


Article

We Learnt a Lot: Challenges and Learning Experiences in a Southern African—North European Municipal Partnership on Education for Sustainable Development

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Abstract: This study investigates a reciprocal partnership between two cities in Namibia and Sweden to deepen the understanding of challenges and learning outcomes in a project on education for sustainable development. Since 2008, two municipalities have developed a strong partnership via The Municipal Partnership Programme at the Swedish International Centre for Local Democracy. Municipal partnerships are results-oriented collaborations in joint projects on sustainability. The purpose is to describe how eight team members in the mutual South-North project, by addressing similar problems in different contexts, experienced challenges in the implementation of the project plan, solutions and learning processes. Semi-structured interviews were conducted at the end of the second project year. Transcripts and field notes were analysed using a phenomenographic approach and contextual analysis. Five main categories of description based on collective statements and three dimensions of learning were recognised in the research data. The analysis identifies strategies for critical knowledge formation and capability building to support mutual learning in South-North Municipal Partnerships. The concluding discussion spots the learning dimensions—how sharing experiences by justifying non-formal and transformational learning promotes organisations’ readiness for knowledge formation by conducting mutual global learning towards sustainable development goals.

Keywords: education for sustainable development; global development; global learning; Municipal Partnership Programme; mutual South-North partnership; non-formal learning; SDG 17; transformational learning

1. Introduction

1.1. The Study in a Broad Context

In 2015, United Nations Member States adopted the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and Agenda 2030 [1]. The 17 SDGs are an urgent call for action by all countries, developed as well as developing, and recognise ecological, economic and social dimensions of sustainable development. The aim is to achieve a better and more sustainable future for the globe and its inhabitants. All societies and countries have to contribute to the implementation of Agenda 2030.

Partnership is a key factor and is considered an SDG in itself. Thereby, SDG 17, “Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalise the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development”, addresses the way to approach the other 16 goals and states that:

A successful sustainable development agenda requires partnerships between governments, the private sector and civil society. These inclusive partnerships build upon principles and values, a shared vision and shared goals that place people and the planet at the centre, are needed at the global, regional national and local level [2].

Sweden, a developed country in northern Europe, has a long tradition of global commitment. Since the 1990s, the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA) has used the concepts of development cooperation and partner countries [3]. Projects and programmes funded by SIDA are designed in collaboration with the partner countries and local partner organisations. For development to be sustainable in the long-term, the ownership of the projects must be in the hands of the partner organisation and country, and development assistance must be conducted on the terms of those who are to benefit from it.

The Swedish International Centre for Local Democracy (ICLD) offers a Municipal Partnership Programme to partners in developing countries [4]. The aim of the programme, funded by SIDA, is to contribute to the development of efficiently functioning, democratic local authorities in both the partner countries and Sweden. The partnerships are reciprocal and results-oriented collaborations. By sharing experiences of how similar problems can be addressed in different contexts, the partners in a Municipal Partnership create knowledge together, along with new methods that increase citizens' influence in local decision-making processes.

This paper considers the experiences of a municipal partnership between Sweden and Namibia, two municipalities working together in a mutual education for sustainable development (ESD) project on in-service training of teachers. Our analysis is concerned with the challenges, solutions and learning outcomes that take place, both intentionally and unintentionally, relating to the substantive aim of the partnership project.

1.2. Framework and Organisations Involved

The ICLD offers a Municipal Partnership Programme (MPP) to 19 partner countries in developing countries in Europe, Africa and Asia [5]. By sharing experiences of similar problems addressed in different contexts, the partners create knowledge together, along with new methods that increase citizens' influence in local decision-making processes.

MPP promotes local democracy development by building on knowledge and experience in Swedish municipalities and county councils, and research from an international perspective. The MPP is based on three fundamental principles: (1) Global challenges demand local action, (2) Institutions are built through knowledge, and (3) Face-to-face meetings in both partner countries for project teams and steering committees [5]. The purpose of the programme is to mobilise commitment and enable solutions to create the conditions that allow the poorest and most vulnerable people to shape their lives and futures. At the same time, the activities aim to contribute to Agenda 2030—the international community's joint response to the planet's challenges.

In 2003, the United Nations University launched an initiative: a global network of Regional Centres of Expertise on ESD (RCEs) [6]. As of April 2020, 175 networks of existing formal, non-formal and informal education organisations, mobilising to deliver ESD to local and regional communities around the world, have officially been acknowledged by the United Nations University. These networks play a crucial role in translating global objectives into the contexts of local knowledge and communities in which they operate, bringing together institutions and building innovative platforms to share information and experiences to promote dialogue through partnerships for sustainable development. They create a local/regional knowledge base to support ESD actors and promote four major goals of ESD in a resource-effective manner:

- (1) re-orient education towards sustainable development,
- (2) increase access to quality education,
- (3) deliver trainers' training programmes and to develop methodologies and learning materials for them,

- (4) lead advocacy and awareness-raising efforts.

Malmö University and Malmö Municipality were two of the driving partners in developing RCE Skåne, in southernmost Sweden, launched in 2007 and supporting the region of Khomas-Erongo, Namibia, in their building of an RCE network.

1.3. The Purpose of the Work and its Significance

The main aim of this study is to deepen the understanding of challenges, processes in solving the challenges and learning outcomes in a mutual municipal partnership. The Swedish-Namibian project team's experiences of challenges, solutions and learning outcomes are investigated and analysed in a project on ESD, 2012–2014.

The research questions are:

- What kind of challenges did the project team face and how were they solved as the project plan was implemented?
- How did the participants in the project team express their learning outcomes from being a part of the partnership?
- What can South and North learn from one another through a partnership?

1.4. Municipal Partnerships as a Framework for Learning

The partnership learning approach has been emphasised in research studies to bring about sustainable change within international development cooperate on [7,8]. Wilson and Johnson [9] stated that North-South municipal partnerships provide a foundation for shared learning and knowledge creation, and Devers-Kanoglu [7] suggests that municipal partnerships are a valuable area for learning. However, learning and knowledge formation within mutual municipal partnerships is still an unexplored research area. Researchers have raised concerns regarding mutuality [8,10] and conceptual clarity, besides other challenges, such as differences in enabling critical reflections and turning learning into improved practice [9].

To find out the state of the art of the researched phenomenon, we performed a strategic and systematic literature search of previous research. We then used this to analyse the results, process quotations and empirical interpretation, as well as conclude the findings in various adequate contexts. Initially, several keywords were identified and considered possible—also in different combinations. Through continued systematic search strategies, we investigated earlier research across several databases. When keywords were combined in various ways to focus the research field of this specific case study, the results showed that there are only a few relevant research studies on the phenomenon. These are introduced below as a framework for learning.

Municipalities play a central role and are key actors in urban sustainable development. They also have the responsibility to transform ambitious national and global goals and visions into local practices [11,12]. In Sweden in recent decades, stakeholder participation has turned into an important prerequisite for municipal activities. With a long tradition of public ownership and municipal autonomy, along with a high level of spatial planning, the municipalities adopt working methods and approaches that include external stakeholders in their processes [13]. Municipalities can use both traditional forms of authority and new partnerships or processes to achieve effective governance [12] and ensure sustainable development.

Municipal partnerships may sometimes be identified, explicitly, as relevant learning contexts i.e., in the field of ESD, global learning for sustainable development and global citizenship education [14] besides global competence development education according to [15–18]. Every municipal partnership is unique, and some have verified to be significant also for individual learning [7].

According to Johnson and Wilson [19], the formation of North-South/South-North partnerships between urban municipalities often focused on knowledge transfer of approaches, techniques, practices, tools and skills from North to South. However, for “authentic partnership” to develop, Fowler [20]

suggests a practitioner to practitioner partnership between municipalities. These are described as “mutually enabling, inter-dependent interaction with shared intentions”. In civic groups and local governments, Fowler called for horizontal partnerships to promote such mutuality between teams and organisations with comparable interests. The municipal partnership in this study could be seen as one of this horizontal type since the aspiring assumption is that there would be learning benefits to both North and South. Johnson and Wilson [19] analysed knowledge transfer and learning in partnerships in-depth and summarise the main issues regarding intended and mutual partnership outcomes. They concluded that learning is promoted both as an outcome and as a process in the partnership.

According to Devers-Kanoglu [7], there are at least two sites for interaction and learning. First is inter-municipal cooperation materialised through interactions in workshops, meetings and partnerships between two municipalities—and individuals involved often found this fruitful (see also [21]). This may also result in the development of, the second site, intra-municipal cooperation catalysed to take place through interactions and partnerships among individuals and groups on a local level (see also [22]).

Two dimensions of informal learning, intended and unintended, are roughly identified [8] when applying definitions of learning in municipal partnerships in a systematic research review focusing on the context of activity and the groups that are involved. Devers-Kanoglu’s [7] investigation criteria emphasised “mutual or unidirectional learning/exchange activities, whether there is a focus on individual or organisational learning/improvements and what types of learning (formal, non-formal or informal learning) are explicitly or implicitly” ([7], p. 205). The category of informal learning asks, as a standard procedure, for the possible learning benefits, whereas the “real” learning below the surface of these perpetuated assumptions remains largely unnoticed—whether they mainly refer to intended learning or account for unintended learning as well. In particular, intended and unintended learning as a framework, given that mutual learning and learning in the South seems to be favoured against the learning of the Northern partners, is explored and defined. Challenges in one-way communication have been addressed by Anderberg, Nordén and Hansson [23]. The researchers argued that what is provided from the North might not be appropriate or respond to the authentic needs identified among the learners in the South when building on concepts of “charity”. To combat such a predisposition, it is important to ensure that partnership benefits do not flow in only one direction, with the Southern partner as the only beneficiary and the Northern partner as the sole contributor [24]. Accordingly, they have—in the field of international adult education partnerships—criticised that the learning benefits on the part of the Northern partner are not balanced equally, but frequently solely focus on the benefits an international partnership brings to the Southern partner.

According to [7], non-formal learning is not provided by an education or training institution and could consist of visits, orientation sessions, workshops, seminars, mentor training and courses. Still, non-formal and formal learning are intentional from the learner’s perspective, but they do differ as formal learning leads to certification, e.g., school and higher education, whereas informal learning is distinguished from these concepts since it occurs accidentally [25] and is open for more insightful deliberate framing and complexity [26,27]. Devers-Kanoglu [7] recognises the high potential to conceptualise informal learning—especially when moving towards a blended pedagogy [27] in which non-formal learning is combined with informal learning while focusing the novelty of various situations. According to Dillon [27], our understanding of learning is that it is cumulative and, if initiated in informal settings, one needs to go beyond formal learning. This learning might be seen as self-directed learning [28] or as blended non-formal learning, as it incorporates several influences, not least the impact of novelty. Also, the lack of an externally imposed curriculum, but with special facilitation, permits the freedom of following one’s own choice [29].

Most importantly, in contrast to other learning outcomes that could be identified, improved municipal performance appears in various forms. Learning can arise as surface learning or deep learning [28,30]. Many ESD contexts present several potential challenges for learners. Sometimes these might not have sufficient maturity to adopt what Biggs [31] and Entwistle [30] have termed a

“deep approach to learning”. Bigg’s definition suggests that deep learning involves intention, meaning, innate curiosity and the feeling of a “need to know” [28]. By contrast, a surface approach to learning is about reproducing knowledge and thereby leads to difficulty in making sense of new ideas, feeling undue pressure and seeing little meaning or value in courses and tasks set, according to [30]. Related to Schugurensky’s [32] interpretation of additive and transformational learning, deep learning approaches most likely arise with conceptual similarities and differences in focus.

Mutuality concerning partnership learning outcomes could be grounded on interactions between understanding and experience, old and new knowledge, seeing learning as an experiential and transformative process. Different types of learning form part of the whole spectrum of learning practices—instrumentally copying or reproducing, adapting new knowledge for strategic purposes, as well as challenging old ideas and old knowledge in a transformative sense. These particular categories are derived from Entwistle’s analysis of approaches to learning [30]. Considering learning communities for sustainability, whether global competence is established or not, partnership members may fail to properly communicate. Cultural diversity could then fuel tensions, misunderstandings and conflict [17] even though the partners do talk to one another. Referring to Dasli [15], pointing to the potential for dialogic meeting discussions, it is urgent to allow the partners—as learners—to voice their differences, biases and culturally determined beliefs, so that the differences unfold [33].

Joint learning starts from the different knowledge that the actors bring to the learning, which is not necessarily equally valued. For deeper joint learning that challenges and re-thinks practice, there must be an even stronger commitment to valuing different knowledge equally. Each partner needs to be aware of the urgency in learning how to learn [34]. The participating partner organisations must nurture the development of a learning culture by recognising the value of differences and diversity [19,28]. Then, when the inherent differences between the partners are seen as opportunities rather than constraints, the mutuality gap is avoided and the partnership can be seen as an endeavour of joint interaction (see also [12]). Johnson and Wilson [19] emphasise that learning through partnerships needs to lead to learning in the partnership organisations, which is maybe the most challenging aspect.

1.5. Critical Knowledge Capabilities

By applying the knowledge capability theory [35] a perspective on the degree of mutual learning developed, particularly in different ESD projects, can be investigated. For example, the critical knowledge capabilities described by Nordén and Anderberg [36] highlight learning experiences and educational changes found to give rise to educational development and the implementation of supporting democratic processes on individual and collective levels. Their research shows the necessary readiness that must be established among all participants to proceed with an international ESD project. To do well, certain critical knowledge capabilities must be encouraged in advance for a successful project: (1) taking command (project leaders must conduct the project and fully take the lead), (2) collaborating within a team (every team member must actively take responsibility), (3) leading to a holistic understanding (sense the local vs. global), (4) acting in a transdisciplinary manner (across all boundaries avoiding silo thinking), besides (5) being prepared (to strengthen the project from the very start and not lose valuable time). These are mandatory for achieving fruitful and mutually beneficial global learning for sustainable development [23,28] and the management of a municipal partnership project with many different actors in a society.

Global learning and transformational learning both recognise changes in the learner’s perspective and not just the acquisition of facts. This approach to education is often seen to involve a holistic, learner-centred way of knowing. Accordingly, Barker [37] characterises global learning as “transformational learning”, being (1) emancipatory in redefining the learner’s perspective on the self, (2) interpretive using cognitive-rational processes to reach understanding, (3) developmental in using experiences i.e., life narratives and mentorship embedding learning in personal transformational contexts, and (4) evoking extra-rational ways of knowing and a spiritual mindset (see also [23,28]). By using an analytic lens on the mutual goals of transformational learning, global learning and

indigenisation, Barker [37] illustrates their synergistic characteristics, challenges and trends. This synergy results in a learning maturity model that would support the measuring of “an organisation’s readiness to implement” global learning in local contexts [28] (e.g., indigenisation) and transformational learning (p. 8).

Educators worldwide have little support and training for the work that sustainability implementation processes imply, according to Högfeldt et al. [38]. Expectations of higher education teachers are on strengthening the abilities to rethinking learning progress, challenging power relationships in learning and “digesting how sustainability thinking and practice articulates” in different contexts and professions [38] (p. 5). Accordingly, rather than focusing mainly on theoretical lectures on the SDGs and ESD, teachers should be encouraged to undertake didactical work with educational development to transform education in practice. Further, Mulà et al. [39] conclude that a co-developed professional development programme is required among experts and newcomers, with mentoring as a core activity to become a part of the change towards ESD and the fulfilment of the SDGs.

Zivkovic [40] investigated how education for sustainability assumptions apply to an active citizenship education programme. The inquiry found that while graduates did develop the active citizenship capabilities desired by Australian governments, systemic blocking factors prevented the graduates from being able to put these capabilities into practice (see also [12,41]). The assumptions did not hold for the programme since graduates did not actively participate and take decisions in change processes nor were able to influence systems change (Principal Conclusions of this Work).

The findings show that the project team experienced several challenges in terms of understanding the project plan, the concept of ESD and the purpose and reciprocity of the collaboration, as well as in the implementation of project activities. Recurring reflections, constructive discussions and study visits, as well as exchange and sharing of material and methods on ESD, contributed to insights and a common understanding. Through constructive solutions to challenges, joint learning processes and knowledge formation were developed within the mutual municipal partnership. The project team experienced learning at both the individual and municipal levels and a local anchoring of global issues concerning sustainability (see also [23,28]). The capacity of the future included professional knowledge and experience, a rethinking of education, developed ESD networks in both municipalities and a South-North understanding.

1.6. Outline of the Paper

Section 2 describes the materials and methods. In Section 3, the results are presented, which is followed by the discussion in Section 4 and finally the conclusion in Section 5.

2. Materials and Methods

The research is conducted as a case study on a municipal partnership project between two municipalities, Swakopmund in Namibia and Malmö in Sweden (Figure 1). Namibia is a large and sparsely populated country with around 2.5 million inhabitants in the southern part of Africa’s west coast [42]. A third of the land area consists of desert. Namibia became independent in 1990 and there is political stability in the country. Swakopmund, situated on the west coast, is the fourth-largest city with 45,000 inhabitants. Sweden, only half the area of Namibia, is situated in northern Europe and has a population of just over 10 million inhabitants. Malmö, the third-largest city, is situated in southernmost Sweden and has nearly 345,000 inhabitants.

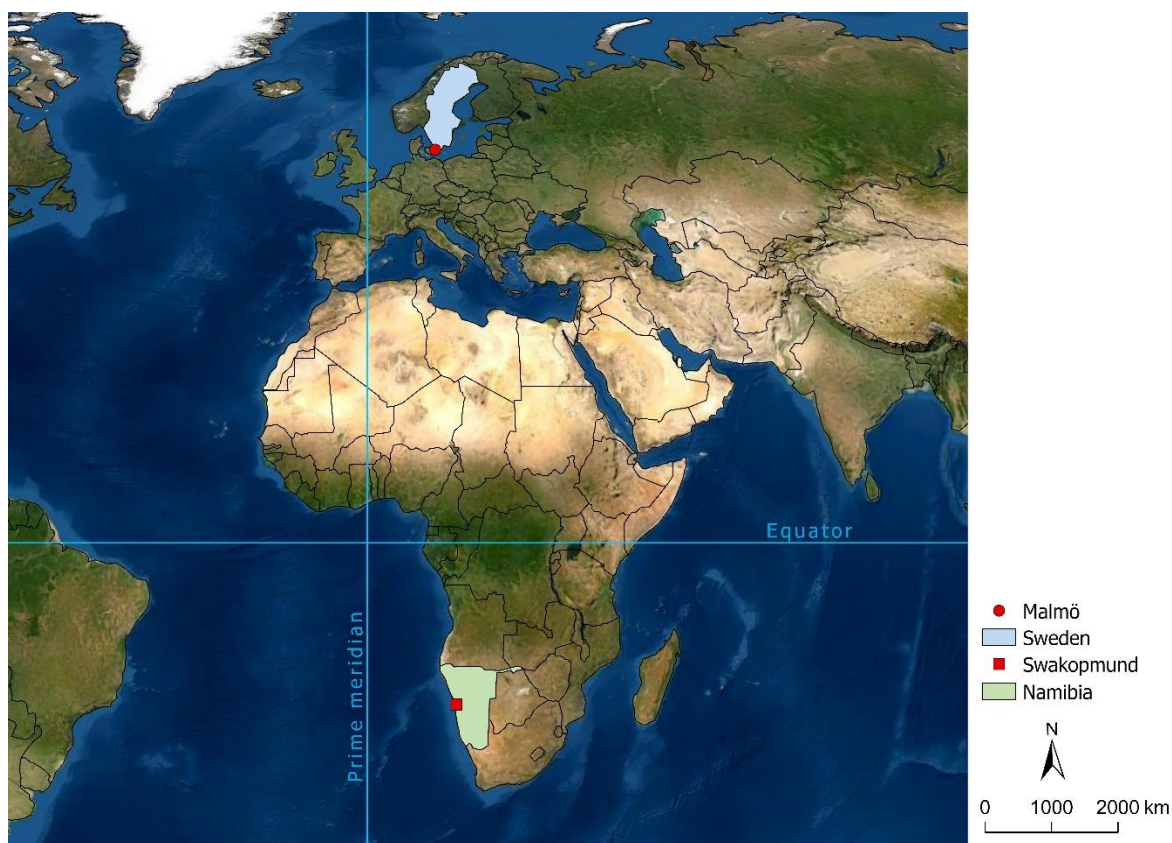


Figure 1. Map with the two municipalities of Swakopmund, Namibia, and Malmö, Sweden. Created by P. Schubert, based on Natural Earth [43] and Esri [44].

Sonesson, one of the researchers, was hired by the City of Malmö as an adviser and expert on ESD in the project. She was a member of the project team, participated in all project meetings and conducted the interviews, but did not answer the questions. However, her fieldnotes, as well as selected notes from project team meetings, are included in the analyses. Nordén, as an expert in educational sciences, phenomenography and contextual analysis, conducted the theoretical part of the research, which justified and grounded the discussion, including the conceptualisation of the three dimensions of learning in the conclusion. She provided the strategic systematic searches of previous research.

2.1. Context of Study

The municipalities of Swakopmund and Malmö have developed a strong partnership through collaboration on sustainable development within the MPP since 2008. In 2012, two projects began in the areas of eco-tourism and education for sustainability. This study focuses on the ESD project. The overall objective of this project was a sustainable city with engaged citizens: Learners and pedagogues are more aware of what a sustainable city is and how they can contribute to creating it. Seven activities in the project plan contributed together to achieving the objective during the three-year project (Figure 2).

A situation analysis (1) in both municipalities was performed to get a view of the best way to implement the project plan, how the activities could be linked to the current school curriculum and what kind of knowledge and support the teachers in each of the municipality needed. This phase also included looking at existing educational material that could be useful in the project. The project team worked closely together when developing training activities (2) suitable for Swakopmund. The trainers in Malmö had an opportunity to rethink and further develop material and methods in the ESD seminars for teachers. Educational material for teachers and students (3) was developed and

constructed at a local level in Swakopmund. Material collected or in use in Malmö was seen as an inspiration and adjusted to the Namibian context.

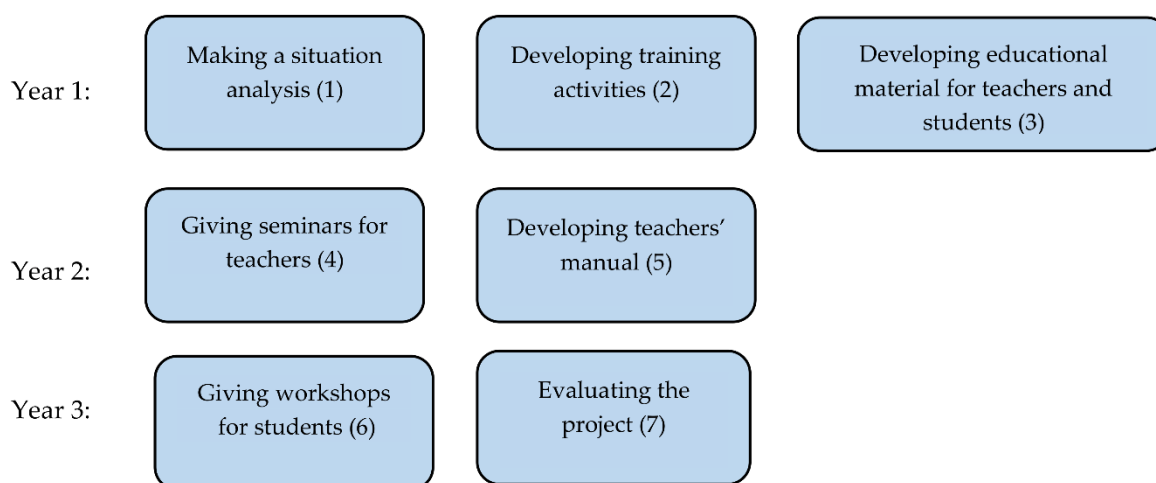


Figure 2. The project plan consisted of seven activities to implement during the three years. The activities followed the numbering but could start before previous activities were completed. The interviews were conducted when the 5th activity had started in the second year.

Fifteen teachers in Malmö and Swakopmund were invited to participate in six two-hour seminars (4) on sustainable development and ESD. Activity 4 is important because without the engagement of the teachers the effects of the project will not be long-lasting. The seminars give the teachers knowledge and inspiration to continue the work with ESD. The teachers must understand how to work with ESD in a wider sense so that they can use it when they go back to their schools. In Swakopmund, a teacher's manual (5) with experiences from the teacher's seminars was put together, printed and delivered to the teachers participating in the seminars. There was also a pilot training course for a small group of students and teachers, to test both the methods and the material for the coming workshops before implementing them on a larger scale.

Workshops (6) for students and teachers participating in the ESD seminars was the core of the project that every other activity lead. Evaluation (7) and final reflections on the project was an important phase in which all parts and the outcomes were discussed within the project team.

The project was monitored by a steering committee represented by one or two administrators from each partner as well as politicians from both ruling and opposition parties within both municipalities. The project team met for five days twice a year in both cities. Only some of the project members had previous experiences of ESD and South-North project collaboration. The project and collaboration were mostly joyful and enriching for everyone involved. However, Sweden and Namibia have different cultural traditions of democratic processes and different experiences of project work methods. Working together therefore also involved challenges, particularly as activities 1–3 were delayed during the first year. This challenges inspired Sonesson to initiate the research study during the second project year.

2.2. Data Collection and Data Analysis

All team members (except Sonesson) were offered the possibility to give their views on experiences, challenges, learning and sustainable development outcomes of the project after activity 4 at the end of the second year of the project. Altogether, nine project team members—four municipal officials, three teachers, a marine pedagogue and a museum pedagogue—were interviewed individually, using semi-structured and reflective questions [45].

Interviews were recorded and transcribed manually. The interview material consists of 251 min of recording.

The questions aimed to stimulate the participants' reflections on their experiences on a meta-level [46]. A semi-structured interview refers to a context in which the interviewer has a series of questions that are in the general form of an interview guide, but the interviewer can vary the sequence of questions [45]. The questions are somewhat more general in their frame of reference than the questions found in a structured interview schedule. Also, the interviewer asked further questions in response to what were seen as significant replies from the respondents.

The interview guide concerned three areas of questions: the respondents'

- (1) experiences and approaches to challenges,
- (2) learning from solving the challenges,
- (3) outcomes from implementation of the project plan.

A phenomenographic approach and contextual analysis [28,47–49] were used to analyse interview material and the notes from project meetings. The phenomenographic method gives priority to analysing the experiences of challenges and learning of the project team members at two levels, the individual and the collective. The individual interviews were read repeatedly and thoroughly, and first analysed to find qualitatively different experiences [47] of challenges in the project. After that, similarities and differences of experiences were carefully analysed and grouped [49] at the collective level. An individual team member might have contributed experiences to more than one category, while each category might be constituted from several project members, providing a "pool of meaning" [49]. This means that several qualitatively distinct categories of description were extracted during the analysis of the collected data, and do not correspond to particular individuals.

In a phenomenographic study, the findings take the form of several qualitatively distinct categories of description. These together capture the essential experience at the collective level. To achieve this description, the data is taken out from the individual context in which it was gathered. Thereby, a collective context of all the contributing voices of the individuals are available in the researchers' pool of data and can act as catalysts for an understanding of the whole when seeking critical differences within it. Later, an iterative process of analysis of the variation is carried out until satisfaction is found and it is possible to describe the whole data in the smallest possible number of categories. Every category is distinct from the others. The categories of description can be seen as a set standing in some form of hierarchy according to a logical and empirical relationship to each other. The categories are contrasted with the original data to highlight the variation of experiences on which the phenomena of the research questions focus. The results show the essential aspects of each category, exemplified by related quotations from the data [49]. Data quotations that pointed towards the same things were described in categories (A–E). These structural categories occurred from the "pool of meaning", which after the analysis of all individual contributions, functioned as a consistent databank. Through categorisation, fragments were put into coherent wholes, which are called categories of description. In this case study, they comprise a set of three main categories of challenges experienced, as well as 16 subcategories, here called themes, with brief descriptions of key aspects expressed by the project team members.

2.3. Research Ethics

All respondents agreed to participate in the research project following the ESD project. Reliability in safeguarding the quality of the research is reflected in the design, method, analysis and use of resources. For ethical reasons, the informants were promised anonymity in connection to the analysis of the study. The tape recordings and transcribed interviews are not shared, as they could become a serious problem and disadvantage in the informants' current and future professional careers. With respect for individual privacy and protection against the risk of harm, legitimate interests and accountability were secured within the research. To safeguard trustworthiness of the study, integrity-sensitive material was handled following the Swedish Research Council's publication on good research practice [50].

3. Results

Five main categories of description based on collective experiences are recognised in the data: (A) Understanding, (B) Implementation, (C) Gaining insights, (D) Knowledge formation, and (E) Capacity for the future. Within the categories, 2–4 identified and investigated themes are described (Table 1).

Table 1. Main categories of description based on collective experiences within the project team. Within the categories, 15 themes are identified.

Category	Main Category	Themes
A	Understanding	The project Cultural issues and South-North collaboration Education for sustainable development
B	Implementation	Project activities and communication School cooperation
C	Gaining insights	Project plan, teamwork and processes Communication and sharing Implementation of activities
D	Knowledge formation	Sharing and learning together Learning by activities Local anchoring of the global
E	Capacity for the future	Professional knowledge and experiences Rethinking education Networks South-North understanding

3.1. Category A. Understanding

The project team worked hard to understand details and the overall perspectives of the ICLD project, cultural issues and the South-North collaboration as well as the concept of ESD.

3.1.1. The Project

Being part of an ICLD project, a mutual municipal collaboration with a South-North perspective was new to most of the team members. It was challenging to understand the overarching aims and the mutuality, as well as the project plan and the budget. The process to understanding the aims and tasks and the importance of implementation of the activities in the right order was important. There was a need to understand how the different activities connected to the budget as well. The start of the project was delayed as two new municipal employees and members of the team were introduced during the first year. The senior officer and co-project leader in Swakopmund delegated the operative responsibility to one of the junior officers. There were difficulties in understanding the possibilities and expectations in the project and the individual roles and tasks were not clear. This is highlighted by the following quotations from the interviews.

- *to understand that you can't make changes in the plan, not change the numbers of seminars, not change an activity to something else. You have to follow the plan...*
- *as knowing how to spend the budget was not clear, not how to worry about it.*
- *some difficulties to get new people on board ... to engage.*

There was also some uncertainty about how the teachers were involved and their roles. It was unclear what the team was supposed to develop in Malmö as the project plan was mainly focused on activities in Swakopmund. The Swedish team members found it challenging to understand the expectations on developing the quality in ongoing series of ESD seminars, the collaboration between schools in the two cities, and how to evaluate these correctly.

- *My biggest challenge was to know what I was supposed to do in the project.*
- *I'm still a bit confused.*
- *Why am I involved, I would like to understand.*
- *The project plan is unclear on what is to be done in the schools involved.*
- *It was unclear to me who is involved and their roles. Is the teacher we meet part of the project or not? I find it difficult to invest wholeheartedly on partners if you do not know if it is long-term.*
- *... easier to evaluate the number of things in a quantitative way. More difficult to evaluate the quality of activities.*

Before teachers came on board, the Namibian school curriculum was a huge challenge. Visits to schools in both cities showed big differences in teaching practice. The need to understand differences and similarities in school curricula became obvious to the project team.

- *There was no knowledge about the curriculum in the municipality.*

3.1.2. Cultural Issues and South-North Collaboration

The cultural, social and economic differences between the countries and the hierarchical differences within administration and management in the two municipalities were challenging to the project team and the politicians in the steering group. There was a strong need to understand the purpose and benefit of collaboration with someone on the other side of the globe and to understand how the municipalities and individuals could benefit and use expected knowledge and experiences in the future. To understand the expectations of mutuality was another challenge. Questions on how the Swedish team could contribute to the implementation in Swakopmund were discussed on several occasions, which the following quotations mirror:

- *To understand each other. This is important, and makes it possible for us to carry out the project.*
- *It was a shock to come here. I was not prepared for the huge social differences ... I need to understand why we are here? Why are we collaborating?*
- *Unclear about the needs, how we as swedes can contribute to the Namibian part of the project. They have to do it in their way, in their context, even though ESD is new to them. Our role and expectations of us are unclear.*

The team members came not only from two different countries but also from different organisations: municipalities, schools, a university, a museum and a marine centre. The differences in knowledge and experiences among the project team members was a strength as well as a challenge. The common aim was sustainable outcomes that could last even after the project. However, some project members found the future outcomes challenging to discuss, as shown in the following examples:

- *... to create and develop something out of our collaboration ... to consist in a longer run. Place the project in a bigger perspective. What are we leaving after the project? What would we like to save for the future?*
- *It is a bit presumptuous to think that the collaboration and the project should be able to make a huge difference, but it may help to start something.*

3.1.3. Education for Sustainable Development

The concept of ESD, both in formal and non-formal settings, was familiar to project members from Malmö, whereas it was new to most of the Namibians. One Namibian teacher had some experiences of ESD and the other had experience of environmental education from a scientific point of view. A holistic view of sustainable development, the ecological, social and economic dimensions of sustainable development, was new to both. On the other hand, the municipal officers in Swakopmund knew about sustainability but had no experience of learning and teaching in formal settings such as schools. However, the context, a South-North collaboration on ESD and the task, to develop ESD-material and methods, in-service training of teachers in Namibia and workshops for learners, were new to everyone.

- *We do have different entrances and understandings of the concepts as we are living and working in quite different contexts, Sweden and Namibia. What are we talking about when we are discussing ESD? To some extent, different issues in sustainability are important to us.”. “Some are beginners and some have worked with ESD for a long time.*
- *... when I came on board ... I didn't have a clear concept. I didn't really have an understanding of ESD...*

3.2. Category B. Implementation

It took a long time before the practical issues were discussed within the project team and the implementation of the project plan could start.

- *We met municipal officials at a higher level, not on the operational level, so nothing happened. That was a challenge, we became impatient ...*

3.2.1. Teamwork, Project Activities and Communication

After developing common understanding in the project team, the implementation could start. It was a challenge to find an accessible way forward, to carry out the project on equal terms, as the experience and knowledge differed among team members. Managing mutuality was challenging when it came to the implementation of project activities.

- *To get people on board ... to make them find time and engagement ... especially as they were not used to working in this kind of project collaboration.*
- *... develop ESD seminars and learn together, not one partner telling the other exactly how to do things, but to inspire, discuss and decide together.*

When planning for the ESD seminars, the Namibian team had to search for local experts on sustainability and ask them to give presentations at the seminars. Another difficulty was to develop and combine presentations with relevant hands-on activities for the teachers participating in the seminars. The Swedish pedagogues contributed with ideas and hands-on material. The driving force in Swakopmund was a teacher working for a governmental school and not funded by the project. Most of the work, she was doing was in her spare time. The municipal staff contributed with practicalities, but she became responsible for planning. The ESD seminars took place in the municipality building, which was a major challenge due to distance and the need for transportation for the teachers in the project team. However, they found the doors at the municipality always open to them and the staff were supportive. Time management was a challenge, especially to those not working for the municipality. The time issues became particularly noticeable in connection with project meetings twice a year. However, the meetings were important to everyone to exchange experiences, reflect and discuss together.

- *To me as a teacher, the ESD project is something extra.*
- *One of our team members was pushing very much for the project to be a success; it was just to make it done ...*
- *We try to give service to our school colleagues.*
- *I feel support ... It was just that the venue, the seminars were so far away from my school. The transport issue was an issue – to transport materials from my school to the municipality building.*
- *My commitment to the project is often limited by work priority. As I am working for a Government school, the ESD project has been like an extra more activity. It is not part of formal education. It is something extra I do in my spare time, after school.*
- *It's worth it! We learn a lot.*

Most of the implementation of activities took place between the project meetings twice a year, but the communication among the team members between meetings was not as frequent as desired. Emails with urgent questions and challenges to solve were irregular. Some experienced loneliness in periods between project meetings.

- *The communication between meetings is weak, both local and between the two cities. Everyone has other things to focus on.*
- *Back at home, I feel quite lonely while running this project as I am not meeting other project members daily, no exchange in the corridors so to say.*

3.2.2. School Collaboration

There were different thoughts about the possibilities for school collaboration regarding the differences in syllabi between the countries. However, the project team tried collaboration. In Malmö, the team developed a local collaboration on marine issues together with a secondary school class and tried to connect to a class in Swakopmund. In Swakopmund, the team established cooperation with The National Aquarium and Ministry of Fishery and Marine Resources in Namibia. The first attempt at a common activity during Ocean Day was not successful due to lack of communication.

- *A challenge might be to weave together our curriculums so we can do the same activities in both municipalities.*
- *... more fact-based and name on species in Namibia, ... more focus on diversity and variation among marine organisms in Sweden.*
- *... the communication failed ... resulting in disappointed learners and teachers in both cities.*
- *You have to be very clear about things, to really have an agreement about things. It's frustrating when things don't work because you have not agreed on who is the responsible person.*

3.3. Category C: Gaining Insights

By coping with deep questions of (re-)orientation, forms corresponding to teamwork processes and a kind of learning practice seemed to start developing.

3.3.1. Project Plan, Teamwork and Processes

The project developed positively after a common deepening process of understanding of the project plan. The project leader took the lead, gave instructions, explained and emphasised the importance of being aware of what is included in the project and what is "extra". The project team meetings became reflective and constructive in the second year. An awareness of the democratic approach of the implementation stages developed. In particular, it was recognised that the base for the ESD project was not a one-way communication project with North mainly talking to and guiding South. The common insight about the individual responsibility for the teamwork contributed to a positive process. The travelling for project meetings with colleagues in another country and context had a strong impact on mutual cultural understanding. To understand that people have different ways of thinking and doing things, the need for different thoughts in different contexts was an important insight for the team.

- *After many, many, emails and discussions, the understanding of the project plan and how to run the project has developed.*
- *Now, there is an understanding of the function of the project plan. It's a 'ripening process'.*
- *Sometimes you need to be more than clear, even more clear than you thought you have to.*
- *The project leader explained to me. She taught me how the budget works ... Then it was clear.*
- *There is a strict control ... limitation of unnecessary expenses ... no challenges with the budget today.*
- *The difference between this and many other South-North projects is that we are not coming telling them how to do things ... that is something I think is highly appreciated. Things must be done on the basis of the conditions in each municipality.*
- *The project is based on committed people. It would not be possible without these.*

- *When you work with people, a learning lesson is that one should be responsive and humble. You can't place yourself higher than anyone else. Hierarchy can be very troublesome. The difference in culture is exciting, but sometimes difficult to relate to.*

3.3.2. Communication and Sharing

The importance of solving and discussing challenges as well as other issues regarding the common project became obvious to everyone during the second year. Good communication, discussions and sensitivity contributed to a friendly atmosphere. All team members became eager to contribute to the implementation despite differences and challenges. The project meetings became learning situations for everyone. The unfortunate circumstances when the communication failed regarding the school activity on Ocean's Day showed the team the importance of communication. The project team agreed to open communication and sharing information in all parts. There was also an insight into the importance of reflections and communication between the project meetings.

- *The projects meetings, twice a year are important. This is when we sum up . . . reflect on the implementation, outcomes and planning for the next activity in the project plan.*
- *Clarity in communication is even more important than I thought before being involved in this project . . . to discuss and explain . . . over and over again.*

The challenges in the project plan, implementation and teamwork became openings for development and learning. The understanding of ESD increased due to fruitful discussions, study visits and hands-on workshops together at the project meetings. The sharing of material, methods and experiences contributed to generating confidence in planning and arranging the seminars.

- *We learned from running the project, the content, but also from the challenges, between different people and organisations, different cultures.*
- *We share examples, possibilities, different activities and ways of ESD. I believe it starts processes, thoughts in the project team.*
- *We are more experienced now.*

3.3.3. Implementation of Activities

The process of developing activities improved as the team understood the concept of ESD and expectations on the project team. Solving the different challenges and the implementation of the seminars generated insights and learning. Team members experienced learning in team management and learned to do things well ahead and not panic before a seminar. The team aimed to adapt the activities to the curriculum, to see what was possible to do within the system. After arguments such as "It's impossible" and "schools are not interested in releasing their teachers into a municipal project", the discussions developed more positively and led to a relationship and collaboration with schools. The need for local experts on sustainability, environmental education and ESD became obvious to the project team, who started building a local ESD network in Swakopmund.

- *We need knowledge to make good discussions, to be able to reflect, argue and develop action competence.*
- *Meeting people from other organisations . . . is also generating new thoughts and ideas, on things to develop and different ways of doing things.*
- *When you leave your 'black box' and reflect, you learn new ways of thinking and doing things.*

The importance of connecting the school curriculum to the ESD seminars became obvious to everyone. Through an in-depth reading of curriculum and discussions, the team found support for the selected themes. Insight in ESD contributed to an understanding of the importance of combining theory with practical activities, particularly how we as pedagogues work more as facilitators than as traditional teachers who speak from the front of the classroom, which was new to the team members in Swakopmund. Insight into the importance of including hands-on activities in the seminars generated

a need for exchange of methods and materials between the partners. The input and examples on how to plan a thematic seminar and to share workshop sheets with a presenter on forehand were useful to the Namibian team. As the Municipality of Swakopmund had the secretary of the RCE, the network became the entrance to the seminars for the local schools. The discussions and reflections contributed to developing the seminars in Malmö as well. They became more activity-based with less passive listening, and reflecting influenced by our discussions in this project. A decision to develop evaluation sheets and kindly ask the seminar participants to fill in their thoughts and reflections after each seminar gave important information and valuable knowledge in both cities.

- *... very helpful to me, is that when you have a presenter, you can share the workshop sheets with them. ... they can add in questions that will address the aims of the specific workshop ... so people will be able to listen. They talk about something relevant, so it's going to address people. That has been very helpful.*
- *Since we have the RCE, we have very good cooperation.*

3.4. Category D: Knowledge Formation

As the project continued, the team learned to communicate, share information and work together. They developed confidence in SD competences and in the South-North collaboration, which facilitated further knowledge formation.

3.4.1. Sharing and Learning Together

The team members developed knowledge about how to collaborate in a project and to exchange information and reflections. The project leader listened to everyone and asked clarifying questions. Although the individuals had different experiences of mutual projects and ESD, everyone contributed to a common learning process and knowledge formation. By discussing and processing the challenges in trying to find solutions, new knowledge was developed. Development of knowledge also took place in meetings with people working with environmental education and in the yearly report writing. The team problematised the report system with measurable results and indicators.

- *I learned to work with people. Most of the time I used to work on myself ... but now working in a team, it is really great.*
- *An understanding of different cultures, in the organisations and countries, different working methods, our different hierarchy cultures that also come into play.*
- *It is now an exchange of knowledge.*
- *We learn from the challenges, from our solutions.*
- *... most funds would like to have measurable results, the soft values are 'a bit flimsy'. Cultural understanding is difficult to measure, but the 'soft ware' makes sense ... might be the most important after a while.*

3.4.2. Learning by Activities

The planning and implementation of project activities generated learning and knowledge development. There was consistency regarding some knowledge developed as a side effect of the project and useful in future projects. The team members involved in the workshops with teachers, together with learners from the environmental clubs, learned something new about active student methods. They became motivated in changing their education, or at least in using workshops in their environmental clubs.

- *Practical work, it makes things practical ... makes you understand easier ...*
- *... but you still use the same concept as in the ESD project.*
- *Sometimes we think that we can't learn from children, but doing this, workshops with adults, we actually learn from the kids, and that was very interesting. It's very good for myself, motivates me to keep on doing this. Rather I let the kids have hands-on experiences, they seem to remember it.*

3.4.3. Local Anchoring of the Global

The visits to the partner country once a year for project meetings contributed to knowledge formation. The friendship and open relationship within the project group made it possible to ask questions, exchange experiences and process similarities and differences in the two countries' history, society and school systems, as well as other issues of interest. Knowledge of the countries' history of democracy processes contributed to an understanding of the MPP. From the beginning, there was a sound and healthy questioning of working on a project on the other side of the globe. The questions concerned the long journeys, with their emission of greenhouse gases, how the team could really contribute, and if the project was also beneficial to the City of Malmö. The development of insights and knowledge contributed to a commitment to the project. In the second project year, the team members as well as the politicians were pleased with the project. The doubts about reasons for the mutual South-North collaboration changed into knowledge and understanding about political and democratic processes.

- *Going to Sweden was the most wonderful thing in this project. It brought me considerable experience. It was a good experience. My way of thinking is very different now.*
- *We are contributing and we can learn from our partners, it's really an exchange of knowledge.*
- *... you have to remember, changes take time.*

3.5. Category E: Capacity for the Future

In the project team, there was a strong consensus regarding the positive effects of the project on individual and common capacity building, today and in the future.

- *This kind of project is always an investment for the future.*
- *We have developed our thoughts, received new ideas and insights, developed networks, a lot of processes have started, and this might sustain in the long run.*

3.5.1. Professional Knowledge and Experience

The project team agreed that they developed useful learning and knowledge for the future, as professionals and as private individuals. All knowledge received will be brought with the team members in their professional working lives as well as in their private lives.

- *What I learned from this project will definitely be useful for me in the future.*
- *We learn things and bring the knowledge back to our organisations, in ordinary work. The things you learn ... and the various experiences, you bring them with you in your further career. You learn about different ways of thinking, methods, how to run and develop a project, and how to develop new ideas.*
- *The main outcome for me is my development of how to run a project. It helps me to organise myself, in my job and in private. From this ... I learned about time management. It's important.*

3.5.2. Rethinking Education

The project team and the teachers participating in the ESD seminars developed new knowledge and tools regarding ESD. This will be useful in their teaching, to their learners and schools now and in the future. Through the seminars and workshops, interest and knowledge of sustainable development strongly developed. Rethinking education and the use of outdoor classrooms gives the learners a possibility of understanding and awareness about environmental and sustainability challenges.

- *The work we are doing now ... developing the competence and knowledge of teachers is for the future.*
- *... they have the possibility to try another way of education, to do it in another way, more exploratory and student-centred working methods.*
- *All these examples ... I am sure, or at least I believe, that the seminars have started a process in Swakopmund.*

- *The schools have started to move outside the classroom with the learners, with the kids, and that includes also the marine life, as well as raising the awareness of our environment.*

The project managed to establish a few environmental clubs and these will have a future impact in Swakopmund. Another result of the project is a new position as a dedicated teacher for one of the teachers in the project team—most probably an outcome with strong significance for the future. The project members working at the Municipality of Swakopmund developed their awareness of the importance of continuing the collaboration with the schools regarding ESD.

- *... the driving force, a teacher, used to be a 'normal teacher' ... now a dedicated teacher for special projects, which is beneficial to our project.*
- *We try to coordinate projects of environmental clubs, so we think by using the ESD workshops that we got. Workshops are going to be included in one of our new projects, the green project, so every workshop that we did before, energy, waste etc., we will do again.*

3.5.3. Networks

The networks of people and organisations dedicated to sustainable development and ESD developed knowledge and skills that will most likely be useful even after the end of the common project. During the project, the relationship between the Municipality of Swakopmund, the local schools and the Ministry of Education developed. These contacts will hopefully remain and be useful in further collaboration, even after the end of the ESD project.

- *This kind of project will always facilitate future cooperation.*
- *I think partnership with different stakeholders will stay.*
- *The networks we are building among our organisations are also important for the future. It's easier to contact and ask for help or collaboration when we know each other. That's also a kind of result in this project.*
- *For us as a municipality, the main thing is to be there, to support the schools and see that it continues. That's our vision for the future. In terms of reaching the community, and the grassroots level, we have implemented the seminars to different schools, in different areas.*
- *We have a commitment from the Ministry of Education, supporting us in our areas. They are willing to support us in our goals and objectives of the project ...*

The sharing of experience and knowledge from the ESD project and the contribution to the regional ESD networks, RCE Skâne and RCE Khomas-Erongo, will be useful on a regional level as well as globally within the global RCE network. The ambition and commitment to sustainability is high in the two municipalities. The Municipality of Swakopmund has the intention to continue to support the schools, as does the City of Malmö.

- *Maybe, it will be closer to our goal, to proclaim Swakop as sustainable, the first sustainable town in Namibia.*

3.5.4. South-North Understanding

The team members expressed an increased understanding of global issues. Visits to the partner country, with several study and school visits, and open discussions about differences and similarities generated useful knowledge on cultural, democratic and social issues. Several project members mentioned friendship as an effect of the exchange between North and South.

- *Both the harder and the softer issues, between people and cultures, we will bring with us.*
- *We develop friendships and learn from each other. We became close friends just because of the project.*

The team expressed that the insights, knowledge formation and understanding on social issues as well as South-North perspectives will be useful to them in future. However, the team also described the difficulties in measuring and explaining South-North understanding.

- *To participate, be part of this project will be useful to me . . . I have seen poverty and huge social differences among the population. Meeting people in real life is important! Without learning and sharing . . . there will be no changes.*
- *To be involved in the project affects me a lot. I get a completely different, completely new picture of how things work in a poor country. I have a different understanding of the complexity of social-economic differences and injustices.*
- *Cultural understanding is difficult to measure, but the ‘soft ware’ makes sense . . . might be the most important after a while.*

To sum up, from the five main categories of descriptions presented above, the following groups were identified:

- (1) Challenges experienced: category A and B
- (2) Solutions recognised: category C
- (3) Learning outcome: category D and E

Consequently, the categories are explored and analysed more in detail in the following discussion. Finally, specific learning dimensions are recognised in the analysis and described in the concluding discussion part of the partnership project.

4. Discussion

Strong international cooperation is needed in the global work for sustainable development and partnership is one of the key factors. Municipalities play a central role and are important actors in transforming ambitious national and global goals and visions into local practices [13]. However, although municipal partnerships are considered a valuable area for knowledge formation, until now only a few research studies on the phenomenon are available [8]. This paper considers a municipal partnership within ICLD’s MPP, a mutual collaboration between two municipalities in Namibia and Sweden (Figure 1). Our research contributes to a deeper understanding of the challenges and learning outcomes a project team can experience in a South-North partnership project on ESD.

Five main categories of description were recognised in the research data, based on collective statements (Table 1). This resulted in finding the constitution of the phenomena within the South-North MPP. By looking at the conceptions of the MPP’s challenges, processes, and learning outcomes, the understanding of the phenomena grew.

The analysis identified strategies for critical knowledge formation and capability for future capacity building to support the mutual goals of a South-North Municipal Partnership. The discussion concludes with the variation of conceptions, the learning dimensions recognised and how sharing experiences by justifying non-formal and transformational learning may assist organisations’ readiness to develop knowledge together to implement global learning towards sustainable development [23,28].

4.1. Different Types of Challenges the Project Team Faced

Our findings show that the project team experienced several challenges in terms of understanding the project plan, cultural issues, the concept of ESD and the purpose and reciprocity of the South-North collaboration, as well as in the implementation of project activities [12,33].

Differences in any learning setting are important to pay attention to [8,27,29], not least because addressing them is what helps lay the foundation for a joint understanding. Even though this can be challenging, this case study shows how to handle the encounters in cultural issues and South-North collaboration. Strengths, thereby developed, consisted of many steps taken—from just being a piece of tokenistic information [12] or consultation project to an empowering partnership with delegated power catalysing citizen control—ensuring further democratic actions, activities and processes. Instead of a top-down development approach, participation was recognised as a democratic right that allows input from different team members, “leading to a particular shared view” ([12], p. 33). Since there was a will

to understand differences, it turned into a learning situation. A deep approach to learning [30,32,33] and an extension of the understanding of how to contribute without telling people how to do things took place, with greater knowledge sharing and development of earlier experiences (see also [12]). Initially, this partnership was directed and led by Sweden (i.e., from North to South), since the project leader was employed in the City of Malmö. ESD was experienced by the Southern partner as a new concept, not only in content but also methods, active learning activities and workshops. In particular, it went beyond formal and informal learning, in an outstanding non-formal learning context (see also [29]).

Implementation was not simple, concerning the project activities and communication, planning, human resources, e.g., finding experts on sustainability and ESD, network and entrance to schools. School cooperation was also challenging between a governmental school system and a municipal project. This problematic context concerning SDG 17 demanded communication to work well. As mentioned in earlier research, it is not enough to talk; communication is a key factor [16,18,19]. According to Molosi and Dipholo [33], participation simply means engaging and involving the local municipality members in decision-making processes. The structures in this project were, in some parts, found to be weak due to the unexpected challenges faced, the lack of proper implementation and the incorporation of some of the active voices, besides certain skills deficits (see also [12,33]). All in all, this suggests the need for further research on an extended understanding of participation in municipality partnerships within the field of global learning towards sustainability. Participatory action research could be recommended in upcoming studies, taking into account that which Arnstein [41] argues: participation should be seen in terms of a continuum, where the members are given advanced chances to contribute.

4.2. The Way the Project Team Found Solutions

The project team found solutions to handling the challenges in the municipal partnership project through recurring reflections, constructive discussions and study visits, as well as exchange and sharing of material and methods on ESD. This contributed to insights and a common understanding within the project team. Through the constructive solution of challenges, a joint learning process of a non-formal character was insightfully framed in an informal learning environment with the dimensions of its encounters as deliberate and intentional [8,26,27,29]. Knowledge formation on ESD was thereby developed within the MPP and the SDG 17 applied within this project.

4.3. The Project Team Participants' Experiences of Learning Outcomes

Many experiences of exchanges, related to examples of critical knowledge capabilities development, were identified as supporting the educational development of the SDG 17 implementation in the context of Southern African—North European Municipal Partnership on Education for Sustainable Development.

Rethinking education was highlighted as critical for capacity building for the future, which also strengthened the ability to rethink learning progress and the ability to digest and understand how sustainability thinking and practice communicate in different global contexts and professions [34,40]. Rethinking education relied on and incorporated the critical knowledge capabilities “to lead for a holistic understanding” and “to act in a transdisciplinary manner”, which led to the knowledge formation that was identified in the result. In particular, together with the critical knowledge capabilities, “taking command” and “collaborating as a team” are also identified in the result. This showed that the intended purpose was achieved, as these capabilities were clearly recognised and emphasised in sharing and learning together besides learning by acting. “Being prepared” was the most critical knowledge capability to gain for participants from the very start in their understanding of the project to be able to join. Since the local anchoring of the global evidently demanded a strong “lead for holistic understanding”, these benefited from the combined efforts paid during the implementation preparations to optimise the knowledge formation.

The project team experienced learning at both the individual and municipal level and a local anchoring of global issues concerning sustainability. The capacity building for the future included professional knowledge and experience, the rethinking of education, developed ESD networks in both municipalities and a South-North understanding.

4.4. What South and North Can Learn From One Another Through a Partnership

Many experiences of exchanges related to examples of critical knowledge capabilities developed [36,37] were identified as supporting the educational development of the usefulness of SDG 17 for the ESD implementation in the context of Southern African—North European Municipal Partnership on Education for Sustainable Development.

The questions raised and discussed here focus on how the participants in the project team expressed their learning outcomes from being a part of the partnership. Some of the learning outcomes from this study can help to develop mutual partnerships in other contexts [38,39]. In the following paragraphs, some mutually beneficial experiences for knowledge formation and future capacity development are presented.

Both partners learned to apply knowledge and develop insights fitting into their different cultural approaches and educational systems, by doing the ESD and SDG activities together even though in different contexts. The Swedish partner could, for example, get a chance to mirror their everyday ESD practices in the SDG work of another municipality. The Namibian partner needed to handle the transferred knowledge, which they learned from the Swedish municipality ESD implementation experiences. The Namibian city should not have to reinvent the wheel if they can simply exchange between the partnership municipalities, with shared learning outcomes, as a part of their own knowledge formation and lessons learned from this project. They all expressed that they learned a lot just by becoming aware of a different municipality's way of working and understanding the democratic process.

Also, the insight that “democratic processes take time” is a learning outcome for future projects and in the everyday life and work of both municipalities. Namibia has been a sovereign nation for some thirty years and can thereby show and highlight the challenges—and achievements—still ongoing in that process. Sweden has also struggled with many contemporary challenges and similar issues, so through the partnership they can learn together and be on easy speaking terms. By meeting as partners, opportunities are given for talking, discussing, visiting and network-building activities. All these experiences lay the foundation for joint ESD knowledge formation and are mutually beneficial for the future as a capacity building project.

Continued teaching and learning could contribute to outcomes and operations that can shape a future fit for generations to come. It also may help all participants to find common aims and ambitions for their activities.

In this type of MPP, voices from the Global South are brought together [33] with voices from the Global North to discuss contemporary educational topics (i.e., pedagogy, blended non-formal learning) and major threats (i.e., social inequity) to global sustainability as well as education's role in accomplishing the global SDGs in various ways.

5. Conclusions: Deepened Understanding through Three Dimensions of Learning

Within the process of the partnership, the project advanced the development of ESD and further understanding of learning complexities. This led to a deepened understanding of the challenges and learning experiences in a Southern African–North European municipal partnership on Education for Sustainable Development. In the broader context, the implications of the findings lead to the recognition of the following three dimensions of learning through the challenges met: (1) establishing critical knowledge capabilities enhancing democratic action; (2) transforming knowledge coherently; and (3) developing knowledge formation and capacity.

5.1. Learning Dimension 1: Establishing Critical Knowledge Capabilities Enhancing Democratic Action

According to knowledge capability theory [36,51], which derives from a pedagogical theory within the phenomenographic perspective on learning, specific crucial mutual learning was seen being urgently developed during the SDG influenced project as described in this study. In comparison with some critical knowledge capabilities found and described previously [30], the findings of this research show examples of experiences that could be identified as a result of changes, giving rise to educational development and implementation supporting democratic action—on both the individual and collective level. This study shed light on the participants' development of certain identified critical knowledge capabilities such as being able “to take command”, “to collaborate as a team”, “to lead for a holistic understanding”, “to act in a transdisciplinary manner” and “to be prepared”, which are considered necessary for global learning for sustainable development [23,28]. This is also in line with the work at ICLD focusing on freedom and the rights of individuals by strengthening participation, local self-government and citizenship. As shown also in this investigation, understanding collaboratively could be seen as a form of learning that evolves from a process perspective. Several democratic skills were thereby gained locally—in both Namibia and Sweden—via global learning and the connected activities in global-local settings.

5.2. Learning Dimension 2: Transforming Knowledge Coherently

During face-to-face meetings, global ESD challenges were jointly identified by the participants, and increasing civil influence considered demanding local action to further strengthen the institutions' capacity building through knowledge development in the SDG area. The paper focuses on how the actors within a municipal partnership consider these matters during the implementation and in the learning output and what South and North can learn from one another through partnership. The strategic learning results described in this study can be compared with surface learning and deep learning [28,30], which in parts resemble the concepts of additive and transformational learning [32,37]. In recent decades, focus has changed from input-quality to learning outcomes. This demands global learning with a deep approach to bring about competences for SDGs, and as global competence education [15–18], which aims for instilling in learners respect for environmental sustainability and empowering them to be responsible global citizens [12,41].

The concept of ESD is not only a matter of introducing curriculum content for sustainability but of working with more and new approaches to pedagogy [28]. Reflecting on the learner's perspective and considering the project participants' benefits of a deep learning outcome is necessary.

The value and importance of non-formal learning opportunities are prominent in the themes (i.e., subcategories) of the findings. The learning outcome lays a foundation for the knowledge formation processes in this municipal partnership project, which is facilitated by the team members' interactions such as communication, sharing of experiences and cooperative learning activities together within the South-North collaboration. Through this, inter-municipal cooperation was materialised by interaction and learning [8] between the two municipalities. Local understanding of SDGs and ESD among individuals and the team was catalysed via the anchoring of the global SDGs in the partnership, which developed mutual non-formal learning locally via intra-municipal cooperation [7]. Unintended learning profits from the established framework of intended mutual ESD and occurs as beneficial non-formal learning for individual team members and on an institutional level—both locally and mutually seen from a South-North perspective.

5.3. Learning Dimension 3: Developing Knowledge Formation and Capacity

Mutual global learning is essential to realise a more sustainable world and could be seen in this project result, just as Wals and Kieft [52] refer to social learning as a special kind of non-formal learning that contributes to realising the learning society. Non-formal learning [7] might be seen as fulfilling the criteria for a kind of social learning, compared to the following definition by Wals and Kieft [52]):

“Ideally, social learning is a way to create a ‘learning system’ in which people learn from, as a result of and with one another and collectively become more capable of withstanding setbacks, of dealing with insecurity, complexity and risks. Such a system needs people who not only accept one another’s differences but are also able to put these differences to use” [52] (p. 37). Accordingly in this study, a non-formal global learning system seems to have been developed as a mutually beneficial sustainability knowledge formation concept.

According to Kristjanson et al. [53] social learning approaches facilitate knowledge sharing, joint learning and knowledge co-creation between diverse stakeholders around a shared purpose. This study shows the importance of linking the learning activities of ESD within the partnership project for research and knowledge. It is a must for substantive, long-lasting and transparent development outcomes, i.e., for the learning outcome of the project to genuinely result in beneficial changes in performance, policies and municipalities. For future capacity building, research outputs need to be much better informed by and engaged with the critical knowledge capability processes through which individuals, institutions, communities and societies learn to achieve change.

The study of this complex MPP highlights that through the constructive solution of challenges, a joint learning process and knowledge formation could develop. The project team experienced learning at both the individual and municipal level and a local anchoring of global issues concerning sustainability. The capacity of the future includes professional knowledge and experience, the re-examination of education, developed ESD networks in both municipalities and a shared South-North understanding.

To conclude, the categories challenges experienced by the team members, solutions recognised and learning outcomes correspond with the theoretical method in which the phenomenographic analysis tool was used and shed light on various learning dimensions from a broader perspective and can be useful in upcoming studies on learning in partnerships on different levels.

5.4. Future Research

Every partnership and project is unique regarding its experiences of challenges [7]. The possibility of drawing general conclusions on South-North collaboration is therefore limited. Still, lessons learned are often transferable while taking into account contextual differences, although a limit with qualitative studies can be a lack of generalisability [46–49].

Learning ought to be promoted both as an outcome and a process in the partnership. In this case study, the research process had not only the aim to check or monitor a process, but to lead to progress towards a shared goal, provided with change and new experiences. However, this case study, together with extended studies in the future, can contribute to advancing common learning regarding the issues the team tried to understand and solve. By further examining the challenge of scaling-up from individual to organisational learning [32–34], knowledge transfer and learning in partnerships could be investigated in-depth by summarising the intended and mutual partnership outcomes [19].

The analysis of the implementation of the studied MPP, e.g., the results of the ESD workshops developed and delivered in Malmö and Swakopmund respectively, will be presented in an upcoming paper (Sonesson, in prep).

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