

Does One Future Matter More Than the ‘Other(ed)’? A Brief Critical Analysis of the UNESCO Education for Sustainable Development 2030 Framework

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The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization’s (UNESCO) Education for Sustainable Development roadmap (ESD 2030) is a policy document that reiterates the urgency of the climate crisis and affirms the central role of education in ensuring the survival of the planet. Building on nearly two decades of international policy on education for sustainable development, ESD 2030 highlights priority areas and recommendations for integrating education for sustainable development at all levels of society. Despite its urgent call to action, there is little to no attention paid to systemic issues such as capitalism and racism and their role in accelerating the climate crisis. This essay critically analyzes the ESD 2030 framework and makes a case for reckoning with past and present systemic injustice to combat the climate crisis effectively. It examines how modernity has functioned as a justification for colonial conquests and exploitation, and the role of racism in perpetuating the dehumanization that makes such activities possible. While ESD 2030 implicitly attempts to integrate empathy and relationality in its approach to sustainability education, this essay draws from Black critical theorists to argue why relationality should confront racism and racialized violence for it to have an enduring impact in education. The essay spotlights ways in which environmental education is taking a more critical and race-inclusive approach while honoring the principles that ESD 2030 proposes.

Keywords: UNESCO, education for sustainable development, climate justice, critical theory.

Introducing Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) 2030 and the Racism Gap

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) rolled out a 73-page framework outlining the road ahead for Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) in 2020. It was built on the work of the Global Action Programme on ESD (GAP) from 2015-2019 and the UN Decade of ESD from 2003-2014. Opening with a powerful call to action that urges everyone to “learn to live differently” (UNESCO, 2020, p. 6), this framework (‘ESD 2030’) expands on the GAP priority action areas—advancing policy, transforming learning environments, building capacities of educators and trainers, empowering and mobilizing youth, and accelerating sustainable solutions at a local level. It offers critical reflections and recommendations for implementation. ESD 2030 recognizes that environmental education, though typically associated with scientific knowledge of the environment, should evolve beyond a

scientific focus for it to be transformative. It calls for a disruption of “the ‘usual’ way of thinking, behaving or living” (UNESCO, 2020, p. 18), and emphasizes education as a means of empowering lifelong learners with the skills to build a more just society.

This echoes what environmental justice movements around the world have been taking on in local, national, and global contexts. Examples include movements against the disproportionate hazardous dumping in African-American communities in the United States (U.S.) (Holifield, 2001), Indigenous movements against major eco-conservation organisations to protect their land rights (Survival International et al., 2021), and protests against forced displacement of nearly 7 million people due to illegal mining projects in Eastern Congo (Amnesty International, 2022). These movements have in common the recognition of the threat that exploitative systems pose to livelihoods. ESD 2030’s call to action is weakened by its reluctance to name explicitly the systemic injustices it wishes to address. While the framework identifies “the complex mix of social and economic issues” (p. 6), “a gendered facet of vulnerability [to climate change]” (p. 20), “unbalanced economic growth” and “extreme poverty” (p. 57) as some of the critical considerations it must make in delivering education for sustainable development, it fails to hold accountable the underlying systems and institutions fuelling these conditions.

The framework is devoid of any mentions of racism and colonialism. This is part of a history of international negotiations evading explicit recognition of racism and colonialism as significant structures affecting humanity. The creation of the UN and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights saw little to no reckoning with race and colonialism for a few reasons (Acharya, 2022). The creation of the UN was a response focused on the events of the Second World War (Acharya, 2022). Several key drafters were colonialists or complicit in colonialism themselves (Acharya, 2022). The nations that would have been most concerned with colonialism were either not represented in the conferences at all or were represented by the colonial powers ruling them at the time (Acharya, 2022). While it would be remiss not to acknowledge significant strides in anti-racism at the UN, such as the Durban Declaration from the 2001 World Conference Against Racism and the Human Rights Council’s Special Rapporteurs on racism, the backlash and boycotts it continues to face from former colonial powers is indicative of the work that needs to be done (Achiume & MacDougall, 2023).

I argue that failing to acknowledge systems of dehumanisation and exploitation in addressing the climate crisis is not only disingenuous but dangerous. ESD 2030 leaves no room for doubt that the climate crisis we face is a “battle for our lives” (UNESCO, 2020, p. 8). The climate crisis is not only a story of emissions and forest cover—these issues are at least partly rooted in historical and ongoing patterns of violence and exploitation (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [IPCC], 2023). Discussions of the climate crisis without reflecting upon capitalism, racism, patriarchy, and colonialism will inevitably fall short. If education is to be a means of driving change, then this framework should reckon with systemic injustices.

Why Do Systems Matter in the Climate Crisis?

A 2024 survey of the IPCC reveals that 86 percent of the 211 scientists estimated a rise in global temperatures of over 2°C above pre-industrial levels by 2100 (Wynes et al., 2024). 58 percent of respondents estimated a 50-50 chance of temperatures exceeding a 3°C rise by 2100 (Wynes et al., 2024). The surveyed scientists identified several factors contributing to the failure of the 1.5°C Paris Agreement target: lack of political will, governmental short-sightedness, corporate interests, and capitalism (Carrington, 2024). The IPCC Sixth Assessment Report (2023) identifies differences in humans' vulnerability to climate change as "driven by patterns of intersecting socioeconomic development, unsustainable ocean and land use, inequity, marginalization, historical and ongoing patterns of inequity such as colonialism, and governance" (p. 51). This calls for a closer examination of the underlying ideologies of modern-day systems and their connection to the climate crisis.

Modernity and rationality, market exchange, and empiricism rest upon the notion that humans are not only distinct from nature but superior to it (the human-nature binary) (Milstein & Castro-Sotomayor, 2020). The origins of this concept can be traced back to thinkers like Descartes and Kant, who posited that all knowledge of the universe existed because the human mind created units of knowledge, and our relationship with nature was an extension of that (Lejano, 2005). What often gets left out of the historical narrative of modernity is the role of colonialism in giving it prevalence (Alimonda, 2019). The idea of modernity was deployed to undermine complex biocultural relations that Indigenous people had with their land and impose a Eurocentric binary model of human-nature relations (Mansilla-Quñones et al., 2023). This was carried out under the guise of bringing 'progress' and 'development' to so-called savage and uncivilized lands. The distinction between 'civilized' and 'uncivilized' served a particular purpose in the maintenance of colonies. Karl Marx coined the term 'primitive accumulation' to characterise resource extraction under capitalism as a brutal, violent process that the flourishing of capitalist societies relies on. The existence of 'democratic', 'civilized' nations is sustained by the unregulated extraction of resources from "savage spaces and zones" (Hage, 2017, p. 61). The 'progress' narrative was and continues to be instrumental in legitimizing this exploitation in ideological and material ways, allowing intellectual experts and politicians alike to interpret and impose their versions of reality in the name of ushering in the future (Shanin, 1997).

To suggest that the civilized/uncivilized distinction was grounded solely in economic reasons presents an incomplete picture. Pulido (2017) illustrates how capitalism has relied on the appropriation of and denial of access to Indigenous land and the racialization of labour through slavery. These are the two main ways in which racism functions as a "structuring logic of capitalism" (Pulido, 2017, p. 526). Race-making is a process of othering (Omi & Winant, 2014). Othering is a process of disregarding and denuding the humanity of a people (Klein, 2016), which makes it easier to justify the relentless exploitation of land and labour in the name of development. The magnitude of

these historical and contemporary structures cannot possibly be undone through education alone, but it does not mean it is not worth attempting. To quote Freire (1970), “the dehumanization resulting from an unjust order is not a cause for despair but for hope” (p. 91). The first logical step to countering dehumanization is through a framework of education that centers empathy and justice.

Can Relationality in Education Help Us?

Lejano (2023) defines relationality as “the degree to which individuals understand their being, thought, and action as integrated with that of others and, so, make decisions and take action in ways responding to these relationships” (p. 109). Relationality posits itself as an alternative to rationality. Where rationality explains human behaviour in terms of maximising individual satisfaction, relationality makes the argument that human behaviour is also motivated by our relationships and care for each other. ESD 2030 aims to foster this spirit, going by its emphasis on “competencies related to empathy, solidarity and action-taking” (UNESCO, 2020, p. 14), cultivating “core values and attitudes for sustainability” and “empathy and compassion for people and the planet” (UNESCO, 2020, p. 17). It seeks to build on “human rights and principles such as participation, non-discrimination, and accountability” (UNESCO, 2020, p. 58). Despite its reluctance to name racism, its allusions to inclusion and democratic processes imply that it intends to address the possibility of change through a relational approach.

One should question the effectiveness of such an approach in a framework that continually sidesteps and omits the question of race. Black critical thinkers remain skeptical of this universalising call for action and unity that hinges on forgetting the violence in race-making, the othering of black people, and black suffering. Karera (2019) proposes a ‘non-relational’ approach to the Anthropocene and climate crisis ethics—one that investigates the enduring conditions of colonialism, slavery, and racial capitalism, rather than scrambling to find a prescriptive universal solution. Non-relational does not negate that humans should care for each other; rather, the ethics of care must grapple with the racialized violence and suffering of our systems if we truly want to protect all life on this planet.

What would this look like in education? Stapleton (2019), influenced by the work of Black feminist theorists like Patricia Hill Collins, calls for the application of standpoint theory, which suggests that all knowledge is socially situated, in the practice of environmental education. This includes interrogating how different audiences define common concepts like ‘environment’, recognising the positionality of educators and learners within unjust systems, and expanding the ideas and thinkers we consider influential to centre knowledge from marginalised communities (Stapleton, 2019). Recognizing that environmental education focuses on climate science and individual action without recognition of social structures, Schindel and colleagues (2023) advocate for a climate-justice-oriented approach that allows learners to engage with climate

justice issues in their communities and for educators to draw connections between local and global issues in the process. They recommend involving learners in local resilience and ecological restoration projects for learners to develop firsthand knowledge of the impact of the climate crisis on their communities and the populations it impacts the most. These are examples of justice-oriented, learner-centric pedagogies that not only make ESD 2030's pedagogies possible but also integrate racial and climate justice in practical, realistic ways.

ESD 2030's idea of progress should move past its imperial legacy and begin with the most marginalized. It should live up to its call to action and allow educators and learners to question what terms like environment, education, and sustainable development mean, and produce knowledge that reflects their experiences. It should center Indigenous voices not only in perspective-sharing, but also in leadership and education. If education is to be liberatory, then humans have every right to call for an attentive, not prescriptive education. An education that accurately reflects the world is an education that will transform it, just as ESD 2030 aims to be.

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