

# POLICIES ON ESD AND ITS (ABSENT) EMANCIPATORY POTENTIAL.

## HINDRANCES AND OBSTACLES

### NEOLIBERAL INFLUENCE

One of the primary challenges is the pervasive influence of neoliberal ideologies on education systems. Neoliberalism emphasizes market-driven approaches, competition and efficiency, often at the expense of social justice and equity. This influence may be seen in the emphasis on performance metrics, rankings and the commodification of education. In the context of ESD, it can lead to a focus on measurable outcomes and economic benefits rather than transformative learning and critical engagement with sustainability issues.

### DEPOLITICIZATION OF SUSTAINABILITY

ESD policies often depoliticize sustainability by framing it as a technical or managerial issue rather than a deeply political one. This depoliticization can obscure the power dynamics and structural inequalities that underpin environmental and social issues. Critical theory emphasizes the need to recognize and address these power relations to achieve genuine sustainability. However, current ESD policies may fail to engage with these deeper political questions, limiting their transformative potential.

### LACK OF CRITICAL PEDAGOGY

Critical pedagogy, which encourages students to question and challenge dominant ideologies and power structures, is often lacking in ESD initiatives. Instead, ESD may focus on imparting knowledge and skills without fostering critical thinking and social activism, possibly resulting in a superficial understanding of sustainability that does not challenge the status quo or promote radical social change. Incorporating critical pedagogy into ESD is essential to empowering students to become agents of change.

### INEQUITABLE ALLOCATION OF RESOURCES

The allocation of resources for ESD is often inequitable, reflecting broader social and economic inequalities. In countries like Poland and Portugal, limited funding and resources can hinder the effective implementation of ESD policies. This inequity can perpetuate existing disparities and limit access to quality education for marginalized communities. Addressing these resource gaps is crucial to ensuring that ESD promotes social justice and inclusivity.

### INSTITUTIONAL RESISTANCE TO CHANGE

Universities and educational institutions may resist change, particularly when it involves challenging established norms and practices. In that sense, universities may simply reflect and reinforce the broader trends of globalized governance and invest in maintaining the status quo. The resistance can stem from bureaucratic inertia, vested interests and a lack of institutional commitment to radical change. Overcoming this resistance requires strong leadership, a clear yet nuanced vision for sustainability, and the involvement of all stakeholders in the change process. It may also require universities to revisit the mission of being critical agents of change and the very own values they stand for.

### FRAGMENTATION AND LACK OF COORDINATION

Fragmentation and lack of coordination in ESD policies may undermine their effectiveness. In Portugal, for example, the decentralized approach to ESD leads to variability in implementation and outcomes. This fragmentation can prevent the development of a cohesive, comprehensive strategy for sustainability education. Enhancing coordination and collaboration across various levels of governance and institutions is essential to creating a unified approach to ESD. At the same time, the approach should be critical and embrace the "wickedness" (sustainability as 'wicked problem') of the concept to stay attuned to its core mission of bringing the transformation.

### SUPERFICIAL ENGAGEMENT WITH SOCIAL JUSTICE

While ESD policies often emphasize social responsibility, they may engage with social justice issues superficially. Addressing social justice requires a deep commitment to challenging systemic inequalities and promoting equity. This involves not only integrating social justice into curricula but also addressing institutional practices and policies that perpetuate inequality. A more profound engagement with social justice is necessary if ESD is to contribute to radical social change.

### CHALLENGES IN MONITORING AND EVALUATION

Effective monitoring and evaluation of ESD policies are critical to ensuring their impact and continuous improvement. However, current evaluation mechanisms tend to focus on quantitative metrics rather than qualitative outcomes, leading to a narrow understanding of success and overlooking the transformative aspects of ESD. Developing robust, comprehensive evaluation frameworks that capture the full range of ESD impacts is essential to driving meaningful change.

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