

FROM *about* TO *for* SUSTAINABILITY IN EDUCATION: Comparative Educational Policy Perspective in 8 European Countries

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Background

This policy brief is based on the research¹ undertaken in 2011 by the ENjoinED Initiative researchers in 9 countries² by 14 different civil society organizations (CSOs) and the comparative study prepared by the ENjoinED Central Research Team (CRT)³. The aim was to identify, collect and systematically present the existing content most relevant to sustainable development (SD) in the national curricula of the participating countries in order to provide evidence for policy change. The official educational content was analysed on 3 levels – a) compulsory education framework curricula b) selected subject curricula and c) selected textbooks.

Sustainability of the developing East

One might expect that many of the countries covered by ENjoinED initiative would have more serious priorities to deal with before they start dealing with global sustainability – their conflict or post-conflict situations, corruption, economic growth. On the other hand, one might also expect that these countries are not threatened by lack of natural resources or affected by climate change, because most of them never really grew enough to be awarded with the title of being developed. They would be wrong, but these two common beliefs seem to push sustainability to the lower positions on the list of policy priorities, which applies to education policy, too (see for example Domazet, Dolenc, Ančić, 2012)⁴.

1 || ENjoinED research reports for 8 participating countries (except for England) can be found at the ENjoinED website <http://enjoined.edupolicy.net/index.php/en/publications.html>

2 || Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Estonia, Georgia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Romania, Slovenia and England (England participated only in the first phase - phase A where the national framework curricula were analyzed). For more information see Domazet M., Dumitru D., Jurko L. and Peterson K., 2012, NEPC

3 || Domazet M., Dumitru D., Jurko L. and Peterson K. (2012), Civil rights and obligations are connected to environmental issues in the curriculum?, A Comparative analysis of the ESD in 9 European countries. Zagreb: NEPC

4 || Domazet M., Dolenc D. and Ančić B. in We Need to Change: Mapping Croatia's potential for sustainable development, 2012, Heinrich Böll Stiftung Croatia

But a better understanding of sustainability, teasing out its environmental, social and economic components, bears upon these countries' preoccupations past, present and future – from social inequalities, interethnic relations, gender inequality, various types of discriminatory practices, to privatization of public space and natural resources, environmental pollution and cross-border issues, and economic crisis, unemployment rate, undefined developmental policies, poverty rate and corruption.

Taking these issues into account we can draw the conclusion that these countries should **prioritize sustainability, in all public policies, including education.**

ESD content present in the existing compulsory education framework curricula

The evidence from the ENjoinED research shows that ESD content is present in the participating countries' curricula, however the framing and purpose of the content are the aspects that are problematic and not in accordance with ESD principles.

The most important ENjoinED comparative study findings, upon which this brief builds its recommendations and the argumentation behind it, show that:

A) The most of existing ESD knowledge in almost all ENjoinED countries is about **social and cultural aspects of SD**, even though, as authors note, the roots of ESD are in environmental education, present in this region for over 20 years.

B) **Gender equality** and **New forms of governance** are the **least represented** and in some countries not even explicitly included socio-cultural cognitive elements.

C) **Market economy** and the **Corporate social responsibility** are not among the economic cognitive elements present in the compulsory education curricula, which could indicate that the compulsory education chooses to detach from

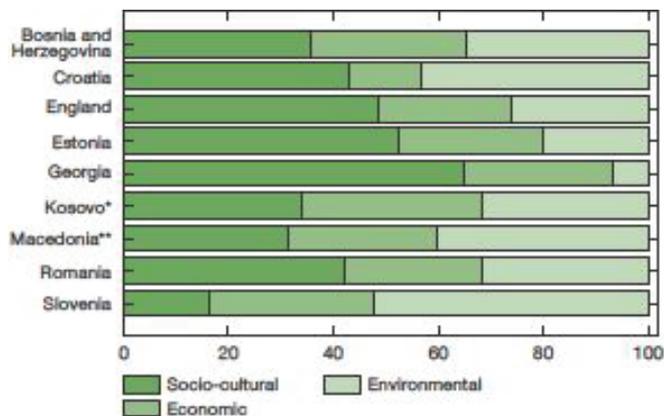


Figure 1: Relative representation of different groups of Cognitive ESD Content in the framework curricula of each of the participating countries

this aspect of social and productive relations. Also, it could indicate that education replicates the unsustainable and exclusive trends and practices, as noted by the authors: "This leads to the question from UNECE 2010 report *Could education be contributing to unsustainability?* gaining a strong relevance in the region."⁵

D) **Agriculture and Rural development** are the least represented environmental elements, even though they carry great importance for the economic and other developmental aspects of the participating countries, as well as for the future in global terms.

E) The most represented cognitive content is about **Cultural diversity and intercultural understanding**, interestingly combined with

F) **Respect and responsibility**, and **Reflexivity and Complexity understanding** which are the foundational value-groups in the curricula of the participating countries.

G) The crucial skills and values for educating for sustainability and systemic changes that it requires, **Managing change and uncertainty, Futures thinking and Decision making** appear in the curricula, but in a way that is mostly factual, and not practical – **about** change, rather than **for** change.

H) **Community cooperation** group of skills, that include *Ability to identify and clarify values, Identifying stakeholders and their interests, Participation in democratic decision-making, Negotiating and consensus building* is among least represented skills and values element in the curricula.⁶

Recommendations

The recommendations founded on these findings take into account that ESD is a „mechanism for rethinking education and learning“⁷ – by responding to the needs of present and future generations to adapt and to cope with the new and

5 || Domazet M., Dumitru D., Jurko L. and Peterson K., 2012, NEPC, p. 13.

6 || Domazet M., Dumitru D., Jurko L. and Peterson K., 2012, NEPC, p. 13-14

7 || UNESCO, 2012: Shaping the Education of Tomorrow – 2012 Report on the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development, Abridged available at <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0021/002166/216606e.pdf>

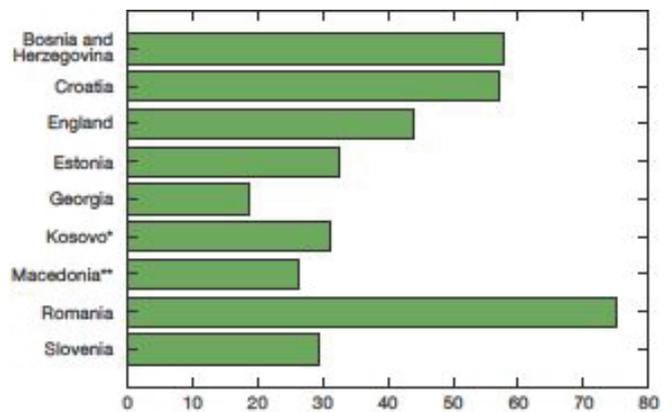


Figure 2: Relative proportions in % of Cultural diversity and intercultural understanding among the socio-cultural ESD content in framework curricula across countries

unknown situation, to become the managers of change, and not only affected by it. It requires new ways of understanding, teaching and acting.

1. The key actors in education should **reconsider the understanding of (E)SD in the curricula and keep in mind the interconnectedness of all aspects SD** - environmental, socio-cultural and economic.

Even though the broadness of the concept can create operational difficulties, the goals of ESD cannot be achieved by neglecting any of the three main aspects. Any kind of introduction of ESD into curriculum and other spheres of education system should bear in mind this characteristic of (E)SD. In the further steps of planning education policy, the actors could decide which aspect is a priority for the given country and future generations according to the local context.

2. **ESD should become one of the foundational principles of curriculum.**

Currently, the ESD content is scattered within the framework and subject curricula, without the coherent thought about overall outcomes expected from it, especially in regards of the ability to experience and manage change. The current unsustainable practices projected through education⁸ are clear enough to open up a re-thinking process in different educational spheres. Sustainable development strategies of individual societies are thwarted in the long run by not being reflected in educational content and practice.

3. All ESD content, already existing or being introduced into curriculum and educational practice, must **focus less on factual knowledge and rote learning and more on skills and values acquired by alternative, practical ways of learning that endorse critical thinking and creativity.**

Students need to learn *how to manage and sustain or mitigate change rapidly enveloping societies they live in.* The key actors in education should focus on the key skills for achieving this goal, currently presented only in a factual manner in the curricula – **Managing change and uncertainty, Futures thinking and Decision making.** It

8 || United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, Report 2011, p. 28 available at http://www.unece.org/fileadmin/DAM/publications/Annual%20Reports/topics/annual_report_2011_EN_web.pdf

is important that these skills should be connected with introducing the content knowledge about **New forms of governance**, not represented in the analyzed curricula.

4. The ESD-relevant themes missing from the curricula should be introduced into the knowledge content of the compulsory education at the level of both framework curriculum and subject curricula.

4.1. Topics related to the economic aspect of SD

In particular, this relates to **Market economy**, as a factor that significantly determines the social reality and life (and its quality) of and individual, and the **Corporate social responsibility**.

4.2. Topics related to the socio-cultural aspect of SD

Gender equality, as a content that is almost completely missing from the analyzed curricula, and within reality determined by discriminatory practices, should be introduced as a topic of teaching and learning at the level of compulsory education.

4.3. Topics related to the environmental aspect of SD

Agriculture and **Rural development**, as environmental topics of great significance to the countries of the Region, but scarcely or not at all present in these countries' curricula, should be re-evaluated and introduced into the knowledge content of the curricula along the lines of the overall sustainability aim.

4.4. Content related to skills and values relevant for SD

Community cooperation skills should be introduced and strengthened within the curriculum, taking

into account the prevailing competitiveness within the education system and wider society. ENjoinED Initiative maintains that cooperation skills bear greater importance for sustainable development, than the activities based on competition and quantification for purposes of ranking.

5. The missing content, skills and values, and the principles of ESD should be engaged in a cross-curricular way, covering more areas and subjects with the awareness that cross-curricularity does not mean that the responsibility for ESD is dissolved, but that it is a strong priority in teaching.

The content related to ESD should not be added in a form of an appendix – an extra subject or a document. What is needed is a small adjustment in more coherent framing and interconnecting of already existing content in all subjects from the sustainability perspective.

5.1. The SD content and its framing on a level of Subject curricula and SD content and its framing on a level framework curriculum should be interconnected.

Contrary to the traditional understanding that SD has its place in higher grades and that it is thematically related mostly, if not exclusively, to natural sciences, the ESD concept has its appropriate place at all grade levels and in all subject areas – natural sciences, maths, social sciences, mother tongue, languages, literature, arts, history, even physical education. This content already exists and it only needs to be reframed in the right manner. In subject curricula, however, the integrated focus often disappears entirely. This makes the framework curricula detached from the subject curricula.



Maybe it is not necessary to go into the future scenarios, but it would be enough to point out the difficulties of the present generations to cope with the effects of unsustainable practices – e.g. the economic crisis, or the incapacity to think about the possibilities of new, alternative forms of governance that could be the key in solving the perpetuating problem.

5.2. The school curricula should include a locally relevant ESD component.

Development of school curricula are another entry point for ESD, with the potential to be used immediately. Almost all countries of the Region have the free space of approximately **20% of their curriculum** for introducing the content that they choose – this percentage could be used to include ESD content of local relevance in a wholly integrated manner that transcends the formal limitation of national framework curricula.

5.3. School development plans should be used for introducing ESD in schools.

Using the school development plans for introducing ESD-practice in schools is on the track of the whole-institution / whole-system approach. In this context, partnering and **networking between the schools in the Region and EU is very important**. The respective authorities and school principals should endorse this kind of projects, and the national agencies should better advertise the exchange programmes thematically related to SD, making them more accessible and more 'user-friendly' for different subject teachers.

5.4. Textbooks should be edited in accordance with the ESD principles.

Textbooks should be updated with ESD content and, more importantly, the **existing content should be framed in ESD way**. A possible way to achieve this could be the ESD training for the textbooks authors. Another possible solution is ESD reviewing of the textbooks.

6. Teacher Training for ESD Competences should be introduced at in-service and pre-service level.

A real change cannot happen without the competent teachers. The latter gives the important role to the Universities and Teacher Training institutions. University courses with ESD framing should be offered, as well as mobility and practice exchange programmes for teachers endorsed by respective education authorities and schools. Through the ESD training, teachers should be encouraged to use this space for ESD content and skills and learn about the ways of teaching the content that they are already familiar with in ESD manner.



7. CSOs, academy and research institutions should do more research related to the monitoring and analysing school level practices.

Officially distributed curricular content is not perfectly reflected in teaching in individual schools. Therefore, the next step is to **monitor and analyze school level practices**. In general, more (action) research in schools will contribute to evidence based policy making.

8. Promotion of ESD through awareness raising actions and advocacy campaigns should be done at the international level and the national level.

International level – ESD should be set higher on the EC agenda, even though the education policy is left to national legislations – national governments and CSOs should collaborate in lobbying for ESD at the EU level. CSOs from the Region, including the members of ENjoinED Initiative, should join with strong international CSOs networks for achieving this goal. **National level** – CSOs should build partnerships with public authorities (both state and local level) for promotion of ESD. CSOs should strengthen the partnership that they traditionally have with the schools for advocating the bottom-up change in direction of ESD. Cross-sectorial networking, such as ENjoinED, where *environmental* and *educational* organizations advocate for the common goals, should be endorsed.



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