is used homogeneously around the world, despite the fact that social innovation is in essence a localised construct that has unique meaning at community levels and is often utilised as a mechanism for resisting globalisation and the inequalities that this creates [14]. This is an important distinction to make, as research has identified that it is bottom-up led community social innovations that tend to have greater social impact than top-down driven approaches [15]. This tension is important to recognise when exploring social innovations centred on the

environment and sustainable development, as the UN SDG framework represents a top-down approach to driving global sustainable development (albeit one that seeks to recognise local contexts). In this context, the SDGs provide a roadmap for sustainable development, but one that must be tailored locally in order to deliver truly impactful environmentally focused social innovations.

Environmentally Focused Social Innovation

Environmentally focused social innovations are becoming increasingly common, as communities, governments and transnational bodies seek innovative solutions to increasingly complex problems. The purpose of this chapter is not to provide an exhaustive account of these interventions, but examples can be found with regards to smart cities [16]; environmental funds [17]; coffee farming and production [18]; and reducing food waste [19]. Whilst traditionally, eco-innovations are characterised as emerging due to policy drivers, market regulation, market demand and cost-saving [20], environmentally focused social innovations are also driven by community action and demands, often embodied within the community leadership. Indeed, it is community leaders that can help to give voice to communities [21], especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds and these leaders can include educators and social enterprises. When considering how these community initiatives emerge as social innovations, it is important to acknowledge the role that social networks and social capital play in enabling the social innovations to develop [19, 21].

The importance of community network building and the role of educators in supporting and scaling social innovations is an important one. Hazenberg, Giroletti and Ryu [22] demonstrated the role that universities can play in this area as local anchor institutions when exploring social innovations in Asia. However, government and transnational frameworks can also play an important role in supporting the scaling of these social innovations and enabling place-based sustainable development [23]. This is because frameworks like the SDGs provide what Baker and Mehmood [23] identified as ‘governance frameworks’ that enable social innovation scaling by coordinating or focusing different stakeholders. Such networks are crucial to social innovations as they act as a mechanism for empowering people at a wider level, whilst allowing a ‘zoomed in’ function for developing change locally [24]. This chapter argues that this is where social enterprises can play a powerful role in driving forwards such environmentally focused social innovations, by acting as hubs within the community to link stakeholders and build social capital. This is particularly pertinent when the social enterprise in question is educationally orientated in its primary mission.

Social Innovation and Sustainability Education

As was noted earlier, when educating potential social innovators or seeking to teach social innovation and entrepreneurship, place-based learning and teaching that is embedded in local contexts is critical [6, 25]. This is extremely pertinent when seeking to educate on environmentally focused social innovations and sustainable development [5], as the local context (as identified above) is crucial in delivering innovative solutions that are *needed* by the community. Further, from an educational perspective, such place-based and experiential processes have clear benefits for learners, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, as they provide real outdoor experiences and enhance sustainability [26]. This allows learners to understand the complexity of sustainability issues, as teachers do not over simplify theoretical/abstract concepts, but rather provide experiential practical learning [7]. This type of embedded learning helps to promote community engagement and encourage connectivity, in a way that empowers learners and teachers alike [27], which can help with sustainability engagement and changing environmental behaviours. The delivery of this type of education through hybrid organisational models that emphasise triple-bottom line (economic, social, environmental) value capture [18], only seeks to strengthen this learning journey.

Based upon the prior literature, this chapter therefore proposes that the delivery of education on environmental social innovation and sustainability by hybrid organisations such as social enterprises, provides a best practice model for sustainability education. The role that social enterprises can play as: anchor institutions in the community, building networks between key stakeholders; community leaders responding to and amplifying bottom-up concerns; and educators supporting learning and promoting understanding of top down sustainability frameworks such as the SDGs, puts them in a unique position to scale environmentally focused social innovations and support local sustainability. This will be explored next through an exemplar case-study of a social enterprise delivering environmentally focused social innovation within an ancient woodland setting in England.

Methodological Approach

Design, Approach and Analysis

The research adopts a single case-study approach to exploring this phenomenon, so as to allow theoretical understanding to be developed in a contextual setting. The approach is what Yin [28] termed an ‘intensive’ case-study, whereby theory is developed through the intensive examination of a singular case. This allows for the exploration of the complex facets of an organisation to understand its nature [29]. Whilst this does not necessarily allow for generalisability, it does allow for theory development as a means to better understand phenomenon [28] (in this case social

enterprises delivering environmentally orientated social innovation education and raising awareness on sustainability issues).

All data gathered and analysed was open-source, publicly available data through the case-study organisation's website, social media, UK government websites and third party websites of partner organisations and funders. This secondary data was analysed thematically on an iterative basis so that key themes emerged from the data, relevant to the focus of the research reported in this chapter. This allowed the research to draw inferences about the case-study organisation's approach to sustainability education that were grounded in the data. The analysis revealed three key themes that will be explored further in the discussion, namely: sustainability education; community engagement; and hybrid opportunities.

Further, it should be noted that the author of this chapter is also a trustee of the case-study organisation having been so since 2016, and so was able to also use this experience of five years' operating on the Board of Trustees in order to reflect on the organisation's approach to sustainability education. This insider perspective provided the research with a useful counterbalance to the use of external facing (outsider) data. This reflexive approach to the research allowed the researcher to act as a quasi-insider to the organisation, enabling new insights but also allowing potential researcher bias. As Silverman [30] notes, it's important to set this context here, so as to fully embed the researcher's position in the research and the context that they are researching.

Case-Study Overview

The case-study organisation is an SME-sized social enterprise and registered charity, operating in the East Midlands region of England that was established in the mid-1990's and became a fully-fledged social enterprise in 2002.² Operating within ancient woodland, the social enterprise also manages adjacent (new) forests, as well as green spaces in the local community, and has a national reputation for environmental sustainability work. In relation to this, the case-study partners with a local university to develop sustainable construction practices and to promote learning within higher education on environmental sustainability, whilst also owning/managing local social housing. The new forests that they manage are also utilised for sustainable wood, which is sawn, treated and sold in bulk or used to create bespoke furniture and craft items in the onsite workshops. The organisation also offers natural burial services in a bespoke cemetery created in the woodland, where people can be laid to rest in eco-coffins in a natural setting.

The organisation encourages public visitors to the ancient woodland, with designated paths, picnic areas and facilities including bathrooms/toilets available, as well as educational boards around the woodland to educate visitors about the flora and fauna present. The case-study also operates an on-site community café as part of

² The organisation is Hill Holt Wood and it has asked to be identified in this research and further information can be found online at <https://www.hillholtwood.co.uk/>.

this offer, which can also be booked out for weddings and corporate events. Further, the organisation also specialises in a wide-range of environmentally focused education, delivering a number of different education programmes, including: school-level education for children and young people excluded from mainstream education; community outreach education programmes (i.e. coppice crafts); and apprenticeships work, vocational qualifications and support for learners with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND). The organisation also runs a health programme that is a nature-based therapeutic service, based on the Ecotherapy or Green Care model of wellbeing. It engages individual with physical and/or mental health issues and supports the development of their emotional, cognitive and physical wellbeing through engagement in woodland management, conservation and coppice craft activities. This educational and health offer is central to the work that the case-study does, and this offer is also bolstered by the presence of an ancient Roman villa site adjacent to the ancient woodland.

The case-study is a multi-award winning social enterprise in England that has won several local and national awards in the last 5 years alone. These include awards recognising their work to support Looked After Children (children in the UK care and fostering system); a Royal Forestry award recognising their work in education and learning with young people; and an award recognising their work maintaining a local nature reserve. Locally, their awards have also included recognition of their sustainable construction practices and their role in engaging and supporting their local communities. On this basis it can be argued that as a highly successful and long-lasting social enterprise, the organisation represents an excellent case-study for better understanding best practice in educating people on environmentally focused social innovations and sustainability.

Understanding Hybrid Approaches to Environmentally Focused Social Innovation Education

As was identified in the methodology, the data analysis revealed three key themes: sustainability education, community engagement, and hybrid opportunities. These will now be discussed in turn, with regards to both the data explored³ and the prior literature. It should also be noted that whilst the Covid-19 pandemic has had a clear impact on the case-study organisation, this has not been focused on in this chapter so as to ensure the focus remains tightly on the central aim of the paper; that is, educating individuals around environmentally focused social innovation.

³ As the data has been drawn from the organisation's website and other supporting publicly available documentation, it is not cited in the document in order to ensure anonymity.

Community Engagement

The case-study organisation is committed to engaging with its local community, seeking to achieve this in a variety of different ways, including:

- Providing the general public facilities and free access to the woodland all year round
- Providing education, training and employment advice for disadvantaged young people
- Establishing sustainable relationships with local government, charities and representative organisations
- Using local materials and services
- Providing ‘experience’ days and promoting knowledge transfer.

The case-study organisation seeks to achieve these aims through a variety of activities, including through the aforementioned woodland access, but also by delivering contracts for local stakeholders such as government (including the maintenance of publicly owned common areas and highway verges). Whilst this provides income to sustain the organisation, it also provide awareness-raising and brand awareness locally, as well providing employment and training opportunities locally.

The organisation also operates a programme to support and encourage the local community to engage in walks in areas of natural beauty, providing green spaces for community wellbeing and mental health, and operating the community café. The author can also reflect on his experience as a trustee of the organisation over the last five years, in which he has seen the lengths the organisation goes to, in order to engage the local community and ensure that local people from diverse backgrounds are represented through its decision-making structures (i.e. on the Board of Trustees). The organisation also promotes engagement through its social media channels and is helping to lead the community against an (ongoing) proposition for an industrial development in the local area. In this respect we see the organisation acting as a community leader, giving voice to the local community and building social capital to enable further innovation [19, 21].

Sustainability Education

One of the central tenets of the case-study organisation’s work is its educational offer, delivered to young people, people with SEND and also as vocational/community education offerings to adults. This lies at the heart of what the organisation seeks to achieve, with a key sub-aim within its ethos on community engagement being ‘Providing education, training and employment advice for disadvantaged young people’. As was noted earlier, this is done through both statutory education, working with children and young people from the ages of 5–16 years, as well as vocational qualifications for those aged 16 years and over. The organisation also offers nursery

support for 2–5 year olds that provides day-care in a woodland environment, helping to focus young minds on nature and sustainability. Further, for adults its education offering extend to team-building days and workshops on sustainable building, as well as engaging with universities and other higher education institutions. In providing these services the organisation is clearly engaged in place-based learning, that can educate around sustainable development [5, 6, 25]. It enables people to feel empowered within their local environment [24] and better understand sustainability needs and what can be achieved locally to enhance environmental sustainability and mitigate against global problems like climate change. Again, here the author can reflect on previous research that he has completed with the organisation which demonstrated the positive impacts that the education programmes delivered to the socially excluded young people engaged [31].

Hybrid Opportunities

The case-study organisation's hybrid model is also a key driver of its local legitimacy, as it is seen as a socially focused, financially sustainable independent organisation that is committed to social and environmental sustainability [13]. Indeed, the social enterprise's third key mission ethos is to 'Run an economically viable social enterprise', with the specific sub-aims of this being:

- Achieving an annual surplus for investment back into the charity and innovation within the business
- Maintaining a diverse range of income streams, clients, products and services
- Manufacturing and selling woodland added-value products
- Ensuring every new venture is sustainable and can continue to benefit the local community and environment
- Funding and providing opportunities for employees' personal and career development.

This financial sustainability, combined with hybrid social and environmental aims, also provides the organisation with independence to pursue activities and programmes of work that it feels will be most beneficial locally (and to maintain the ancient woodland at its core). Indeed, one can argue that it is this (relative) financial independence that allows the organisation to engage in the community engagement activities that it does and to have the impact that it achieves. It is harder to make this argument in relation to educational provision, especially given that large parts of its educational income is for statutory educational provision, but here the organisation seeks to deliver the educational outcomes required by local and national frameworks, whilst blending learning with their unique place-based approach to sustainability. Nevertheless, these hybrid opportunities also include hybrid tensions, and here it is the role of governance frameworks (i.e. oversight from trustees and the Senior Management Team) that help to ensure that the balance between the three financial, social and environmental missions never becomes too uneven.

A Model for Environmentally Focused Social Innovation Education

This chapter has sought to better understand how environmentally focused social innovation can be better delivered and educated. Set within a Weberian framework of empowerment [8] and centred around the prior literature on social innovation and social enterprise, sustainability education, and networks, the author argues that social enterprises can play critical roles as anchor institutions locally and globally in educating people on sustainability whilst enabling/empowering others to become social innovators also. Figure 3.1 below outlines the model developed from this examination of a singular case-study organisation, to demonstrate how and why such social enterprises can deliver these models, and to provide best practice guidance to other scholars and practitioners as to how this can be developed elsewhere.

The model identifies that such organisations operate within the social innovation ecosystem, as a critical network hub for stakeholders, enabling communication and understanding between different groups, and decoding community needs and international frameworks into mutually coherent logics (and translating these to the wider community). In this respect they play the role of governance framework (i.e. the SDGs) decoders [23], whilst also empowering the local community and developing change locally [24]. This enables the scaling of environmentally focused social innovations at the local level, by supporting place-based EFSI [23], and embedding this within community logics. The organisation is able to achieve this because it has legitimacy, emerging from both its hybrid model and its educational offer. In regard to

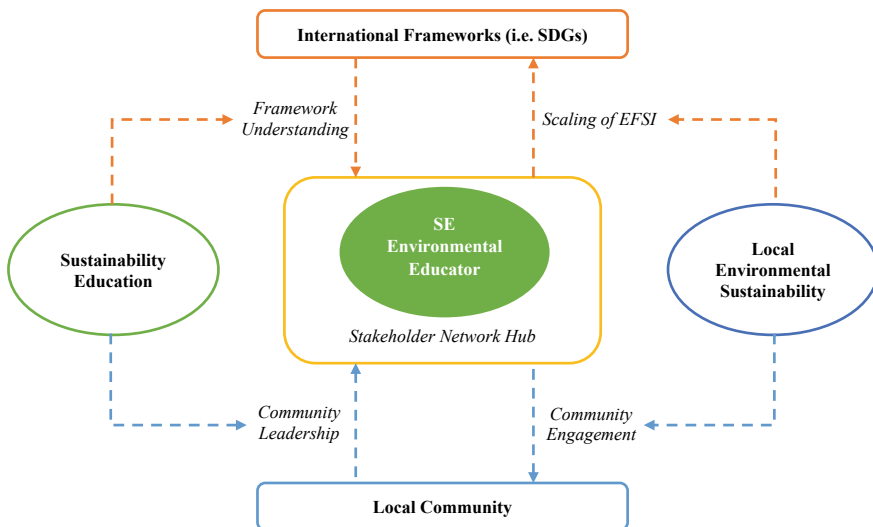


Fig. 3.1 Educating for environmentally focused social innovation (EFSI) best-practice model

the former, the organisation's hybridity offers legitimacy as the organisation is financially self-sufficient but socially orientated [13], meaning that different stakeholder groups retain high levels of trust in the organisation, as its seen as independent but working towards the common good. This trust is also enhanced by the educational role of the organisation, which also aids legitimacy by placing the organisation as a knowledge expert in the field, which is further enhanced through its partnerships and networks with high-trust external educators such as universities. This enables the organisation to decode frameworks such as the SDGs for local communities and young people, by providing real-life, outdoor experiences that allow the complexity of sustainability issues to be understood through experiential learning, learning that empowers the community holistically [7, 26, 27]. In this way the organisation acts as a social innovator in the best possible sense, by enabling social action at the community level and improving the communities' collective resources to deliver this action [8, 9].

Limitations and Further Research

This chapter presents exploratory research, based upon a singular case-study in order to develop theory. Therefore, the results cannot be generalised to a wider population, nor can one argue that this type of environmentally focused social innovation education is limited only to social enterprises (albeit the author suspects that it can only be achieved by truly hybrid organisations). Further research is therefore needed to explore this model in relation to other organisational models, as well as hybrid and social enterprise organisations in England and beyond, in order to test the efficacy of the proposition. However, in providing a theoretical approach on how to deliver sustainable, environmentally focused social innovation education that succeeds at both global and local levels, the author contends that scholars and practitioners could learn much from this case-study example.

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