

Environmental education and information for citizens and businesses

In a nutshell

SUMMARY

It is best practice to provide environmental education and information to citizens and businesses with the objective of:

- fostering public awareness of environmental problems;
- providing practical information on the everyday contribution that citizens and businesses can make to environmental protection and efficient utilisation of resources;
- creating new patterns of behaviour among different groups within society;
- inspiring citizens to get to know and appreciate the local environment and reconnect with nature;
- stimulating an understanding of the environmental interdependence between urban and surrounding rural and natural areas.

Such objectives can be achieved by organising educational seminars, conferences, workshops for the general public or specific groups of citizens, businesses or professionals on specific subjects (e.g. energy-efficient buildings). Moreover, the local public administration can provide specific information on legal (and other) environment-related aspects and on incentives available (e.g. incentives for energy efficiency). All the activities can be organised with the involvement and cooperation of residents, local organisations and businesses that support the environmental education and information of citizens.

Target group

Public administrations responsible for the environmental education of citizens and provision of environmental information to businesses.

Applicability

This best practice is applicable to all public administrations with a role in informing the public on environmental matters.

Environmental performance indicators

- Percentage of citizens reached directly and indirectly by the environmental education actions
- Presence of a municipal service or agency for provision of environment-related information to businesses (y/n)

Benchmarks of excellence

N/A

Description

Environmental education plays a key role in the effectiveness of putting in practice the principles of sustainable development. In terms of content, environmental education encompasses a variety of areas ranging from practical advice

about environmental protection and the efficient utilisation of the natural resources, to information about the local natural ecosystems and their conservation (PROEUROPE, 2005). It can be aimed at awareness raising, behavioural changes or, also very important, reconnecting with nature.

Local public administrations are in a key role for providing environmental education and information to citizens and businesses. Indeed they are both the level of public administration closest to citizens and business and those in charge of implementation of crucial environment-related policies, public services and concrete measures in fields such as waste management, energy planning, air quality, mobility...

Most often environmental education/information schemes run by local public administrations have the following objectives (PROEUROPE, 2005; Uttke, 2012; CEA, 2015):

- Fostering public awareness of environmental problems
- Providing practical information on the everyday contribution that citizens and businesses can make to environmental protection and efficient utilisations of resources
- Creating new patterns of behaviour among different groups within the society
- Inspire citizens to get to know and appreciate the local environment and reconnect with nature
- Stimulating an understanding of the environmental interdependence between urban and surrounding rural and natural areas
- Providing information on legal (and other) environment-related provisions and on incentives to go beyond legal obligations (e.g. incentives for energy efficiency)
- Organising educational seminars, conferences, workshops for the general public or specific groups of citizens or businesses professionals on specific aspects (e.g. energy efficient buildings)

The environmental education and information schemes can be organised and run internally by the public administrations, i.e. using in-house resources, as well as relying on civil society or external companies. An example of use of in-house human resources is the recycling officers employed by several city councils to explain how to separate waste at the household level. An example of relying on civil society is the "environmental education centre" set up and funded by the municipality of Rome (Italy) and run, on behalf of the municipality, by a consortium of local environmental associations (CEA, 2015).

One representative widespread example of educating citizens comes from the waste management field. Citizens and businesses play a crucial role in ensuring waste separation which is a key step to make the system more sustainable. The experience shows that campaigns in this area, especially based on household level personal interaction, can be very effective in modifying people behaviour. Moreover, even an education programme focused on a specific aspect, such as waste separation, can have a broader effect by increasing environmental awareness of people and encouraging them to take further measures to protect the environment.

An approach which is often successful is providing environmental education at or in cooperation with schools and at vocational training establishments. This has not only the potential to have a positive effect on the children's and young adults' interest and knowledge of the environment, but also to have those messages conveyed by the children and young adults to their whole family. Therefore a much broader audience and effect can be reached.

Another effective approach is the creation of environmental education centres. These can be placed in or close to natural areas and act as a link between citizens and the green space thanks to talks, guided tours, etc. In touristic places, they can also play a very important role in informing and raising awareness of tourists (e.g. about the importance of conserving the dunes for a municipality responsible for a natural coastal area).

Environmental benefits

The environmental benefits of providing environmental education and information to citizens and businesses depend on the specific issues tackled and on the effectiveness of the programme. In several instances the benefits are long term, such as for actions targeted at school students or programmes aimed at behavioural change, but can be very significant.

Side effects

No reported side effects from the implementation of this best practice.

Applicability

Public administrations responsible for the environmental education of citizens and provision of environmental information to businesses.

Economics

The cost for organising educational schemes and trainings for citizens by the public administration is relatively low comparing to the outcomes. As an example, in the case of waste management, the cost of effective education of citizens can be easily paid back by lower waste management costs if the amount of the residual waste becomes significantly lower.

Furthermore, the construction of environmental education centres may have positive effects for the local economy, such as attracting more tourism to the area.

Driving forces for implementation

Different driving force may lead to the implementation of this best practice. In some instances, the environmental education/information schemes may be part of a broader sustainability plan or policy. In other cases, these can be the result of the need or willingness to reach a certain target or objective (sometimes because dictated by regulation) where the active engagement of citizens or business is key (e.g. reaching a certain level of separated waste collection). Finally, there are cases where these actions start from the willingness to promote a natural place (such as a reserve or park) and engage citizens with it.

Reference organisations

Several municipalities run effective environmental education/information schemes. Some examples are:

- Barcelona, Spain
- Bristol, UK
- Leicester, UK
- Rome, Italy

Literature

Beatley T. (2000), Green urbanism: Learning from European cities, Island Press, ISBN: 1-55963-682-3.

CEA (2015), Centro di Educazione Ambientale – Riserva Naturale Statale "Litorale Romano" – Ente gesture: Roma Capitale – Dipartimento Tutela Ambientale – Protezione Civile. Available online: <http://www.riservalitoraleromano.it/index.asp>, last accessed June 2015.

CENEAM (2010), National Centre for Environmental Education, available online: http://www.magrama.gob.es/es/ceneam/quienes-somos/ceneam_english_tcm7-132136.pdf, last accessed June 2015.

EU Green Capital Award (2015), Section 7, waste production and management chapter, available online: http://ec.europa.eu/environment/europeangreencapital/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/Indicator-7-Waste-production-and-mgt_BRISTOL.pdf, last accessed June 2015.

PROEUROPE (2005), Environmental education – the path to sustainable development, available online: http://www.pro-e.org/files/environmental_education.pdf, last accessed May 2015.

Uttke A. (2012), Towards the Future Design and Development of Cities with Built Environment Education, Experiences of Scale, Methods, and Outcomes, The 5th Intercultural Arts Education Conference: Design Learning, Procedia-Social and Behavioural Sciences, 45, 3-13.