

Values for a sustainable future:  
**The Earth Charter and  
 educational curriculum  
 in Romania**

**Gabriela Scarlat and Constanta Poede<sup>50</sup>**



**Introduction**

The processes of European integration reflected in “The Lisbon Strategy” and “The EU Strategy on Sustainable Development” helped the Romanian government set its priorities in defining national strategic objectives for European integration. As part of the integration effort, Romania approved the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe’s (UNECE) strategy for Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) and actively joined the United Nations Decade for ESD.

As a result of a broad political and socio-economic transformation, the Romanian educational system has undergone a dramatic shift towards European integration and mature forms of democracy. These changes are bringing about new opportunities, as well as increasing the need for education initiatives and projects, with the view to making education for sustainability part of the formal learning experience of Romanian school children.

<sup>50</sup> Ms. Gabriela Scarlat is a General Inspector of the Department of Pre-university Education of the Ministry of Education and Research of Romania.  
 Ms. Constanta Poede is a Deputy Head Teacher of School N.13 “Stefan cel Mare” in Gelati, Romania.

## Methods and activities

In mid-2006, Dr. Mihail Hardau, the Romanian Minister of Education and Research, asked his staff to develop a broad action plan for integrating Earth Charter principles into the school-based curriculum, through new content, objectives and criteria for student proficiency. The main principles of sustainable development as expressed in the Earth Charter had already been reflected in the national core curriculum. These efforts were documented in the national report at the 2<sup>nd</sup> Meeting of the Steering Committee on ESD in December 2006 in Geneva.

Among the measures planned and taken to promote ESD through formal and non-formal learning in Romania, the Ministry of Education included the "...Promotion of the Earth Charter as an educational instrument/material to be used in pre-university education, through posting the Earth Charter on the ministry website (<http://www.edu.ro>); recommending that county school inspectorates and schools develop school-based curriculum on the Earth Charter; and to organize extracurricular activities at the county and school level, based on the Earth Charter's principles."<sup>51</sup>

By the start of the 2006–2007 school year in Romania, the Department of Pre-University (primary and secondary) Education had integrated the Earth Charter in subjects included in the core curriculum, vocational training modules, and general school-based curriculum:

- **Core curriculum:** Technological Education, Biology, Sciences, Civic Education, Entrepreneurship, Economy, Applied Economy, Sociology, Philosophy, Social Studies, Geography and Ecology
- **Vocational Training Modules:** Preventing and fighting pollution, Preserving biodiversity, Waste management, Regeneration of trees, Sustainable tourism, and Standards of sustainable development, among others
- **School-based curriculum:** Health Education, Biology, Arts

### *Activities at the ministerial level*

The project started during preparation for the 2006–2007 school year. The Ministry made ESD materials available that had been sent by the Earth Charter Centre for Education for Sustainable Development by posting them on its website and by presenting them to county school inspectors and the heads of schools. The Ministry offered funding for school contests related to subjects in which the Earth Charter principles were reflected. Four types of contests were organized at the local, county and national levels: **interdisciplinary ("Earth Sciences"); civic ("Democracy and Tolerance," as based on student portfolios); "Little Ambassadors for the Environment;"** and ecology ("SOS Nature").

### *Activities at the school level ~ case of No. 13 Stefan cel Mare secondary school*

The experience of No. 13 Stefan cel Mare secondary school (Stefan cel Mare) is a concrete example of the adaptation of ministerial plans for the integration of the Earth Charter framework for ESD. This Romanian school, like many others, designed its own project to apply sustainable development principles and values in its teaching process and in students' interaction with parents, partners and the local community.

The school is located in the city of Galati, one of the five largest cities in Romania, and is located on the banks of the Danube River, with its unique natural habitat for flora and fauna. Stefan cel Mare is a large, modern school located in one of the central districts of the city with 850 pupils and 36 classes (17 primary and 19 mid-secondary classes). The school also employs 50 teachers, most of them holding the highest national didactic degrees.

The teachers are very enthusiastic and open to local, national and international initiatives, particularly in such areas as the environment, responsible consumption, education through extracurricular activities, life-long education and skills, foreign languages, and education for democracy and peace. The pedagogical team

<sup>51</sup> This statement is part of the official Minutes of the 2nd Meeting of the UNECE Steering Committee on ESD (Geneva, 4-5 December 2006).

reported finding all of the above-mentioned areas addressed by the Earth Charter document and its principles. The school deputy headmistress and English language teacher, Constanta Puede, together with her colleagues, decided to endorse the Earth Charter and apply its principles in their school and in the local community.

### ***“The Way Forward:” Project Description***

The Earth Charter school project is entitled: “The Way Forward – The Choice is Ours: Educational Programme for Extracurricular Activities in Sustaining Earth Charter Principles.” A motivated group of teachers set up a School Development Plan that defined the goals, means and methods to educate students on the principles of sustainability; to promote democracy, tolerance, equal opportunities, cooperation and integration into the world’s community; and towards shaping a world based on respect for nature and universal human rights. During the course of the project, students were expected to develop the following skills and values:

- Become responsible to one another, the greater community of life and future generations
- Take care of life with understanding, compassion and love
- Act with moderation and efficiency when using energy
- Protect local sites of spiritual and cultural significance
- Develop students’ democratic spirit
- Identify solutions to prevent harming the environment through inappropriate waste management and garbage pollution
- Develop the capacity of self-organization and team-building spirit
- Support the local community in decision-making processes and
- Recognize the importance of moral and spiritual education for a sustainable life.

### ***“The Way Forward:” Project time frame, target group, and partners***

School staff had prior experience in looking for innovative ways to promote sustainable education and integrate its methods in various areas and subjects. It

was clear that the Earth Charter framework could help them to further incorporate the integrated vision of sustainability into formal educational programmes, extracurricular activities and relations with parents and the local community. The time frame of the project was set from October 2006 to December 2007. Participants included 300 primary school pupils, 250 lower-secondary school pupils, 14 primary school teachers, as well as teachers of English, Biology, Art, Geography, Religion and Civic Education. Art teachers helped students set up exhibitions, performances, musicals, and recitals with Earth Charter themes. A group of enthusiastic young primary school educators were also inspired by the Earth Charter and assumed a very active role in this endeavour.

It is important to mention that the Pupils’ Council, a democratic student governance group comprising 60 pupils, made essential contributions to the decision-making processes and implementation of the project, in co-operation with the School Board. The school educational counsellor and the school psychologist were involved in all project activities, and the project reached a further 400 parents and many neighbours of the students. In the wider community, the local parish priest and congregation of the church, Inaltarea Domnului, were also actively involved. Local organizations and NGOs that signed partnership agreements with the school included: the local branch of Friends of the Earth, the Ecological Consulting Centre, the Natural Science Museum, the NGO “Save the Children,” and the local branches of the Anti-Drugs Association, the Echi-Gal Foundation and the Environmental Protection Agency.

### ***“The Way Forward:” Methodology and activities***

The project was designed as a series of interconnected mini-projects, each reflecting one of the Earth Charter principles. The four mini-projects are described below.

#### ***1) The Green School (Green 13)***

Green 13 educational activities were carried out as part of the nation-wide programme, Eco-School. The project was inspired by Earth Charter principle 7(a): “Reduce, reuse, and recycle the materials used in production and

consumption systems, and ensure that residual waste can be assimilated by ecological systems.”

From January - October 2007, 60 pupils from grades 3 to 7 set up a Green Volunteers Group and designed an eco-code of behaviour based on the second Earth Charter principle and its sub-principles. The Green Volunteers Group, with help from 36 teachers, set up a monthly collection of paper-waste to sort and sell to the local waste processing plant. With the motto “Nothing to be thrown out, everything can be recycled!,” more than 200 students, alongside their parents and neighbours, became involved, and donated their earnings to the Green Volunteer Group for the tools, materials and literature necessary for future activities.

This group also organized and led a Spring Carnival on April 22, 2007, with a parade of costumes made from recyclable materials being showcased in the school gymnasium. Seventeen primary school teachers helped with costume design, background music and parade logistics. It was on a bright spring day that 100 of the youngest students from grades 1–4 celebrated Earth Day with friends and family in beautiful – and often funny – costumes.

Another part of the mini-project was named “Funny Recycling,” under the leadership of ‘funny teachers’ from “The Fun Science Club” – a group of enthusiastic primary teachers who stimulate their students’ hunger for knowledge by making theatrical educational presentations for students. The Fun Science Club is

becoming very popular, attracting many new members. The local branch of the National Foundation for the Environment was also a partner in this activity.

## 2) *Energy Is Our Future*

This mini-project is based on Earth Charter principle 7(b): “Act with restraint and efficiency when using energy and rely increasingly on renewable energy sources such as solar and wind.”

Since November 2006, 60 members of the Green Volunteers Group, assisted by their science teachers, have held a series of workshops for the rest of the school under the general titles: “What energy is” and “Climate change effects.” The participating primary and secondary teachers developed materials to assist them in integrating sustainable energy issues across school disciplines, both inside and outside the school environment.

Teachers helped the students to prepare materials and visual aids in order to demonstrate sustainable and unsustainable energy production and consumption. After the completion of student reports and presentations – carried out during lessons on physics, chemistry and biology –several working groups formed to continue the lively discussions in an informal learning environment. Partners of the project, such as the local branch of Friends of the Earth, have attended these presentations to share the latest scientific information with participants; they have also helped to prepare senior students for future roles as community trainers. This mini-project will continue through 2007.



Mini project “Funny Recycling”: 3th graders make theatrical educational presentations.



Mini project -Energy is our future- 4th graders.

In October 2007, as a complimentary mini-project, the ten winners of the school contest participated in an online competition to design posters and slogans on how to enhance the effectiveness of energy conservation activities. The online competition, organized by the web-based international project "Energy is our Future," is focused on supporting energy education across school curricula and helping teachers to raise students' awareness of conserving energy, understanding energy consumption, and advocating the importance of renewable energy. The project also aims to inspire students to influence their own and others' behaviours and lifestyles. This online project is also part of web-based European School Net, sponsored by the European Commission to advance the European integration process (<http://www.eun.org>).

### **3) We Protect and Preserve the Environment**

The second pillar of the Earth Charter ("Ecological Integrity") and its principles, have inspired several mini-projects for the school's younger students (grades 1–3). Principle 5 has particularly served as a source of inspiration: "Protect and restore the integrity of Earth's ecological systems, with special concern for biological diversity and the natural processes that sustain life."

In November 2006, primary school teachers and students in biology (along with many of their parents) undertook a study trip to the Focul Viu mountain ridge in Vrancea County to learn about the flora and fauna. Applying Earth Charter principle 5, students then gave presentations on the endangered bird species and animals of that natural habitat, and arranged a photo exhibition to be shown at the school to parents, partners and residents of the school's neighbourhood.

Inspired by this experience, the students soon after launched a mini-campaign, "The Danube: The River next to us," and invited a local partner, the Ecological Consulting Centre, to join in the initiative. The children cleaned the riverbanks and took photos to illustrate their efforts and the waste and pollution in the Danube, and added these to their permanent photo exhibition. Teachers have used this experience to organize other activities, such as designing an ecological file for each pupil and for the whole class, arranging exhibitions of

posters and essays on ecological themes, and making stuffed animals from recyclable materials during lessons for handcrafts and recreation.

### **4) The social component ~ projects on education, health, and human rights**

The social component of the Earth Charter, as reflected in the fourth pillar "Democracy, Nonviolence and Peace," initiated many educational activities and events. Particularly inspiring were principles 14: "Integrate into formal education and life-long learning the knowledge, values and skills needed for sustainable development;" 14a: "Provide all, especially children and youth, with educational opportunities that empower them to contribute actively to sustainable development;" and 14d: "Recognize the importance of moral and spiritual education for sustainable living."

The need to educate students to become socially responsible citizens motivated the Pupils' Council and teachers to invite representatives of a local Anti-Drug Agency and other community members to participate in the project. Activities included a thematic cartoon exhibition of the most common and dangerous drugs, a discussion of a film about youth and drugs, and a question-and-answer session with the school psychologist and doctor. This activity was later followed by a school role-play, "We, the Children, Have Rights, Too: Respect Them!" The play was written and staged by students after their enrolment in a series of social studies lessons, and this was followed by a debate session in the education resource hall. Partners in this mini-project included parents, neighbours and members of the local branch of Save the Children.

Another ongoing mini-project, "I can help, too!" was carried out from October 2006 to October 2007, by teachers, students, parents and the congregation of the local Catholic church, Inaltarea Domnului. The students, along with their parents and teachers, identified old, infirmed and lonely people in their community and took turns caring for their needs. This helped them to recognize the importance of moral and spiritual life, and taught them that compassion is an integral part of truly sustainable living.

### ***“The Way Forward:” Evaluation of the school project***

The impact of the Earth Charter school project “The Way Forward –The Choice is Ours: Educational Programme for ExtraCurricular Activities in Sustaining Earth Charter Principles” was assessed through a questionnaire and a series of interviews with all stakeholders, including students, teachers, parents and other partners. It collected information on school curriculum development, particularly in view of the change in teaching style, student involvement and democratic approaches to learning. The most successful examples of teaching methods and student initiatives were documented for developing new educational strategies, as were the outcomes of each activity (such as tables and graphics depicting the amount of waste paper collected by each class). Class winners were awarded diplomas and presents, and articles were published in the school magazine and in local newspapers. A final report was presented during the Conference on Dissemination and Evaluation on October 5, 2007 – Education Day in Romania.

At a first glance, it might seem that the changes are not profound – just a tidier schoolyard and participation in contests. But that is just the first glance. Since the launch of the project, the students and teachers of Stefan cel Mare have demonstrated increased motivation and academic results, strong partnerships with local NGOs and other community stakeholders participating in the mini-projects and other school initiatives, and a growing awareness of (and involvement in) energy, water and waste issues.

Moreover, the school has seen other important outcomes, such as more parent-student involvement and better teacher-student relations based on teamwork, cooperation and active participation in school activities. In addition, students are taking concrete actions for a better future. They have decided to use the Earth Charter as the framework for designing their own “Code of Environmental Behaviour,” which will be introduced by the Student Council. In summary, students have become actively involved in school and community life, and are demonstrating the attitudes and behaviours of truly concerned citizens.

The participants and partners in this project have learned to think and act as “a little part of the global community” and to feel a sense of interdependence and shared responsibility for the wellbeing of the human family and the larger living world.

## **Lessons learned and future plans**

In Romania, it is clearly understood that education for sustainable development is a process through which teachers and students learn about the concept of the common good, and learn how to become citizens who actively contribute to social and environmental changes through cooperation and respect. The case study of the projects carried out by the Stefan cel Mare school is just one of many examples of Romanian schools integrating the Earth Charter into their educational curriculum and extracurricular activities. These activities provide students with avenues to demonstrate that sustainable development can be achieved through exercising social and political rights. These experiences also help students to develop critical thinking skills, and encourage them and their teachers, parents, and community members to engage in participatory, hands-on, integrated actions towards living in a more sustainable way.

### **Contact information:**

Gabriela Scarlat  
Ministry of Education and Research of  
Romania  
**Email:** gabriela.scarlat@medu.edu.ro

Constanta Poede  
School 13, Stefan cel Mare Galati,  
Romania  
**Email:** poedec@yahoo.com