



# The handprint concept: changing structures towards sustainability

The handprint is a concept with the claim of “transformative education” and the basis for Germanwatch's educational work, which inspires, empowers, accompanies, and supports transformative engagement. The handprint was originally launched by the Indian organisation CEE ([www.ceeindia.org](http://www.ceeindia.org)) as an open concept of positive action. Germanwatch has further developed the approach, motivating groups or individuals to focus on transformative, political forms of engagement that have a long-lasting impact on concrete structures. Engagement with the handprint supports groups and individuals to reach their goals.

The handprint offers three basic entry levels to advance transformation:

1. Socially transformative engagement: transforming societal structures in a sustainable way (examples can be found in the list below).
2. Politically transformative engagement: encouraging and motivating decision-makers to reshape social structures in the interest of sustainable and resilient development.
3. Transformative educational work: empowering people to convert their social structures to be more sustainable or to align with sustainable development goals.



Illustration: Holly McKelvey

Each of these approaches is about enlarging the handprint of action, which is defined as increasing the positive traces we leave on earth or in our local surroundings. In this context, the handprint stands for the sustainable impact of our actions with the aim of establishing sustainable structures as a social standard. Transformative education work can anchor and support people in all three levels. Essentially, the aim is to reflect on and develop options for taking action that address the conditions of structural framework and building skills and ideas to use one's own sphere to shape society. Taking action itself and learning through engagement are the main core aspects to any form of transformative engagement. The concept of the handprint resulted from the theoretical considerations and practical experiences from various actors in education for sustainable development (ESD), political education and global learning.

The Central aspects that make up the handprint concept:

- Positive perspective on options for taking action: What can I improve? Where can I leave something good? (Contrary approach to the perspective of the ecological footprint)
- Enabling to get active and involved in political participation in shaping our society towards sustainability
- Learners are considered as a valuable part of the program and not just as consumers, but as builders of their society. They develop greater (self-) efficiency expectation and experience
- Options for taking action which (more or less) correspond to the size of the challenges (“epistemic fit”)
- Potential for greater transformative impact to make sustainable behaviour easier for as many people as possible and to anchor it in society: strategic and systemic action
- Action-oriented possibilities according to transformation models
- Strengthening the pillars of democracy: Learning from the negotiation process, access to co-design and participation, politicisation (not only for and by the youth), references to politically legitimised frameworks, revitalisation of debate culture, visions of the future.

Examples of specific projects with which groups would leave a lasting handprint:

- Initiatives in cities strategically join forces with the goal of convincing the local electricity providers to change their “standard option” (often the so-called basic rate) for customers from a fossil or mixed option to a climate-friendly option composed purely of renewable energies - the new normal.
- Pupils or students at their school or university are committed to ensure that only seasonal, organic food is offered in their canteens, and that the meat-free option is the cheaper standard option.
- At the state level, they have further strengthened the agricultural and food transition by campaigning together with other groups for a quota of food from organically and regionally grown food in public institutions (schools, hospitals, old people's homes, day-care centres...).



Illustration: Benjamin Bertram

- Members of religious communities are campaigning for the financial investments of their congregations and national associations to be withdrawn from fossil fuel projects and for stricter procurement guidelines, for example for electronic devices.
- Company employees ask their employers to abolish company cars and to create alternative mobility offers, such as company bicycles or fully paid job tickets. At the same time, they are committed to ensure that their company publicly positions itself in favour of stronger incentives for sustainable mobility and against the corporate car privileges and takes this demand to local, regional and national trade and commerce associations.
- The residents of a district put the local transition to sustainable agriculture and the protection of biodiversity on the agenda of the district election campaign. Together with local farmers, they called on their district councillors to transform the district into a pesticide-free district and to establish the corresponding regulations. In this way, they want to raise public awareness of the issue and create strict quality criteria for regional agricultural products so that sustainable regional products are being offered more frequently.

Once they were successful when implemented on a smaller scale, many of these approaches can be transferred to the next higher level in the further process. In doing so, we also learn from examples from the Global South.

The educational work on the handprint is not only about discovering these options for action for oneself and finding individual starting points but also about developing strategic steps towards the implementation and tackling them with the necessary perseverance and skills. Therefore, transformative education should include a competence-oriented accompaniment of transformative engagement within the individual, specific learning and action processes.

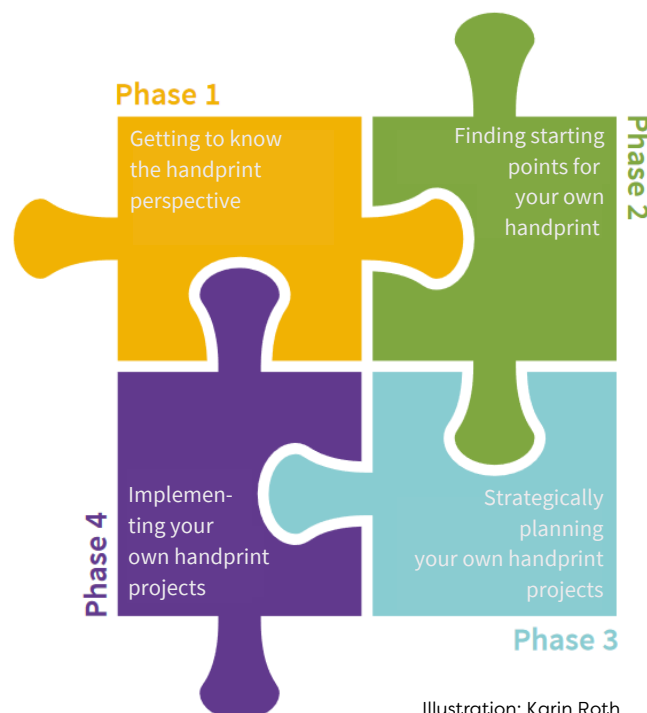


Illustration: Karin Roth

# What can I do to enlarge my handprint?



**1** What topic am I enthusiastic about and would like to commit myself (more) to?



Sustainable mobility

Ecological agriculture

Renewable energies and resource utilisation

Protecting ecosystems

Adherence to human rights

Corporate responsibility and sustainable economic activity

Participation


Where should I start to enlarge my personal handprint? Where and how can I initiate major societal changes, that facilitate more people's sustainable behavior? Our chart should help you to think beyond the reduction of your own ecological footprint and discover new structural options for action. Circle your answer to each question and connect your answers. Then write down your first steps to enlarge your own personal handprint for a socially and environmentally sustainable society.

**2** At which levels am I familiar with structures and decision-making processes and can imagine bringing about change?



At work

In a political party

At school/university

In the congregation

In a youth centre

In an association/NGO

In the neighbourhood

In the city/municipality

At state, country or world-region level


**3** What is the best way to implement my idea successfully?



demonstrate sustainable alternatives

communicate arguments to decision makers

use a sustainable option instead of the standard

start a petition or citizens' initiative

propose an amendment at an assembly or board meeting

talk to political representatives

make sustainable options more affordable

invest money sustainable and withdraw from fossil companies

creative protest/integrate arts & culture


**4** Which allies do I need?



Colleagues/classmates

Experts

Economic actors

Politicians

Initiatives

Media


**5** My actions will facilitate sustainable behaviour for \_\_\_ people:



20-50

50-100

100-300

300-1,000

1,000-5,000

5,000 +

**6** My first necessary steps to implement structural changes:


**7** Potential allies I would like to address:


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more informatoin on the handprint: <https://www.handprint-hub.de/>