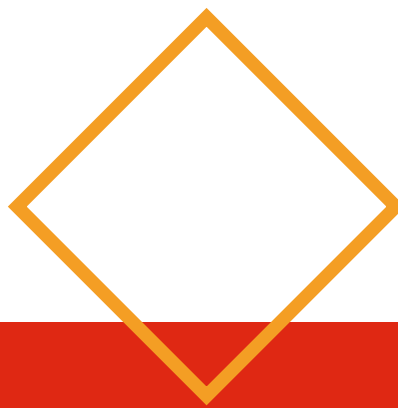




Policy Paper Beyond Barriers: Strengthening Global Citizenship Education for Inclusive Societies

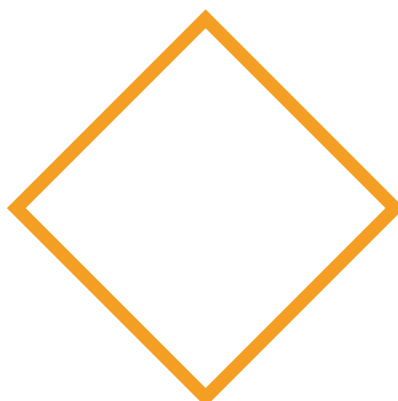
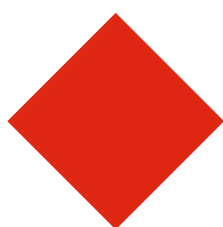
SOLIDAR+



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FOREWORD

It is a privilege to present SOLIDAR +’s Policy Paper titled *Beyond Barriers: Strengthening Global Citizenship Education for Inclusive Societies*. This publication marks the conclusion of our three-year thematic focus on Global Citizenship Education (GCE), a period shaped by significant global challenges and crises. Now more than ever, Global Citizenship Education is urgently needed. We need learners who can think critically, act responsibly, understand and enact their possibility to engage locally as well as across borders.

This Policy Paper highlights the significance of Global Citizenship Education and its role in addressing inequalities, showing how GCE can empower learners to engage meaningfully with today’s challenge. It builds on our previous publications: [We All Belong: The role of GCE in supporting democratic participation and addressing current global challenges](#) (2023) highlighting the importance of GCE and non-formal education providers, and our [Policy Paper on Global Citizenship Education and Democratic Participation in Europe](#) (2024) underlining GCE’s positive impact on youth democratic engagement.

The conclusion of this 2023-2025 cycle on Global Citizenship Education marks not an end, but a new beginning. It reaffirms and strengthens our commitment to keep striving for more just and resilient societies. With gratitude to all who contributed over these three years, particularly our members and partners, and with hope for the work that lies ahead, we are proud to present *Beyond Barriers: Strengthening Global Citizenship Education for Inclusive Societies*.

In presenting this paper, we reaffirm our belief that education is not merely the transmission of knowledge, but the development of capacities needed to respond to the challenges of our time. Every learner has a stake in our common future, and through GCE, we can foster a society in which individuals recognise their role as part of a community, ready and able to act for the public good.

◆ Mikael Leyi, Secretary General
of SOLIDAR & SOLIDAR+



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Over the past decade, Global Citizenship Education (GCE) has become a central framework for promoting democratic participation, inclusion, and social justice. While in formal schooling GCE has progressively become part of the curriculum, in non-formal and informal education civil society organisations (CSOs) have played a key role in advancing GCE, particularly by reaching systematically marginalised learners.

Building on previous work conducted by SOLIDAR+, this paper explores the relationship between GCE and socio-economic inequalities, focusing on how GCE can be used as a tool to address systemic inequities. It aims to map GCE provision for learners of different socio-economic backgrounds, identify which groups are most deprived of GCE, and explore innovative practices that link education to social justice and democratic engagement.

Key findings

- The literature reviewed highlights the influence of critical pedagogy and decolonial theory on GCE, calling for approaches that go beyond “complacent” models toward more intersectional, feminist, and care-based GCE frameworks.
- Testimonials from SOLIDAR+ members underline 1) the importance of conceptualising inequality as a multifactorial and intersectional issue; 2) the central role of participatory, sustained, and locally grounded GCE practices; and 3) the need for greater recognition of non-formal learning for improving the impact of GCE practices.
- Bridging theory and practice in GCE requires moving from individual ethical

action to collective political engagement. A “critical GCE” must integrate reflection and praxis, and challenge global structures of inequality.

- Some gaps remain in terms of evidence about the impact of GCE, especially related to accessibility for systematically marginalised groups such as refugees, rural populations, and LGBTQI+ communities. Strengthening collaboration between academia and civil society is essential to address these gaps.
- Policy changes are necessary, beyond integrating GCE into curricula: recognising competences gained through non-formal education, supporting teacher training, and ensuring education policies move beyond what is “on paper” is fundamental for a meaningful mainstreaming of GCE.
- Equity in access to GCE must be prioritised for GCE to “live up” to its promise: although the most vulnerable groups participate to some extent in community life through GCE activities, they often remain excluded from due to the lack of the material resources, which ultimately could affect their capacity to participate in democratic processes.

BACKGROUND

In the past decade, Global Citizenship Education (hereafter, GCE) has gained traction in Europe as a concept and as a practice. The increasing interest on GCE has shed light on the factors that have enabled and also challenged the practice: on the one hand, civil society organisations (CSOs) are key players that level the field in non-formal and informal education, in particular by reaching to systematically marginalised groups of learners and by creating multistakeholder partnerships at the local, national, and European level. On the other, challenges related to context (e.g. shrinking spaces for civil society) and funding (e.g. high dependency of non-formal education providers of public funds that are decreasing) influence the implementation capacity of GCE providers, especially in the non-formal education sector (Santibanez, 2023).

In previous SOLIDAR policy papers we flagged some GCE trends that tend to uncritical, self-complacent perspectives of the societies we live in. Academic and grey literature have

underlined the need to shift towards a “critical” GCE that centres social justice (de Vries, 2020; Dyrness, 2021; Estellés & Fischman, 2021; Vella, 2022). Also, an increasing number of scholars advocate for more reflexive research on GCE, that brings to the forefront concrete examples of practice showing the impact of GCE as a transformative learning experience.

On the practitioners’ side, the role of GCE in addressing socio-economic inequality has gained traction at an institutional level, as demonstrated by the reflections shared during the high-level policy roundtable organised by SOLIDAR+ ([“Breaking Barriers: Global Citizenship Education \(GCE\) for Inclusive Participation”](#)). The event, held at the European Parliament in May 2025, brought together representatives from the European Commission, the European Parliament, civil society organisations, and education practitioners to reflect on the role of GCE in promoting democratic participation and addressing deepening social inequalities



across Europe. Key insights shared during the roundtable referred to the work of European bodies such as the European Education Area (EEA) Working Group on Equality and Values, which supports mutual learning between countries, civil society organisations and other stakeholders on equity, inclusion as well as citizenship education. Also, initiatives such as the Dublin Declaration Global Education to 2050 outline a vision of GCE as universal, participatory, and transformative, highlighting how global education must connect local and global issues and be grounded in solidarity.

Aims and objectives of this publication

A common frame that reunites the membership of SOLIDAR+ is the fact that each one of them is striving to achieve social justice through education, ensuring that all learners have access to quality, public education that is done in a lifelong learning manner. Together, members have developed a shared definition of Global Citizenship Education¹, that provides common ground, while acknowledging that the concept continues to evolve and can be understood in diverse ways. A group of them has worked on the conceptualisation of a shared definition.^{2,3} In 2023, SOLIDAR+ published the Policy Paper WE ALL BELONG: The role of GCE in supporting democratic participation and addressing current global challenges which discusses recent policy developments connected to GCE at European level, including a reflection on the relevance of GCE delivered in informal and non-formal education for supporting democratic participation and addressing the current global challenges. This publication constituted the first building block of a three years-long work. The second building block is represented by the Policy Paper

Global Citizenship Education and Democratic Participation in Europe published in 2024. This looked into how GCE and democratic participation are related, and its pointers show that political investment in GCE can result in enhanced democratic participation, notably for transnational elections such as those for the European Parliament.

Following up on the findings of these two publications, **this policy paper aims to further the knowledge of the impact of Global Citizenship education on inequalities, notably looking at learners with diverse socio-economic backgrounds.**

Moreover, the general objectives for this paper include:

- map the provision of GCE for learners with different socio-economic backgrounds and innovative practices in this field;
- investigate whether certain socio-economic backgrounds are particularly deprived of GCE.

In order to tackle the complex relationship between GCE and inequality, this paper explores three main questions:

- What does the literature say about the role of GCE in addressing inequalities?
- Are there any specific groups particularly deprived of GCE? How does this relate to their participation in the democratic processes and community life?
- Is there evidence of GCE provision to learners with different socio-economic backgrounds and/or innovative practices in this field?

1 See Frank, Andrei & Gambardella, Elisa [Citizenship and Lifelong Learning Monitor](#) 2020, p. 9.

2 Thanks to the [Project AKA Active Citizens](#), co-funded by the CERV programme.

3 Ibid.

The next sub-sections describe the starting conceptual definitions and the methodology used to elaborate on these questions.

Conceptual definitions

Global Citizenship Education is understood as political education on a global scale which prepares learners to develop a sense of belonging to the global community, to get involved and to take an active role in society in order to contribute to a peaceful, just world in which ecological resources are preserved. This definition stems from the works of Vanessa de Andreotti (Andreotti, 2014), whose work on GCE takes a “critical” stance in order to collectively address the root causes of inequality, and more recently, from a decolonial perspective (Andreotti, 2022).

Inequality is undoubtedly one of the key critical issues affecting the quality of life of individuals and societies at large (Ehmke & Ciravegna, 2025; Varlik et al., 2025). According to recent research, globally “the richest 10% hold 52% of the world’s income, while the share of the poorest 50% is only 8.5%” (Varlik et al., 2025, p.2) and “258 million children and youth in low-income countries are completely deprived of education, with only 36% of girls accessing secondary education” (Ibid). Inequality feeds into violence and exclusion, which expresses in oppressive structures that perpetuate this power dynamic over generations, making it even more difficult to addressing its root causes.

In this policy paper, inequality is not seen a single phenomenon and thus we refer to the term ‘inequalities’. One of the most common categorisations is that of vertical and horizontal inequalities that overlap and interact (Ehmke & Ciravegna, 2025):

- **Vertical inequalities** refer to “hierarchical disparities within a society or a group. They can typically be expressed through data and often relate to how much power and status an individual or group has within a given society” (Ehmke & Ciravegna, 2025, p.5). Some of the most common dimensions of vertical inequalities are income, wealth, and political power.
- **Horizontal inequalities** point to “differences between social groups, which are formed around markers and categories by which people are classified or selfidentify” (Ehmke & Ciravegna, 2025, p.9). Some of these markers are class, gender and/or sex, ethnicity/race, disability status, religion, etc. It is based on these markers that people can experience either privilege and/or discrimination. This is why using an intersectional lens to understand how these markers interact with vertical inequalities is needed: power and privilege are not fixed in time or space, and the way in which we are affected by both changes according to our lived experience in society.

Methodology

The main assumption guiding this study is that GCE could have a (positive) impact on inequality, but in order to understand *what type of impact*, it is necessary to gather evidence about how GCE is, in practice, used as an approach or as a tool to address inequality.

For the purpose of this policy paper, data were collected using a twofold approach:

- **Rapid literature review (RLR).** Given the timeframe and the specificity of the topic, the rapid literature review method aims to provide credible results keeping in mind the time and resource constraints. As explained by Tricco et al., rapid reviews help to synthesize knowledge in which

“components of the systematic review process are simplified or omitted to produce information in a timely manner” (Tricco et al., 2015).

- **Qualitative in-depth interviews with representatives from SOLIDAR member organisations** regarding their work with learners from different socio-economic backgrounds. The aim of these interviews was to identify opportunities and/or challenges to their work in GCE around inequality, and examples of practices that have been successful in their contexts.

The RLR encompassed a review of recent academic and grey literature (since 2015), including articles, books, reports, and other documents available in English, French, Spanish, and Italian. The geographical scope covered the European region. Scholarly databases used include Research Rabbit and Google Scholar. The following keywords were used for the literature search:

- GCE + “inequality”;
- GCE + “socio-economic inequality”
- GCE + “social justice”

It is worth noting that, in terms of academic literature, less than 50 sources explicitly addressing the relationship between GCE and inequalities were found. This suggests new avenues for future research on this topic.

In-depth interviews with SOLIDAR members and partners were organised with the aim of developing brief case studies. The inclusion criteria used to select participants were:

- Being a member or partner of SOLIDAR+ working in Europe

- Availability to participate in an online interview voluntarily
- Implementation of initiatives started no longer than 5 years ago
- Objectives of the initiative specifically focused on working with learners affected by inequalities (either socio-economic or other)
- Having documented examples of practice

Five online interviews were conducted in Spanish, Italian, and French, between July – September 2025. All data were transcribed, translated in English, and analysed using a constant comparative method (together with the results of the RLR) in order to produce a narrative report of the results.

Some limitations to the findings should be taken into consideration. First, even though the desk research was conducted in several languages, most of the literature available was found in English, which may affect to some extent the representativity of the results. Second, the limited capacity for participation of organisations in SOLIDAR’s network (members and partners) impacts on the generalisability of some results, although they provided a variety of examples that help illustrate the relationship between GCE and inequalities. Third, the authors are aware of the existence of a wealth of resources from the NGO sector (e.g. reports, working papers, etc.) regarding their work in GCE, but these were not included in the RLR due to time and capacity constraints. This does not mean, however, that said resources have less value as evidence to support the exploration of GCE practices with regards to inequalities.

The following pages provide an overview of the key takeaways of this paper. Section 2

discusses the main findings, including the results from the literature review and the in-depth interview analysis, as well as a discussion about the considerations to keep in mind moving forward. Section 3 provides some pointers for improvement and further recommendations at the policy and practice level for a meaningful mainstreaming of GCE across all types of education.



MAIN FINDINGS

This section presents an analysis of the results from the literature review as well as of the in-depth interviews conducted for this research. The analysis is followed by a discussion of key issues emerging from the findings, namely an ongoing “theoretical tension” between different strands of GCE – e.g. “complacent” vs “critical” GCE –, and the need for more research specifically related to the impact of GCE practices in non-formal education. Both issues are connected to the need of strengthening the social justice goals of GCE through concrete steps – for instance, by helping practitioners to identify who has access to GCE and who’s systematically excluded and by encouraging dialogue among learners with the aim of forming networks that will enact collective action.

Theoretical and empirical contributions from the literature

Although it may seem that the relationship between GCE and inequalities has been widely explored (based on the social justice component attached to the concept), it has only become visible in the literature from recent years advocating for a “critical” GCE (Akkari & Maleq, 2020; Bosio & Waghid, 2023; de Vries, 2020; Dyrness, 2021; González-Valencia et al., 2022a; Santamaría-Cárdaba et al., 2024; Schippling, 2020). This critical stance promotes GCE as a transformative learning experience, which would allow us to develop specific knowledge and skills for peaceful and solidary coexistence, but also a change



in attitudes and behaviours that will ultimately lead to action for social change (Brown, 2018). This perspective, as seen in many of the works cited throughout this paper, is greatly influenced by Freire (1970), whose work on critical pedagogy laid the groundwork for educational practices that aim for reflection coupled with action. A key concept in Freire's work is the process of *conscientização*, which is defined as "learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions – developing a critical awareness – so that individuals can take action against the oppressive elements of reality" (Freire, 1970, p. 35). It is not enough to deeply understand the world surrounding us – it is also necessary to lead social change through praxis; as noted by Brown (2018), "this implies working towards a critical understanding that encourages learners to explore and reflect on the reasons for oppression and build together ways to overcome these collaboratively" (Brown, 2018, p.2).

Besides the clear influence of Freire's work on critical GCE, other authors have contributed to elaborate on the relationship between GCE and inequalities. **Postcolonial and decolonial discourses** have steadily increased among scholars advocating for critical GCE (Abdi & Shultz, 2008; Coelho et al., 2022; de Oliveira Andreotti & de Souza, 2012). Postcolonial and decolonial contributions directly addresses the structural causes of inequalities and value "human diversity and ethical, self-aware and solidary engagement towards a profound change in current social relations and structures" (Coelho et al., 2022, p.157). Altenberger (2025) argues that adopting a critical stance in GCE would allow us to "interrupt the reproduction of the narrative that essentialises the poverty and struggles of the former colonies (and hides the fact that both are the direct result of colonial exploitation)." Altenberger also advocates for "an implementation of queer-feminist perspectives to post- and decolonial discourses on GCE" (Altenberger, 2025,

p.51), which means 'sabotaging' historical power relations (and one's own position) but also understanding the potential of political practice to change the status quo (Altenberger, 2025, p.41). This perspective acknowledges gender as a multidimensional concept, "always intertwined with other structures of inequality", which has been placed within a "narrative of emancipation and enlightenment that is inescapably intertwined with colonialism" in the predominant (uncritical) versions of GCE.

Other contributions to critical GCE emphasize the **critical consciousness, ethics, and reflective practice** to address inequalities. GCE for critical consciousness would entail "teaching students about macrostructural relationships and improving their understanding of inequities in justice to challenging the historical idea that human development can be accessed only via one path—the neoliberal" (Bosio & Waghid, 2023, p.10). Linking critical thinking to global education, Santamaría-Cárdaba et al. (2024) state that education for social transformation (such as GCE) "requires citizens to know both the reasons for social inequalities and their rights and to be aware of their capacity to act on reality" (Santamaría-Cárdaba et al., 2024, p.6). Brown (2018) argues that "ideology critique" should be central to GCE practice "to see the way common-sense understandings are constructed a certain way to serve the interests of the powerful and thus perpetuate inequalities and oppression" (Brown, 2018, p.3).

Another contribution comes from **intersectional GCE** (de Vries, 2020) which starts from the assumption that "intersectionality is not so much about categories of identities, rather about structures of inequality" (de Vries, 2020, p.7). For the author, adding intersectional literacy to GCE would help us to connect the global to the local (all complexities considered) and to "perceive inequality as a result of power dynamics on a structural level rather than a

personal or individual attitude or experience” (de Vries, 2020, p. 11).

With regards to research about the potential impact of GCE on addressing inequalities, some examples touch on experiences that have taken place at school. Although GCE at school is not the main concern of this policy paper, we discuss below a few examples that explicitly look into the relationship between GCE and inequalities.

In a study conducted in Catalonia (Spain), Gonzalez et al. (2022) examine the dimensions of GCE that emerge when secondary school students analyse images taken from the digital platforms of the mainstream media. The authors found that “while students tend to adopt a perspective of social responsibility, they do not have the tools necessary for critical interpretation of social facts and problems; they are still less able to formulate arguments or make decisions relating to actions within the parameters of social justice” (González-Valencia et al., 2022, p. 1). Also in the context of secondary schools, Duarte and Robinson-Jones (2024) used a social cartography of GCE types from a recent study to identify management staff’s, teachers’, and pupils’ perceptions of GCE in the context of Dutch (bilingual) secondary education. The authors found that there is “a clear dominance of a liberal orientation towards GCE” in the Dutch context, “but also evidence of a critical orientation, as well as liberal-critical and neoliberal-liberal interfaces” (Duarte & Robinson-Jones, 2024, p.1). The critical orientations were mainly associated “with an in-depth historical-based approach” touching on human rights, climate change, and the overall impact of these topics at the individual level (Duarte & Robinson-Jones, 2024, p.14).

Other authors also focused on the perceptions and practices of teachers (pre-service or in-service). Tarozzi and Mallon (2019) compared a

series of GCE in-service primary teacher education programmes in four European countries (Ireland, Austria, the Czech Republic and Italy), so as to explore how higher education institutions (HEIs), non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and participating teachers “shape the development of content-based, competence-based and values-based approaches to teacher education” (Tarozzi & Mallon, 2019, p.112). Among the key findings, the authors conclude “that successful collaborations can foster teacher agency through transformative, values-based approaches to GCE teacher education” (Tarozzi & Mallon, 2019, p.112).

In a study conducted in Andalusia (Southern Spain), De Arriba Rivas & Ibáñez Ruiz Del Portal (2023) used a care approach to analyse teachers’ GCE practices. The authors describe the “ethics of care” as key to understand “the importance of relationships, emotions, and empathy”, because it “appeals to the transformation of society, politics, laws, economic activity, family, and personal relationships beyond the assumptions inherent in patriarchy” (De Arriba Rivas & Ibáñez Ruiz Del Portal, 2023, p.3). An interesting contribution from the authors is that a care approach doesn’t consider gender as a criterion for attributing collective responsibilities (e.g. women look after children) and it needs a “collective recognition” of the internal capacities that are found within global citizenship. In the study, teachers that applied a care perspective to GCE started to question “the roots of the economic system and human lifestyles, for instance, the role of a teacher or the educational structure. When care is added to GCE, we draw closer to critical GCE” (De Arriba Rivas & Ibáñez Ruiz Del Portal, 2023, p.7).

In Italy, Damiani (2020) analysed how the lack of formal inclusion of global education in initial teacher education (ITE) programmes impacts future teachers. Her findings suggest that the basic training and knowledge teachers

receive is not directly addressing GCE, and that the mainstreaming of GCE in the classroom depends mostly on future teachers' "self-preparedness and confidence of the learning opportunities that occur in non-formal and informal contexts" (Damiani, 2020, p.23). Coelho et al. (2020) note a similar trend in a study conducted in England, Finland, and Sweden, where the teachers' background and experience influences the ways in which "issues related to Western colonialism are viewed and addressed" (Coelho et al., 2020, p.3).

Regarding research on GCE in the non-formal and informal education sectors, some examples look into the implications of using GCE as part of non-governmental organisations' activities. In a study conducted in Malta with migrants from Sub-Saharan Africa, Vella (2022) argues that GCE principles "can enrich socially engaged practices in art and education" by overturning the "fixed citizen identities" in moments such as learning and teaching (Vella, 2022, p.547). Coelho et al. (2020) analysed the discourses of GCE practitioners working in development NGOs in Portugal, and found that, although humanist views are predominant, neoliberal and postcolonial perspectives are still present, which are also linked to a prevalence of "the responsible citizen-consumer as an agent of social change" (Coelho et al., 2022, p.155).

Finally, Milana and Tarozzi (2021) comparatively analyse GCE and adult education and learning to "unpack" their similarities and differences. The authors argue "for reconceptualizing adult education and learning as global citizenship education" because both " (1) promote active citizenship skills, (2) strive towards equality and social justice on a global level and (3) adopt a values-based approach and promote transformative learning" (Milana & Tarozzi, 2021, p.46). Although this is not an empirical study, it offers a unique insight into adult edu-

cation and learning; according to the authors, "the two domains are interconnected and share some key constitutive elements when interpreted in a particular and non-neutral way (i.e. addressing social transformation, equity and social justice from a non-Western-centric perspective)" (Milana & Tarozzi, 2021, p.56).

Tackling inequality through GCE: stories from the field

The in-depth interviews undertaken for writing this policy paper (see the Methodology section) aimed to explore to what extent members of SOLIDAR+ understand and enact the assumption that GCE could help to address inequalities. **Box 1** provides a brief overview of the five member organisations that participated in the interviews.

Box 1: description of member organisations participating in the interviews

Asamblea de Cooperación por la Paz (Spain) is an NGO that has been working since 1990 on humanitarian action programmes and development cooperation in countries in the Global South, supporting the work of social movements. It works also in Spain and Europe, and it is dedicated to raising awareness and providing formal education in public primary and secondary schools: "we have a structure that is very closely linked to the territory, because we have 14 branches in 14 of the 17 autonomous communities that exist in Spain. We work in the territory very closely with youth, women's and migrant organisations, as well as with public educational centres", explained the staff member interviewed.

AUSER (Italy) is a national association network that deals broadly with active ageing, but it does so with around 1,700 local associations, some of which are voluntary associations

that provide personal assistance; others are social promotion associations, which promote relationships, socialising, culture and leisure activities. Under the umbrella of Auser, there are experiences that are very different from one another, “because we are a network of associations made up of and run by volunteers, so we do not always do the same types of activities everywhere” explains the staff member interviewed. Auser volunteers are primarily older adults who find in volunteering a way to remain active.

IFIAS (Belgium) is an international NGO working for the promotion of democracy, transparency and human rights since 1997. As described by one of the volunteers working for the organisation “since the end of the 1990s, we worked with Bosnian refugees in Germany, we worked with Belarusians here until 2013, we worked with Palestinian refugees in Palestine, we’re helping internally displaced Ukrainians, etc. We base our work on requests from beneficiaries, so it doesn’t just pop out of our heads. It’s something that is brought to us by the future beneficiaries, and of course, they are involved from the outset in the approach we have chosen. And that hasn’t changed since 1997.”

La Liga Española (Spain) is an independent, secular NGO founded in 1986, and it is made up of a network of volunteers and education professionals. According to the staff members interviewed, “one of the important battles we have been fighting for 30 years or more is that the Spanish education system had to include aspects of reflection on the concept of citizenship, and then also practical activities”. La Liga implements activities in different areas inside and outside school. One of the concerns of the Liga since its inception has been “how to insert civic and democratic values into the education system, how to get students, boys and girls, to reflect on a type of civic education that was not provided during the dictatorship” added the interviewees.

Movimiento por la Paz (MPDL) (Spain)

is a Development, Humanitarian, and Social Action NGO created in 1983 to defend and promote Human Rights. Internationally, MPDL works in development cooperation and humanitarian aid in the Middle East, North Africa, Sub-Saharan Africa, and Latin America. In Spain, they work for social inclusion, immigration, gender equality, education, and awareness-raising. Today, their educational activities allow them to collaborate with schools and in the field of non-formal education: “we have also autonomous projects that bring both perspectives together (formal and non-formal education) with a high degree of autonomy”, explained a staff member.

In this section, we discuss the findings from the interviews conducted, organised according to four main points:

- The organisation’s understanding of inequality as a concept;
- How the organisation translates this understanding into their GCE activities;
- What are some of the GCE practices that have worked with/impacted systematically marginalised groups of people they work with;
- What do they believe is needed to increase the potential of GCE in addressing inequalities.

Understandings of inequality

Member organisations interviewed seem to have a shared (and sharp) understanding of inequality as a multi-factorial phenomenon stemming from unjust socio-economic structures underpinned by a neoliberal model. It is multi-factorial because inequality expresses through different means – e.g. oppression, discrimination, exclusion, etc. For some member organisations interviewed, this means that adopting an **intersectional perspective** to their work is essential: “we see that it has more

to do with the space for social participation that exists in public life, your background, your sexual orientation,” explained one of the interviewees. “We always emphasise the convergence between economic and social disadvantage and also in relation to gender, ethnic origin and immigration status,” added another interviewee.

While the intersectional perspective to inequality was not predominant across member organisations interviewed, other dimensions are emphasized – e.g. “fragility” (of certain sectors of the population), “gender inequalities”, “risk of exclusion”, etc. – which reflect in the choice of the target groups they work with, the type of initiatives they carry, and the focus of their activities.

One of the interviewees explained:

The common thread that brings coherence to our widespread commitment is precisely that of trying to help to bring the needs of fragile sections of the population to the fore, and try as far as possible to provide some kind of response, convinced that the issue is not only combating inequality in absolute terms; in general, the belief is that, if within a community one of its components (be it the elderly, children or migrants) is disadvantaged, improving the conditions of one of its components structurally benefits the community as a whole.

Moreover, some organisations interviewed conceptualise inequality in association to a broader understanding of (global) citizenship, in which civic and democratic values such as secularism, citizenship, and solidarity are the foundation to fight for equal rights and freedoms. In relation to GCE, this understanding is expressed “through an experiential and learning process to change their position in the world and from there be able to combat

inequality... the idea of living with dignity”, as described by an interviewee.

Translating this understanding into GCE

Most of the member organisations interviewed have a presence both in formal and non-formal learning environments. This could be explained by the specific awareness these organisations have regarding the ways in which said target groups experience inequality. When it comes to activities conducted at school, there is a “sense of urgency” about the impact of socio-economic inequality on the classroom climate, but also about other forms of oppression determined by people’s origin, religion, sexual orientation, etc. As one of the interviewees explained: “we work a lot on what happens inside the classroom, because right now it’s a hotbed of inequalities related to where each student comes from, what their income level is, what kind of mobile phone they have, what clothes they wear, whether they are Roma or not...” Another interviewee from a different member organisation shared a similar perspective:

We are very careful about how the discourse of meritocracy has permeated society, this idea that those who have made it to the top have earned it because they have worked hard and those who have fallen behind deserve it because they have not worked hard enough. This worries us when it takes root in students who have fallen behind, who have intersecting structural family conditions that make them extremely vulnerable, and who accumulate difficulties and remain at the back of the class. We think it is important for these students to be aware that they are not to blame for where they are.

All of the organisations interviewed work in non-formal education, addressing GCE by different means (e.g. awareness raising campaigns, trainings, intercultural education,

employment programmes, etc.). While some of these initiatives do not explicitly refer to GCE, all of them tackle one or several dimensions of inequality, in close connection to the organisations' understanding of 'what matters most' in the context they work. For example, one of the organisations does awareness raising activities in depopulated and rural areas of Spain, but also with young migrants: "each territory has its own needs, which is why we need to know the territory – to respond to those needs. We always work in agreement with the organisations to find out if what we do is of interest to them or if it is a social need that has been identified by them", illustrated one of the interviewees. A similar approach of acting as "facilitators" between funders and the groups working in the field was shared by another interviewee: "we always work with partners, and it is these partners who approach us. Here in our city there's a long-standing group that fights against inequality and for human rights for all. We work with refugees from all over the world who are very involved, very personally too, and who come to see us and say, 'Isn't there something we can do for this group?'".

Another way through which organisations interviewed address inequality is by focusing on the consequences it brings – e.g. social exclusion, isolation, and fragilization. In the case of one of the Spanish organisations interviewed, their aim is to reach people at risk of exclusion, with a focus "on empowering these individuals as citizens, as in, making them aware of their rights and responsibilities", as explained one of its staff members. Another organisation working with the elderly addresses inequality using a twofold approach: on the one hand, tackling fragility and, on the other, combating social exclusion: "what really sets us apart is the combination of two strands – i.e. volunteering and social promotion. What is particularly interesting in our experience is that the same people who may be interested in one of these activities in our association

may also get involved in the other" noted one of the interviewees.

GCE practices that have worked with systematically marginalised groups

Member organisations also reflected on practices that support their work on GCE, in particular with groups that are directly affected by inequality. Most interviewees highlighted two elements that enable their work on GCE: 1) the importance of using participatory and bottom-up approaches, and 2) working in networks with different organisations and actors at the local level (and not only from the educational sector). In describing their methodology, one of the interviewees reflected on the importance of developing a process together with the target groups:

We work with a methodology that is not about going into the classroom one day to give a talk and then disappear, but rather it is part of a process we propose with all the activities, materials and resources we have. It has to be integrated into the needs of the school and what the school is already doing. So, this methodology also has to be participatory... it's a continuous and ongoing process, not just one-off activities. It involves the whole community.

A second interviewee also shared this perspective, adding that "a significant impact can be seen with sustained work over time rather than one-off efforts. It is a success when children who entered the programme at a young age end up becoming new trainers, younger boys and girls who return and convey that vision first and foremost as a success."

Another organisation emphasized that their work with integration into the labour market has allowed them to directly act upon reducing inequalities: "when people at risk of exclusion receive training (that ranges from skills for specific jobs to improvements in sociability,

emotional intelligence and self-esteem), the moment they enter the job market, they also in a way re-enter society, which reduces exclusion.”

In line with their considerations about practices that support their work on GCE, member organisations interviewed also reflected on how they recognise the impact of their activities. The common denominator among interviewees seems to be behaviour change (e.g. reduced incidence of racist or discriminatory attitudes), but also the “transformation” at a personal and collective level. Several interviewees illustrated this transformation with concrete examples from their experience:

[The impact is visible on] the empowerment of students, because when students perceive themselves as capable of reflecting on the world around them and thinking, it completely changes how they perceive themselves and how they are capable of transforming the world around them. Sometimes it's small things, and that's one of the best impacts I see, because it's small, but it's for one person and it's for every day and for the rest of their life, you know? Once it clicks in your head, you can't go back, and your level of commitment increases.

There are young boys who are a bit reluctant to recognise the specific oppression or violence that girls suffer because of gender. I think it's powerful when we invite them to recognise the oppression they may suffer due to other factors, such as class, because suddenly the commonality, recognising what it feels like to be left behind for something, whatever it may be, suddenly makes you more empathetic. It is also a driving force that serves to mobilise allies who do not experience oppression themselves, but who can recognise another specific form of oppression in their own lives.

When a person reaches retirement age and stops working, it is not as if they have reached a point beyond which they simply have to drag themselves along as best they can, without any personal, artistic, professional or human aspirations. Once they have finished working, there is still life left to fill, and this is the kind of issue that our association tries to address in a practical way.

One of the things I've really learned in my practice is that if you can make at least one person happy with a project and give at least one person the idea that there's another way of living that could be more positive for everyone, then you've won.

What is needed to increase the potential of GCE in addressing inequalities?

Member organisations brought many suggestions to address this question based on their own experience. Some key points mentioned relate to 1) the importance of opening spaces for dialogue, 2) the recognition of competences/experience acquired, and 3) the need for education policies that do not stay “only on paper.”

“It's like discovering the wheel 500 times, but giving people a space to get together, talk and feel listened to is the most transformative thing”, explained an enthusiastic interviewee. This perception is widely shared among member organisations interviewed, whose examples also referred to the significance of intergenerational dialogue: “intergenerational dialogue as a methodology can be beneficial, because direct approaches in the classroom are still seen as classroom matters; students always distinguish between who is in the classroom and who is outside the classroom.” This idea of dialogue across generations also refers to a sense of shared values that can be developed using oral history:



Oral history, which has become increasingly widespread over the last years, consists of testimonies of life, biographies. It is not history as read, written or narrated, but rather each person narrating their own story, their own biography, their values, how they acquired them, how they defended them, how they lost them and how they regained them.

For one of the member organisations this is a central methodology, in particular in their work to counter hate speech: “we talk a lot about new narratives, because in part it has to do with that, these are testimonies of life, which is very different from history books, where you learn about characters and dates that seem lifeless, as if they never existed, as if they were just dead letters”, described one of the interviewees.

Recognition of competences and experience acquired through non-formal education is

another factor that, according to some interviewees, could enhance the potential of GCE in addressing inequalities. As one of the interviewees explained, “the types of recognition available remain closely linked to the labour market and the development of an individual’s competitiveness within the labour market,” which leaves out entire groups that do not seek recognition for employment purposes. “In our case, most of the people we involve as active volunteers, not just as participants in activities, are people who, due to their age, could not care less about recognition in terms of their competitiveness”, added the interviewee. An alternative way of recognising competences/experience proposed was, for example, providing discounted access to theatres, libraries, parking, transportation, etc. which would also facilitate participation of active volunteers. This reflection is also connected to lifelong learning and the recognition of training undertaken in non-formal or informal contexts: “the fundamental point is

that when we talk about recognition, we need to stop for a second and think very carefully on the concept behind the term ‘recognition’. When we talk about a recognition system, we are presupposing a quality certification system of some kind.”

A final but no less important point that member organisations addressed in the interviews is the need for education policies that “do not stay on paper”. Here, two key aspects were mentioned by interviewees. First, the need for a (decolonial) curriculum that follows an educational reform towards better integration of GCE at school:

Global Citizenship Education should be integrated not only into educational policies, but also into the official curriculum of educational institutions, because it is not permeating, it is not being done. And for me, that would be extremely important...it would increase the capacity to reduce inequalities with such a comprehensive and structural approach. All curricula should integrate critical reading of inequality, the causes, the effects, in other words, students would learn to think about these key issues not as an afterthought, but on a daily basis: the patriarchy, colonisation...

It’s worth noting that several interviewees highlighted the need to decolonise the curriculum (at the European and national level) so as to move away from Eurocentric perspectives towards more critical approaches to the role of the so-called Global North, in particular regarding its colonial past. As one interviewee explained, “we must move away from traditional views that focus solely on the idea that we in the North interfere in the problems of the South as if they were problems that only affect the South. In other words, these outdated views of GCE must be transformed from the political and educational frameworks at European level.”

Interviewees also emphasized the need for teacher training opportunities for pre-service and in-service teachers (that sometimes lack the competences to address GCE in the classroom): “just because it is stated in the law does not mean that it will be implemented in the classroom or that teachers will mainstream it, because they lack the training, the time to change the materials, and some of them are no longer going to embrace change, except for young teachers”, explained an interviewee. Another interviewee expanded on this idea of working closely with older teachers: “there are people who have been teaching for 30 years and who teach the way they did 30 years ago, and then one day they are told, ‘now you have to start talking about gender equality,’ and that overwhelms them. Awareness-raising is needed, because these are issues that many teachers reject.”

Member organisations interviewed shared a wealth of examples of GCE projects, activities, and initiatives they have led together with the communities they work. More examples will be mentioned in the following section, that discusses how to bring together GCE theory and practice in a way that it better addresses inequalities.

Connecting the dots of theory and practice in GCE

As seen in the previous sections, scholarship on GCE has broadly developed in recent years, with a particular accent on the need for more critical stances and calling for more reflection coupled with action to address the root causes of inequality. On the side of practitioners, testimonials from SOLIDAR members show that GCE takes different forms depending on target groups, contexts, resources available, etc. However, the main goals remain more or less the same for these organisations – i.e.

reach systematically marginalised groups, tackle exclusion, and achieve social cohesion.

One key question emerging from the analysis of the findings is **how can GCE “live up” to its promise of helping to address inequalities?** The results from the literature review show that there are a variety of theoretical approaches that strive for a more inclusive practice - revealing a “theoretical tension” between different strands of GCE (e.g. “complacent” vs “critical”). Also, the literature provides only few studies focusing on the impact of GCE in non-formal education environments. On the other hand, the analysis of interviews conducted with SOLIDAR member organisations provide many examples in which different aspects of inequality are tackled, without necessarily following a structured GCE approach as described in the literature. The following paragraphs provide a discussion of these issues.

With regards to the theoretical tension, many authors have underlined the dominance of cosmopolitan or liberal discourses over issues of global inequality, injustice, and oppression (Altenberger, 2025; Brown, 2018; Kim & Kwon, 2023; Mansouri et al., 2017; Milana & Tarozzi, 2021; Pais & Costa, 2020; Pashby et al., 2020). As noted by Bryan, interrogating the “reconfiguration” of GCE as “a constellation of SES [socio-emotional skills]” is needed to understand that the “intertwined logics of *skillification* and *neuroliberalism*... shift attention away from the substantive causes of global poverty and injustice and the need for widespread political engagement, collective action” (Bryan, 2024, p.244). A majority of the critical GCE scholars advocate for reflection coupled with action, not only at the individual, but also at the collective level. This response to the theoretical tension integrates decolonial, intersectional, and transnational perspectives into GCE so that oppression and inequality are actually addressed (de Vries, 2020; Drerup,

2020; Dyrness, 2021; Kim & Kwon, 2023; Pashby & Sund, 2020). The purpose is to steer away from quick-fix solutions linked mostly to “ethical consumerism” and individual activism deprived of a reflection about our implications in structures at the root of oppression and injustice (Brown, 2018; Coelho et al., 2022).

The overemphasis on individual actions for social change is already being problematised in the literature, in particular **how to achieve transformative collective action**. Some possible answers have been explored in the literature, such as that critical reflection has to be coupled with action so that learners can actually challenge their core beliefs and assumptions as part of a network of like-minded people (Bosio & Schattle, 2023; Brown, 2018; Mansouri et al., 2017). Also, recent works have argued for the integration of the **ethics of care** in GCE practice at school, which should focus on three dimensions: the role of teachers, the educational system, and group management (De Arriba Rivas & Ibáñez Ruiz Del Portal, 2023).

This question implies that NGOs working in GCE should try to strike a balance between encouraging critical analysis and empowering individuals to act as a collective (what Paulo Freire would have called *praxis*); **through dialogue and interaction, learners can form networks, which in turn, can lead to collective action**. Simply encouraging ethical consumerism is not going to generate the structural change needed to reduce inequality, and therefore, supporting the creation of networks should be an essential role of actors in the GCE ecosystem.

Achieving the social justice goals of GCE is even more pressing in contexts where recent political developments have led to the shrinking of spaces given to civil society organisations. Less resources, authoritarian environments, and unabashed racist policies are affecting

the capacity of civil society to provide spaces for critical dialogue and action. History, however, has shown that resistance to oppression comes in many forms – for example, by forming solidarity networks that transcend borders, such as the global movement against genocide in Palestine, which has taken root everywhere in Europe in spite of the repressive policies against protesters implemented.

One of the central assumptions in critical GCE – and in the work of SOLIDAR+’s members – is that education is not just about the mere transmission of information; it is also about helping learners integrate democratic practices into their daily lives. This would mean becoming individually and collectively aware of the ways in which vertical and horizontal inequalities permeate and affect every aspect of our lives. However, this also means recognising that the “global space is by no means equally

global for everyone”, as argued by Altenberger (2025). In recognising this, we should be able to understand who is actually considered a global citizen (and who is not). This is crucial to identify who has access to GCE and who is systematically excluded, and in what ways GCE needs to improve its practice in order to reach the learners most affected by inequalities and exclusion.

The issue of access to GCE remains understudied in the literature, and therefore more research on this topic could provide further clarity. We theorise that in formal education, access to GCE is conditioned primarily by enrolment status of learners (e.g. in school, higher education, etc.). However, access to GCE is also conditioned by how horizontal inequalities exclude learners with specific markers of identity (e.g. class, gender and/or sex, ethnicity/race, disability status, religion,



etc.), which is also applicable to non-formal and informal education. The expression of these markers of identity is also ‘used against’ learners through oppressive and discriminatory practices in educational institutions that are supposed to include them.

According to data collected for this paper, groups that are particularly deprived of GCE are those who are most vulnerable to discrimination in our societies – i.e. refugee and/or migrant women, people living in rural areas, people with disabilities, and LGBTQI+ communities. Most of the time, this vulnerability translates into limited participation in democratic processes, not necessarily because of lack of awareness or information, but rather because people lack the material resources to engage – e.g. participating in local elections may be extremely difficult for a person with a disability living alone and away from the polling station. However, participation in community life, as seen in the examples provided by SOLIDAR+’s members for this paper, is strengthened if people have access to GCE-related activities that seek to bridge the material gaps and include them fully, paying close attention to their markers of identity and how these affect their everyday lives.

Some of the examples provided by SOLIDAR member organisations focus in particular on how they seek to involve some of the most marginalised or vulnerable groups in their initiatives. However, these organisations are led by their own mission, values, and understanding of inequality, and are not necessarily influenced by GCE frameworks proposed in scholarly literature. This leads us to the second issue emerging from the findings: **the need to generate more evidence about the impact of GCE on inequality.**

While the literature review yielded a number of articles and book chapters related to GCE practice, most of these referred to studies

conducted at school or with actors from the school community. Only a small number of articles covered GCE in non-formal and informal education, which indicates a need for more empirical research in these contexts to be able to assess to what extent GCE meets its principles/tenets in concrete ways (Coelho et al., 2022). More research on access to GCE through non-formal and informal education would be beneficial for understanding how to improve the practice drawing from examples that explicitly address the different dimensions of inequality.

Having more evidence at hand can also help to support advocacy efforts by providing evidence of what is/is not working, what are the key enablers/challenges for GCE practice, etc. This brings another question to the table: **how can academia support civil society in generating this evidence?** Some examples of this collaboration are found in youth work research, but more examples that focus explicitly on the impact of GCE initiatives on inequality would help make a stronger case for GCE.

POINTERS FOR IMPROVEMENT AND FURTHER RECOMMENDATIONS

Considering the findings of this study, as well as findings from previous research on GCE, we offer some pointers for policymakers for the meaningful mainstreaming of GCE across all types of education:

At the policy level:

- Ensure that education policies that mainstream GCE are followed by curricula that better integrates GCE at school. Policies aiming at introducing GCE at school should consider how curricula will reflect GCE goals of social justice and cohesion, either using a single-subject or a cross-curricular approach.
- Linked to the point above, providing training and capacity building opportunities to pre-service and in-service teachers, educators, school directors, and school staff about GCE, is paramount to ensure that GCE curricula is mainstreamed.
- Open spaces for cross-sectoral learning including different educational actors (from the formal and non-formal education sectors), to foster a dialogue on how to improve the GCE practice. As highlighted by SOLIDAR+ members and in the Input Paper of the EEA Working Group on Equality and Values⁴, collaboration between CSOs and schools is a strong component in the GCE practice, and more institutional support would facilitate its mainstreaming.
- Following the point above, maintaining avenues for collaboration with other education stakeholders to ensure that all learners, regardless of their socio-economic status, can access GCE is key. This could mean implementing GCE initiatives addressing specific groups of learners (e.g. the most vulnerable) together with CSOs, with the aim of overcoming material barriers to ensure provision (e.g. decentralising the offer of GCE opportunities, using blended learning approaches, etc.)
- Support higher education and research institutions to produce timely and evidence-informed research on GCE implementation, in particular in non-formal education.
- Facilitate the dissemination of research findings related to the role of GCE in addressing inequalities, highlighting innovative practices and successful examples.
- Ensure that funding opportunities are sustainable to allow the implementation of long-term GCE initiatives.

At the practice level:

- Keep open and maintain spaces for dialogue and collective reflection with learners, practitioners, and the communities living in our own contexts to encourage critical reflection coupled with action around GCE.
- Mainstream decolonial, transnational, and intersectional approaches in GCE initiatives to move closer to a critical reflection coupled with action. This means, among other things, providing platforms to voices that represent systematically marginalised groups instead of talking on their behalf; questioning what counts as “official knowledge” in GCE; and aiming for concrete actions that tackle asymmetric power relations within the GCE community of practice.
- Foster network development among people participating in GCE activities to support collective action towards social change; this could translate in generating contextual knowledge about how to dismantle asymmetrical power relations, developing resistance actions against oppression, implement concrete care-based and solidarity practices among participants, etc.
- Maintain avenues for collaboration with other education stakeholders (including education providers, NGOs, etc.) to ensure that all learners, regardless of their socio-economic status, can access GCE.



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