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Article

Decolonising education for sustainable development (ESD): The case of the German conceptual framework for secondary schools

Subin Nijhawan

Goethe University, Frankfurt, Germany

Keywords: sustainable development goals (SDGs), education for sustainable development (ESD), whole school approach (WSA), social science education (SSE), decolonisation of education

Highlights:
– A progressive reading of ESD offers opportunities to decolonise SSE.
– SDG4, highlighting *quality* in education, should define the centre of gravity of the SDGs because it has a global and decolonial DNA.
– ESD, in its genuine form, should be interpreted as a revolutionary paradigm change for rethinking schools as whole institutions and consequently for decolonising teaching.
– Attempts in Germany to reform schools are in jeopardy due to the priority for comparative approaches to education, e.g., PISA.
– To facilitate ESD within given system constraints, global justice offers an appropriate *leitmotif* to expand and globalise horizons and decolonise teaching practices in SSE.

Purpose: The article offers a progressive reading of ESD with a teaching example to decolonise SSE despite constraints set by the school system.

Design/methodology/approach: The article presents ESD's idea of thought within 'the big picture' of global education. After that, a description of an expert group is given, tasked with developing a conceptual framework for SSE, commissioned by the school administration in Germany and critically reflected on amidst system constraints.

Findings: Full-fledged reforms to rethink schools in the 21st century from scratch to efficiently decolonise and integrate ESD are required.

Research limitations/implications: The last part of the article is limited in its description and critical reflection of the federal German example.

Practical implications: It is recommended that the big picture in terms of promoting global and decolonial dimensions of ESD and facilitating a sustainable transition of schools for achieving the SDGs is kept in sight.

Corresponding author:
Subin Nijhawan, Goethe University Frankfurt, Norbert-Wollheim-Platz 1, 60629 Frankfurt, Germany.
E-Mail: nijhawan@em.uni-frankfurt.de

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1 INTRODUCTION: THE BIG PICTURE

> We teach youth to think like states, or nations, in a time when global problems demand thinking beyond borders. The absurdity of the disconnect is stark – that despite mounting problems that cross boundaries, including migration, global warming, infectious diseases, war – we continue to use the nation/state framework to solve problems that demand a different way of thinking. (William Gaudelli, in his keynote at the conference "Educating the Global Citizen: International Perspectives on Foreign Language Teaching in the Digital Age. Munich, March 26th, 2019, cf. Römhild & Gaudelli, 2022, pp. 17-18)

In retrospect, any predictions about the demise and redundancy of the nation-state after the end of the Cold War (e.g., Ohmae, 1996), as well as the linear end of history and human evolution (Fukuyama, 1992), have proven wrong. States as the main subjects of international law have retained, possibly slightly decreased, or arguably even increased in significance in the 21st century. This contradicts the plea of the initial quote indicating that problems – or challenges, to frame it more positively – are as much a part of globalisation as all other areas of life. Globalisation as a full-fledged concept is accelerating modernity. It inevitably brings positive effects for humanity, but also detrimental aspects such as the globalisation of risks, as, for example, Beck (1992) and Giddens (2000) have prominently elucidated. In the context of development studies, Scott (1998) criticises the mentality of "seeing like a state" in his analysis of state-led planning schemes that have often failed to improve living conditions. He mainly criticises the ignorance of local knowledge and the indulgence of modernist attempts to standardise human existence and administer the planet.

Consequently, it comes as no surprise that, in the context of education, some calling for comprehensive pedagogical reforms see modernity and the ongoing process from the past as a synonym for coloniality (Andreotti, 2011b, 2015; Pashby et al., 2020b; Stein et al., 2022). The findings of Scott's (1998) book become more relevant when looking back to the future of modern globalisation. The fragrance of optimism after the end of the Cold War, in that age of uncertainty, caused a renaissance of economic sociology and even concepts of corporate social responsibility to become legitimate approaches. Among others, within a projected utopia of a network of global citizens, it has become mainstream to look at corporate players interacting on the market and at other non-state actors seizing power within global dynamics on the cost of states. With the first cesura having occurred with the 9/11 terrorist attacks, there seem to be perpetual backlashes to the positive effects of globalisation. This, *inter alia,* includes climate change putting the earth's health into jeopardy, right-wing populism endangering global democracy, and new forms of poverty rendering people homeless and causing major waves of modern migration. Are attempts by the United Nations (UN) to promote sustainable development a pleasant but intangible utopia? "*Has Globalization Gone Too Far*" (Rodrik, 1997) and failed? And is the global citizen as much a theoretically constructed and idealised model as *Homo economicus*?

Luckily, attempts in educational research to prepare students to live as global citizens have not waned in intensity. The growth of global institutional efforts to improve education and set the stage for the world's sustainable development has helped us think beyond the nation-state. Gaudelli (2020), owning the introductory quote, holds that global citizenship education (GCE) "is very much a work-in-progress, (…) a wide discursive field in development" (p. 212). With the adoption of the *sustainable development goals* (SDGs) in the wake of the *Paris Agenda for 2030* (2030 Agenda), GCE was fueled with new meaning, elevating the *global* within citizenship education. It was subsequently subsumed as an integral part of *education for sustainable development* (ESD), as will be specified later.

Everything is subject to one's own reading and interpretation. For me, GCE means two things: (1) GCE, with that amplified 'G for *global*', opposes distilled nationalised approaches to education; (2) ESD in a progressive reading is much broader than the Anthropocene and looks beyond states and the human species, at the planet as a whole. Such GCE compels one to take off national lenses and, equally important, to engender a decolonial perspective in mobilising all possible resources so that everyone can contribute to preserving the habitat. Following Andreotti (2006, p. 49), I support a critical approach to GCE and not the soft, Western capitalist approach promoted by the UN. She describes it as promoting "change without telling learners what they should think or do, by creating spaces where they are safe to analyse and experiment with other forms of seeing/thinking and being/relating to one another". This means that students must be empowered to form their own judgments and sketch their own solutions for achieving global justice, all strongly correlated with sustainability. A soft version of GCE maintains current systems of injustice, with ESD and GCE running "the risk of being a discourse and practice of the West imposed on the rest" (Gaudelli, 2020, p. 212).

This extended introduction, more in the fashion of a first chapter, includes the 'big picture' as well as first thoughts on decolonisation, which is more than simply a metaphor and "cannot easily be grafted onto pre-existing discourses/frameworks, even if they are critical" (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 3). Rather, the horizon for decolonising GCE, following Stein et al. (2022), must be expanded as widely as possible by Davidian reformist movements against the odds that Goliath, the educational administration, carries on the vessel's current path.

ESD, officially recommended by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), is the result of years-long global negotiations to promote sustainable development in education in schools around the globe. The SDGs that came into effect with the 2030 Agenda give ESD a new meaning. Undesired outcomes are strictly nationalised versions of ESD, moulded into national education systems in an attempt to "green- or better whitewash", unsustainable educational practices. It should be clarified that I consider GCE to be an integral part of ESD beyond the imagined community of a nation-state (Anderson, 1983). Andreotti (2011a, p. 307), in line with Spivak's (2008) idea of *"planetary subjectship"*, posits that "globalisation, citizenship and education can also be conceptualised beyond the allegedly natural confines of Nation building and organising".

This short theoretical survey will be substantiated in sections 2, 3, 4 and 5. The remaining sections unfold the process of designing a chapter out of the given domain of social science education (SSE) for the new conceptual framework for global learning and ESD, as directed by the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs of the Länder in the Federal Republic of Germany (*Sekretariat der Ständigen Konferenz der Kultusminister der Länder in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland*, KMK), together with the Federal Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ). I chaired this project. The attempt to make the best of a bad job with a decolonial lens will be delineated along the lines of the chosen topics for the teaching example, namely global justice, using examples of climate and border justice, constituting a progressive reading within an educationally conservative system. I will conclude with a rather pessimistic outlook that, amidst political and systemic restrictions, realising ESD in its pure and genuine form is a far from realistic vision.

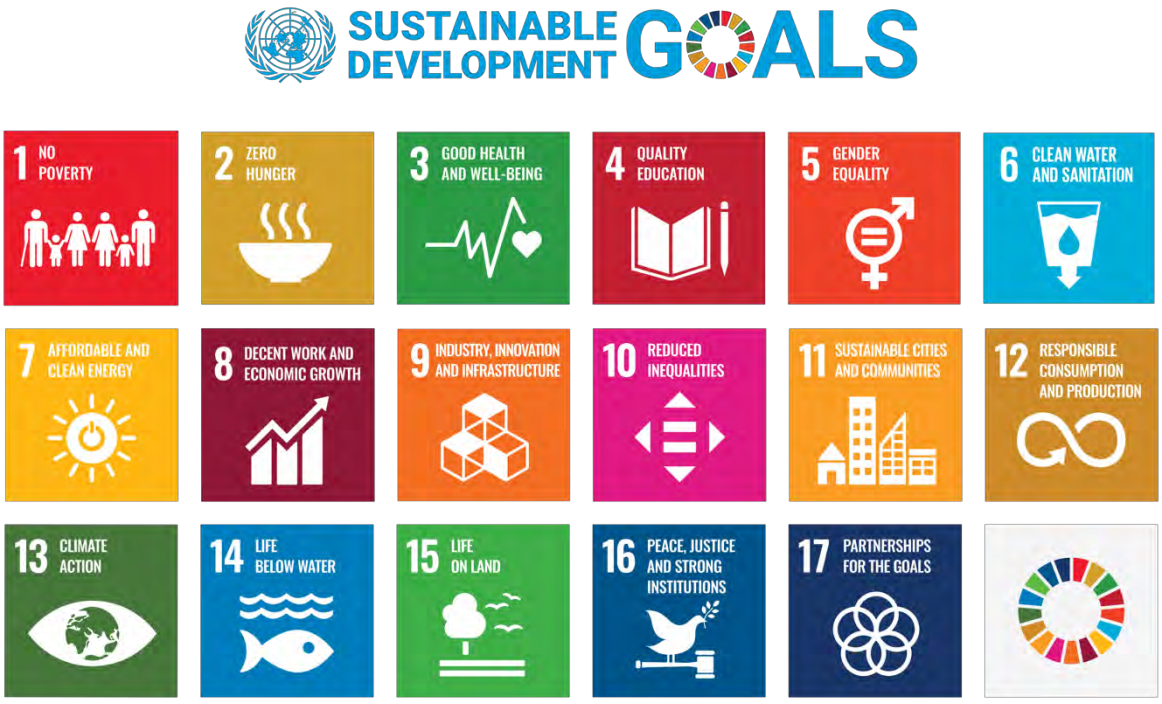
2 HOW THE SDGS HAVE SHAPED TODAY'S MEANING OF ESD

Although ESD today is mainly associated with the emergence of the SDGs (Figure 1) as part of the 2030 Agenda (2015), its basic history of thought ranges back to the year 1732 (Zhang & Wang, 2021). The

harbinger for contemporary ESD can be traced to the emergence of the UN. Most prominently, the *1972 UN Conference on the Human Environment* in Stockholm, the 1977 *UNESCO Intergovernmental Conference on Environmental Education* in Tbilisi, and the 1992 *UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED)* in Rio de Janeiro were decisive (Wals & Kieft, 2010). In a nutshell, ESD, in its historical genesis, has had a critical view on paradigms of neoclassical economic development ever since. Their demand for immediate and maximum possible growth as a panacea to abate poverty contrasts with environmental and social costs in the long term, outplaying possible short-term benefits. This assumption defines the famous sustainability triangle of the so-called *"Brundtland report"* as the most seminal landmark (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987). The commission was influenced by earlier simulations of the *Club of Rome* with its scientifically significant yet devastating findings (Meadows et al., 1972) that immediately attracted public attention. ESD, in today's understanding, is juxtaposed with the SDGs and henceforward to be seen as

> UNESCO's response to the urgent challenges facing our planet. Human activities have changed the Earth's ecosystems so much that our survival is at risk, and these changes are becoming harder to reverse every day. To prevent global warming from reaching catastrophic levels, we urgently need to take action. Education for Sustainable Development empowers people with the knowledge, skills, values, attitudes and behaviors to live in a way that is good for the environment, economy, and society. It encourages people to make smart, responsible choices that help create a better future for everyone. (UNESCO, n.d.a, n.p.)

Figure 1. The 17 SDGs of the UN define a full range of targets that should be achieved by 2030.



Source: https://sdgs.un.org/goals

With lessons learned from the preceding *UN Millennium Development Goals* (MDGs), the universal character of the SDGs is among the most significant innovations that avoid dividing the world into industrialised and developing nations. Thus, in theory, they deconstruct the colonial view of economic (under-)development that had shaped the aftermath of the Second World War within the shallow field of development studies (Esteva, 1992). ESD, by contrast, is a synthesis of different forms of

socioeconomic paradigms of education and a core concept of the new environmental paradigm (NEP), including, among other things, environmental education (EE) and, for example, development education (DE). As Bhandari and Abe (2003) phrased it during the heyday of earlier ecological movements, ESD is often misunderstood as a synonym of EE but looks far beyond it because it

> is radical in nature, and it does not subscribe to technocratic interpretation of sustainability. Rather, it is rooted in eco-centric view. To be different from EE and DE, it should be noted that the adjectival educations are their own cultural baggage and support only their interest groups. So ESD holds the prominence of a more coherent, far-reaching and integrated responses than other adjectival educations but it has to be manifested and meaningful. (p. 15)

Remaining accurate today, a close reading of the SDGs rejects popular perceptions that ESD only deals with ecological aspects. Thus, importantly, ESD is 'far more than just and only saving the environment'. Applying a positive reading, the SDGs represent globality and a borderless, cosmopolitan vision for enabling similar living standards yet preserving cultural diversity, going beyond the dated sustainability triangle. A very general categorisation of the SDGs can be made in accordance with the *"5Ps"*, namely *People, Planet, Prosperity*, *Peace,* and *Partnership* (United Nations System Staff College, n.d.). Historically, the *5Ps* have been an amendment to the triple bottom line framework (3BL), as seen in business and management studies by Elkington (1994). There, the *"3Ps" people, planet,* and *profit*, following the sustainability triangle, intend to introduce sustainability as a target in long-term business planning**.** With the SDGs, the *"P"* for *profit* has been replaced by *prosperity* as a wider concept of wealth (Jackson, 2009), whereby the dimensions of *peace* and *partnerships* have been added as addenda to upgrade the sustainability triangle to today's outset. *Participation* as another possible *"P"*, a core concept of global democracy (Culp, 2019) and decentralisation of the SDGs to the transnational civil society, has surprisingly not been added, insinuating a classical business or conventional economic development view of the SDGs by the UN.

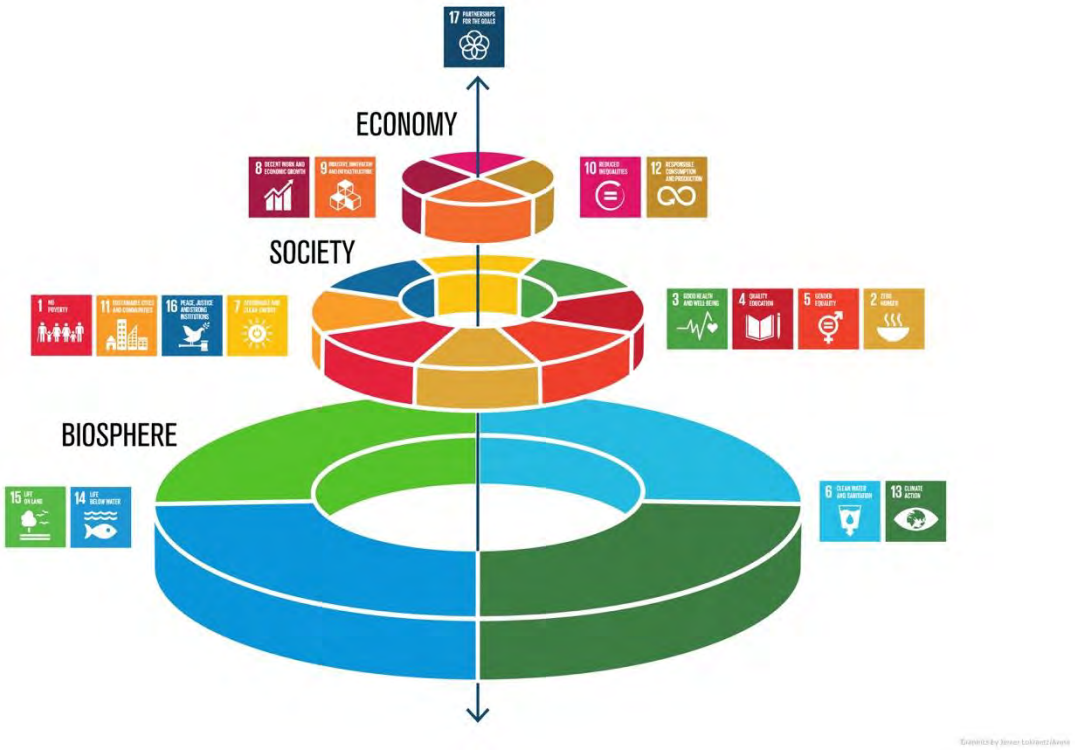
3 PRIORITIZING THE SDGS: WHICH SDGS ARE FIRST IN THE HIERARCHY?

Still, which SDGs are ranked at the top with the integrated planetary perspective remains unclear. Whereas the order of the SDGs appears partly random even at a second glance, the anthropocentric SDG1 (no poverty) and SDG2 (zero hunger), respectively, are the first two targets, as they constitute the absolute yet unmet basic needs of billions of people. They are followed by 15 remaining targets that can be grouped into various categories, depending on the criteria of analysis or the individual perspective. For example, from my view, whereby SDG1 and 2 (as well as arguably SDGs 3, 6, 7 and 4) belong to a group of 'classical social SDGs' for combatting absolute poverty, SDGs 5 and 10 can be seen as 'equality SDGs', related to relative poverty. SDGs 13, 14, and 15 (and eventually SDG 6) can be called 'environmental SDGs'. The most obvious economic SDGs are 8, 9, 11, and 12. The more political or institutional SDGs, 16 and 17, complement the targets, whereby it is understood that all these categories overlap. The instrumental role of SDG 4 (quality education) defines the most transformative element. The word *quality* underscores the content of, *inter alia*, curricula, didactics, and teaching methods on a micro level and defines the main centre of gravity within this article. It can be inferred that ESD is a transdisciplinary venture that attempts to trespass rigid subject boundaries using a problem-based approach. McKeown and Hopkins (2007, p. 18) state that "ESD works beyond the disciplinary scale at whole-school, educational system, and international scales".

Yet, it remains unclear how to prioritise the SDGs for a clear-cut teaching agenda. In 2016, *The Stockholm Resilience Centre* proposed the SDG wedding cake (Figure 2), a model rapidly

disseminated within the community of climate scientists and ecocentrics. Reminiscent of Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs, albeit partly inverted, the SDGs are organised into a hierarchy that sees the biosphere as fundamental, in accordance with the environmental SDGs 6, 13, 14 and 15. It serves as a foundation for human society, in line with the social SDGs. In turn, an intact society serves as a basis for the remaining economic SDGs. Finally, SDG 17, pointing out the role of partnerships in achieving goals, constitutes the icing on the cake.

Figure 2. The Stockholm Resilience Centre's SDG Wedding Cake



Source: Azote for Stockholm Resilience Centre, Stockholm University CC BY-ND 3.0.

The SDG wedding cake sandwiches social SDGs between environmental and economic SDGs, with SDG 17 as the piece on top. When a negative reading is applied, social SDGs are *de facto* seen as inferior to the environmental SDGs but positively read as superior to economic SDGs. SDG 17, in the sense of a new version of the end of history, sees partnerships, including free trade, as the ultimate target, resembling transcendence, in accordance with Maslow (1943). In defence of the wedding cake, it attempted to strictly respect the 2030 Agenda and consider all its SDGs. It must be questioned whether it serves as a real departure into the future because green economic growth and a concomitantly market- or business-like approach can be inferred as a panacea for future sustainable development, reminding of the 3BL. This is most specifically represented by SDG 8, *sine qua non* defining modernisation theory and growth economics. However, SDG 8 is probably the most controversial SDG (see also Hickel 2019; Kopnina 2020). A common narrative is taken by Pashby et al. (2020a, p. 3), criticising a "universal and inevitable an economic system organised by (racialised) capitalist markets, a political system organised by nation-states, a knowledge system organised by a single (European) rationality, and a mode of existence premised on autonomy and individualism".

Probably unwanted, not only does the wedding cake, with its universal and planetary claim, therefore question the seminal findings of the Club of Rome, but it also mirrors the SDG's business-

like approach in incorporating the "current hegemony of the sustainability-through-growth paradigm (…) actually increased inequalities and pressure on natural resources", as Kopnina (2020, p. 1) puts it. She continues by identifying the main flaw of SDG 8, namely that "[t]his is a missed opportunity as degrowth aims to drastically reduce natural resource use while maintaining the wellbeing of the planet's citizens" (p. 7). Striking is the empirical evidence that strictly adhering to SDG 8 would jeopardise not only the environmental SDGs, in particular the abatement of global warming to 1.5 degrees as compared to pre-industrial standards (Hickel, 2019), but social SDGs are also negatively affected because the detrimental effects of limitless growth would outplay all other SDGs in the sense of a zero-sum game. Thus, the wedding cake in its current version could not prevent the melting not only of the cake's icing but of the whole cake itself in the long term, jettisoning the partnership and cosmopolitan aspects.

A slightly modified wedding cake with SDG 8 as an optional sauce for less socioeconomically developed regions still in despair and need of economic growth to catch up with the Global North would be a possible future amendment. Otherwise, such a view of the SDGS, i.e., curing the fallacies of modernity by spreading even more modernity around the world and integrating, among others, indigenous communities with the universalist claim into this instrumental SDG paradigm, has been criticised as a highly colonial practice (Stein et al., 2022). Much of this criticism echoes the discourse on human rights from alternative views, mainly directed at their Eurocentric composition and the focus on civil and political, or individual, liberties. Such an approach mirrors Western neoliberal and market-based world views in the sense of dependency theory, with thriving prospects for the periphery's centre in the world system (Wallerstein, 1974). From a broader perspective, Jickling (1994) argues that more in-depth philosophical analysis of both the terms "sustainable" and "development" is required because modern environmentalism with a technocentric approach is unrightly promoted. Education *for* sustainable development, as he clarifies, has been suggestive and biased from the beginning, as students do not have any safe space to debate such controversies aptly or identify their own alternative solutions beyond common paradigms. Hence, the cheerleading of modernisation theory prompts us to regard the SDGs and ESD with due diligence.

Such a view implies that their idea of felicitating growth is not rooted in universalist claims but in Western ideals. To provoke the readers, possible colonial aspirations are concealed by globalisation as the wolf in sheep's clothing with "the very idea of universalism [that] itself is a colonial imposition that seeks totalizing, decontextualized, and apolitical knowledges and practices" (Stein et al., 2022, p. 200). This simplified criticism also needs to be seen with scepticism because "the idea of [global] justice" (Sen, 2009) as such is universal, now construing a riddled dilemma. According to the isolated or categorised view of the wedding cake, the biosphere is hierarchised, whereby the top layer with its icing implies a tacit agreement with growth economics, calling for amendments beyond standard Western growth paradigms.

Furthermore, looking at socioeconomic inequalities on a global scale, the "chicken-or-the-egg question" remains whether 'first the environment or social disbalances' should be addressed to maximise the benefits of all stakeholders and species of the planet. This controversial question aligns with Vare and Scott's (2007) view on ESD, reminiscent at first of three different types of approaches. Type 1 sees all problems as environmental, Type 2 sees them as social, and Type 3 denies any end of history, requiring *"reflective social learning about how we might live in the future"* (p. 193). Type 1 and 2 are in line with what the authors call ESD 1 and are followed by UNESCO and most governments and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). ESD 1 has been criticised by Pashby et al. (2020a) as an attempt to frame GCE (as part of ESD) with an inherent colonial

Eurocentric view. In contrast, ESD 2 takes a different, and in a broader sense, outspokenly decolonial approach, and promotes capacity building among learners to think critically about how technocrats and experts view sustainable development, including the wedding cake.

Infusing the line of argument about Eurocentrism and colonialism, any pedagogy that facilitates decolonial ESD must include Type 2 controversies to engender multiperspectivity from below, instead of simply taking the SDGs as well as value-based opinions like the wedding cake as carved into stone from above. In turn, the struggle for recognition of third-generation human rights, mainly by nations of the Global South and Indigenous communities, rooted in their historical experience of colonialism, speaks volumes, in accordance with ESD 2. These unite the chicken-and-the-egg in consolidating the (social) right to development with the right to environment. As Faruque and Begum (2004) elucidate, such non-Eurocentric views see the environment as a social right and *vice versa.* The paradox here is that the unity of the chicken and egg validates, in general, the ecocentric view of the first two layers of the wedding cake because indigenous views on the environment are considered social.[1] This calls for a more integrated view of sustainability *per se*. Overall, Machingura and Lally (2017) identified two major trade-offs that are labelled "environmental sustainability or ending hunger" (p. 26) and "economic growth or sustainable environments" (p. 36). These are accompanied by the "paradox of social and economic development goals" (p. 48), all highly relevant for decolonising education with an integrated view of the SDGs. Pigozzi (2007, p. 29) summarises:

> The emphasis on linking poverty with issues of sustainable development points to the concern of the international community that ending deprivation and powerlessness is as much at the heart of our concern for the future of the world as is environmental protection. Balancing this equation is a central challenge of sustainable development.

Moreover, to maintain the established nexus for decolonising education, SDG 4 (quality education) is not highlighted within the wedding cake. It is, however, naturally related to ESD because it defines the quality of education concerning all other SDGs. It starkly contrasts the mere use of official statistics that simply point out quantitative indicators like the increase in schools and classes or the higher number of girls enrolled. Indeed, SDG 4 is often cited as the real engine of transformation and sustainable change, thus seen as a panacea for achieving sustainability and global justice through education. UNESCO's (2015) *Incheon Declaration and Framework for Action,* the result of the World Education Forum of 2015, confirms that SDG 4 is "the heart of the 2030 Agenda" and thus a "stand-alone goal" (p. 24), with integrated targets of the remaining SDGs. Hence, SDG 4 is at least suggested as the wedding cake's *fondant au chocolat*.[2]

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[1] Take the example of Ecuador since 2008: Articles 71-74 of the Constitution include constitutional provisions in the form of Mother Earth's rights with her representation in parliament. Bolivia followed this path with the *Ley de Derechos de la Madre Tierra* (2010) and even personifies Mother Earth with the same rights as humans.

[2] The UN, however, at another place, states that all SDGs are at parity and do not need to be discriminated against but concomitantly achieved: "ending poverty and other deprivations must go hand-in-hand with strategies that improve health and education, reduce inequality, and spur economic growth – all while tackling climate change and working to preserve our oceans and forests" (UN, n.d.b). This means that the SDGs are seen as a full and interconnected entity with countries and regions setting own priorities. In reality, however, to my knowledge, only one empirical study with a complex methodology has been carried out with the goal of examining which SDGs are prioritized in reality. According to subjective expert knowledge in the field (N=366), SDGs 2, 1 and 6, representing basic needs, are identified as the most important, contrary to the wedding cake. The transformative SDG4, as the normative basis of ESD, is ranked 4th (Yang et al., 2020).

The focus will now be set on this SDG, with its wholesome impact on how schools in the 21st century should be *thought and taught*, as well as to sharpen and calibrate the decolonial lens after that.

4 WHY SDG 4 AS A HORIZON MUST BE USED TO DECOLONISE SCHOOLS

Looking at the full dimension of SDG 4, UNESCO, as the responsible UN agency, defines its purpose to "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all". The UN specifies that "[t]his goal is a pivotal driver for positive change, emphasising the transformative power of education in fostering a sustainable and equitable world" (UNESCO, n.d.b). To operationalise SDG 4 and monitor its implementation and overall global progress, it is further specified by ten indicators. Target 4.7 deserves special attention:

> By 2030, ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture's contribution to sustainable development. (UN, n.d.a)

Beyond the named dimensions of global citizenship (education) and cultural diversity, "knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development" define the focal point as looking at the whole institution of schools beforehand to direct the spotlight on SSE after that. At the level of learners, Pigozzi (2007) considers five dimensions central for the successful implementation of SDG 4, in short: (1) seeking out learners, (2) acknowledging their resources, (3) content, (4) social inclusion, and (5) the learning environment. The last three dimensions indicate that SDG 4 specifically, and ESD on the broader level, demands a new school culture and understanding of how good schooling under present circumstances is constituted.

SDG 4 alone offers a first normative basis for decolonising education. But its reading and interpretation need to be progressive and in favour of such groundbreaking change, combined with a willingness to learn from past mistakes. Stein et al. (2022) suggest four different horizons to decolonisation in education, with an increase in intensity: (1) decolonisation as equity, diversity, and inclusion; (2) decolonisation as alternatives with guarantees; (3) decolonisation as hacking; and (4) decolonisation as hospicing. Horizons 3 and 4, respectively, go so far as to suggest a discontinuity of schools and facilitate alternative futures, but the focus will remain on horizons 1 and 2. Horizon 2 "may work within existing institutions and/or develop educational communities or practices outside of formal institutions altogether" (Stein et al., 2022, pp. 206-207). It is about redistributing "power and resources within existing institutions, so as to remake them in ways that would be essentially unrecognisable; or create alternative institutions or communities that can take the place of existing institutions" (p. 207). The most extreme form would be associated with the genesis of a "*deschooling movement*", in line with Spivak's et al. (1996) position on unlearning, indeed constituting the scopes of horizons 3 and 4. The bottom line is that institutions would need to be significantly transformed, including a distribution of power, its dynamics and existing practices, giving it a new meaning. Horizon 1, in turn quite simple in its logic, "seeks to integrate decolonisation into existing practices of 'EDI' – equity, diversity, and inclusion" (Stein et al., 2022, p. 205). It opens the scope for discourses, whereby formal practices and institutional changes are not foreseen. In the following, these two horizons will be referred to on different occasions.

Realising the chances to integrate ESD into schools in accordance with horizon 2, the rejuvenation of the WSA fueled the discussion about transforming schools into whole institutions that meet the needs of learners in the 21st century. The WSA, a reform-oriented concept with its genesis parallel to ESD, thus a door opener to decolonising education, covers similar areas of foci mirrored by the SDGs since 2015. Today's understanding of the WSA has been subsequently adopted by ESD "to expose students to authentic problems in the wider society to transform the school itself into an agent of change in a sustainable direction" (Mogensen & Schnack, 2010, cf. Gericke, 2022, pp. 153–154). In other words, the WSA, in one gasp together with ESD, concurs with Target 4.7 of SDG 4. Sustainable development serves as a fulcrum beyond curricular reforms, i.e., as a learning outcome. Schools are seen beyond the notion of merely drilling and mediating knowledge, skills, and competences of an island world of single and isolated disciplines. Moreover, the WSA is genuinely democratic with its inclusive and participatory stakeholder-oriented framework that also looks beyond students, teachers, and administrators but includes the entire surrounding community without demarking boundaries.

Such an approach is a clear paradigm shift to most schools' common practice. Gericke (2022, p. 157) states that "previous research on ESD implementation suggests that the whole school needs to be engaged if truly transformative ESD is to be enacted in any school". ESD, amplified by a WSA, infuses a new idea of thought about the function of schools, placing the individual's resources at its center, supporting capacity-building and envisioning empowerment. The idea of the WSA is opposed to common practices consisting of merely adding a column with relevant SDGs next to the specified content of curricula, arguing that this fulfils the criteria of ESD. Without modifying the logic of teaching and learning, however, this becomes a clear case of 'green- and whitewashing of existing subjects and their curricula'. The same is the case for other ideas, such as simply suggesting the design of a school garden, in accordance with SDGs 13 and 15, because the impact is too local. Furthermore, and often ignored, such new thinking also demands a reevaluation of what performance is in its essence and how a new culture of assessment is needed that goes beyond comparativist approaches, quantifications and scores, followed by ranking of students, schools, and countries on scales. Rather, it recognises social dynamics, the value of cooperation in solving 21st-century real-world problems, and the realisation and emergence of individual and personal resources within a positive feedback framework to felicitate diversity in a global world. As positive side effects, pressure and, for example, classical testing anxieties can be abated. A WSA integrating ESD into the school curriculum is meant to empower students and promote their agency, with the aim that they ultimately become mature and responsible citizens.

Elevating the WSA as a common feature of any school system would mean a clear paradigm shift, because it also means decentralising educational policy competences to the schools and the management board, and even more significantly, to its stakeholders. However, without full-fledged national political support policy initiatives and the willingness to support such 'grand transformation' of national school systems and surrender control (Gericke, 2022), any reformist initiative is doomed to failure. The article now takes a gradual shift towards the case of Germany to contextualise the debate and to delineate the reluctance of school administrations to adopt the WSA, apart from marginally mentioning it within policy documents (e.g., KMK, 2017, 2023). System constraints caused by missing policy initiatives or political willingness render such transformative vision hardly tangible, as it will be shown. As an appraisal, it should be remembered that ESD implemented through a WSA comes close to Vare and Scott's (2007) ESD 2 and would not only mean a significant school reform but a true revolution.

5 IMPLEMENTING A NEW CONCEPTIONAL FRAMEWORK FOR GLOBAL LEARNING AND ESD FOR SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN GERMANY

From a historical macro perspective, the discourse about the transformation of the German school system and reform of curricula remains a long-lasting affair. It has been receiving regular public attention and momentum with the *Programme for International Student Assessment* (PISA) study and resonating "PISA shocks" since 2000, most recently in 2023. Against these odds, and in line with the UNESCO agreements on ESD, Germany envisions inducting ESD into its school system as directed on the national policy level, side-by-side with PISA.

Educational systems on a global level are administered in accordance with the policies and provisions of the nation-states. The first round of the PISA study in 2000 was the launch to compare students' performances across countries, mainly in the areas of numeric and literacy competence. Results were followed by different national initiatives to improve the ranking in consecutive rounds. Swiftly turning to ESD also means that the discourse about ESD in schools remains a very nationalised affair. PISA constitutes a Pandora's box in terms of ESD's global and cosmopolitan vision and assessing students' performance during rather progressive and forward-looking ESD.

In Germany, the outcomes of PISA studies since its launch were, at best, mediocre, if not disappointing. An ongoing discussion about a full-fledged school system reform to equip students with basic competencies propels it forward. One of the biggest reforms since PISA has been the nationwide shift from input or content-driven to output or competence-based education since the middle of the last decade. This was adjoined by the initiative to introduce comparative A-level *(Abitur)* exams in each federal state (*Länder*). To date, the *Abitur* is administered by each of the 16 *Länder's* educational boards because education policy pertains to the legal competence of not the central but the individual *Länder* governments. The long-term goal is to introduce nationwide comparable *Abitur* exams, with tasks designed by the *Institute for Educational Quality Improvement* (IQB). The IQB's work on quality assurance can be described mainly as an affair with quantitative indicators and aggregated data and, thus, a counterrevolution to ESD.

Additionally, the KMK acts as a coordination body at the central level to, *inter alia*, standardise education within the Federal Republic and react towards new challenges for the educational system. This comprises tasks beyond only harmonising the *Abitur* in the wake of reconsolidating after PISA. Nationwide strategies for other challenges pertain to the KMK's duties as well, like digital education and, of course, ESD. The given paradox, however, of standardisation, consolidating testing, and more rigid quantitative assessment on the one side, with real educational system innovation and transformation through introducing a WSA on the other side, should be memorised while reading the remainder of this article. The former is associated with increased bureaucracy, government decrees, and micromanagement to make the system and teaching comparable from the top down. In contrast, ESD rather focuses on democratic stakeholder participation and individualisation, and thus, resource-based school innovation from below. Attention should moreover be directed to another, namely the Finnish paradox, where a democratic school culture with less focus on testing and assessment was followed by impressive scoring during PISA's earlier exercises (Sahlberg, 2006, 2011).

With federal efforts to make education more comparable, assessment happens on the basis of subject didactics. This enforces the idea of separated subjects and their didactics, eschewing the liberty to enter novel paths. ESD and the WHA, in turn, challenge subject boundaries and consequently follow a genuinely transdisciplinary approach with a new logic of school. Despite these opposing forces, the KMK, having global efforts in 2007, recommended that the *Länder* make ESD

an integral part of education (KMK, 2007a). The same year, the first conceptual framework for global learning in the context of ESD (in the following, called *Orientierungsrahmen*) was published together with BMZ (KMK, 2007b). In 2016, an updated edition was also made available for open access (KMK, 2016). However, two years earlier, that very draft had been highly criticised with an open letter titled "Decolonize *Orientierungsrahmen*", published by the association *glokal e.v.* (2014), signed by 72 other civil society associations and 67 academics. Realising that the work was torn within the given paradox of standardisation and ESD, the *Orientierungsrahmen,* a project of political prestige, was criticised, *inter alia,* due to its colonial understanding of the world as well as for a lack of representation of authors and contributors. Since this criticism reverberated through civil society and mirrors the deficit of the bureaucratic and non-representative school system as such, KMK/BMZ had to react by designing future working processes that were more representative and participatory. For the middle school level (till grade 10), a new process to design an annexe of the *Orientierungsrahmen* was launched in 2017. The group, including several signees of the open letter as well as the author of this paper, has completed the work under consideration of *glokal e.v.*'s criticism and made a description of the proceedings and underlying ideas available to the public (Nijhawan & Grammes, 2023). KMK/BMZ have not yet published the annexe, possibly because the result of the democratic, participatory and diverse process at least marginally includes the very genuine logic of decolonial ESD. Pressure so far, as well as seeking an explanation for a years-long delay, was met with reluctance and excuses against the background that the annexes for nearly all other subjects have not only been published but also actively disseminated in the form of teacher training sessions. It remains uncertain whether that innovative work will be published at all for reasons that should become clear in the remainder of this contribution.

Recognising the resonating increase of public attention and widespread criticism after each new PISA round indicating outdated structures of schools, the KMK, together with BMZ, initiated a process for the third edition of the *Orientierungsrahmen.* This time, the focus was set on upper secondary schools (from grade 11 to the *Abitur*), with the initial goal of publication after public consultation in 2023. Experts from public administration, universities, school practitioners, and members of civil society were invited to collaborate and design an *Orientierungsrahmen.* It will consist of a general part on ESD, specifying the scope and the problem-based competence model. The latter has a threefold structure: (1) *awareness and analysis* – (2) *judgment* – (3) *agency*. Agency as a target dimension is identified as the fulcrum, which motivates the young generation to become change agents. The second part of the *Orientierungsrahmen* will include specific contributions of 16 subjects taught at German schools, drafted by subject expert groups (in the following *Facharbeitskreise* – FAK).

However, one common similarity with every launch and relaunch of the *Orientierungsrahmen* jeopardises the contribution of the working groups. Although it has been argued that ESD *per se* challenges subject boundaries and consequently follows a genuinely transdisciplinary approach, the KMK insists on viewing ESD from the perspective of the single subjects taught at school, i.e., math, geography, history, and old and modern languages. Thus, from the beginning, the working groups were confined by these very restrictive terms of reference because the new *Orientierungsrahmen* is not meant to rethink schools and prepare the ground for transdisciplinary ESD in its genuine form. Rather, it is supposed to be fitted into the existing system. In this vein, it does not come as a surprise that the KMK, realising PISA as a global assessment instrument, has thus far not published any separate strategy paper recommending the WSA as a new paradigm of education, indicating its missing support and thus reluctance towards such full-fledged reforms. This would

be comparable to open-heart surgery and question the very structure of the present school system. Not even the 2016 version of the *Orientierungsrahmen* mentions the WSA even once (KMK, 2016).

The author of this article was one of two team leaders of the *Facharbeitskreis* SSE. By horizon 1, the process and endeavour of the group to decolonialise social science education through a progressive reading of ESD and the SDGs will be described. It represents the attempt to approximate ESD's original line of thought as much as possible within the current system, in view of all system constraints, bureaucratic boundaries, and hindrances.[3]

6 A PROGRESSIVE READING OF ESD TO DECOLONISE SSE

Given the restrictive terms of reference to forge the idea of ESD 1 into a comparative framework of schooling with single subjects, the *Facharbeitskreis* had a complex task. It needed to design a subject-specific ESD chapter for the *Orientierungsrahmen* that seamlessly fit the current practice of the present German school system. In other words, special attention had to be paid to the contribution to ensure it did not jettison the centralised and standardised federal *Abitur* regulations. Put simply, the working group had to delineate the contribution of SSE to ESD without the freedom to set milestones for a great transformation of the school system. In particular, the terms of reference demanded five subchapters: (1) the contribution of SSE to ESD as a whole, (2) competence standards for measuring the progress, (3) didactic principles that support ESD in SSE classes, (4) possible content and specific topics of SSE, and (5) a teaching example exemplifying ESD in SSE school practice.

To preserve ESD's original idea of thought as much as possible, the FAK of eight authors agreed to design all chapters with some common premises. These contain many general references that describe the change around the globe and the need to react accordingly. Furthermore, the scope of the SDGs and their global and transformative power, in general, was specified, as well as general recommendations about how schools must react as whole institutions of change in the 21st century. A common understanding of a global and cosmopolitan vision, GCE and global justice, equality, solidarity, antiracism and decolonial pillars were integrated into the single chapters. A full set of controversial topics directed mainly at students in the Global North was included to initiate their reflections on their existence and role within the contemporary global setting, in line with Vare and Scott's (2007) recommendations on ESD 2. Many grand questions with a decolonial reading of the SDG's general integrity, such as whether citizen assemblies should replace party politics or whether economic growth needs to come to an end (in the Global North) in favour of degrowth, were adopted. The detailed teaching example revolves around global justice as an umbrella concept for exemplifying the theoretical and conceptual as well as amplifying the SDGs' global, transdisciplinary, transformative, and decolonial dimensions. An initial alternative was the idea to suggest the famous degrowth vs. green growth controversy, which was, however, rejected by the steering committee of the KMK/BMZ, with the argument that economic SDGs belong to the purview of not the FAK SSE but to the vying FAK economic education. The steering committee also expressed initial scepticism regarding global justice. Some in the committee believed that justice *per se* is the field of the 'FAK Religion and Ethics', which was forcefully but argumentatively overturned by the FAK

[3] It is essential to mention that any criticism expressed here is solely directed against general policy stances of institutions, often inflicted by rather ideological positions of party politics and controversies at higher political levels. Any resulting directives strictly bind the subordinate hierarchy, which is why there is absolutely no individual responsibility at a working level for what, in the broader sense, can be called general political resistance to innovation and advice from the academic community, civil society as well as the very active nongovernmental organisation (NGO) sector.

SSE. The following section describes, explains, reasons, and defends this selection in detail, insinuating where a progressive reading for decolonising SSE education was incorporated.

7 TEACHING EXAMPLE: GLOBAL JUSTICE AT THE EXAMPLE OF CLIMATE LAWSUITS AND BORDERS IN A GLOBALISED WORLD

The FAK decided to title the teaching example *"The dilemma of global justice within a nationalised institutional framework"*. The topic, focusing on the competence field of judgment, deals on one side with the Herculean task of the SDGs to promote equal living standards around the globe. On the other, it takes an outspoken global approach that often contrasts with the idea that local change and engagement suffice to implement the SDGs, also rejecting the famous yet outdated slogan, *"think global, act local"* (see also Karliner, 1997). It thus goes beyond the danger of ignoring the grand political questions in underlining the responsibilities of political institutions instead of simply passing the buck to the students' agency. It questions the outdated notion that students' living environments are confined to classrooms, neighbourhoods, and other such localities. With the "glocality approach" (Nijhawan et al., 2021), the FAK recognises students' global knowledge in a superdiverse world with many existing connections to other geographical regions. This underlines the dimension of GCE as specified in SDG Target 4.7, and "a countervailing force from which global learning evolves (…) trying to dissolve the binary of local/global, particularly concerning inequality and oppression" (Gaudelli, 2020, p. 212). The conflict line of strictly nationalised SSE, didactics, and educational systems with modern approaches to global learning become visible. The former is directed at reducing complexity, whereas the latter illustrates the complexity and multi-perspectivity of such grand questions. Debates and negotiations are required to find compromises in fields where solutions are more complicated than they appear at first glance. Nijhawan and Grammes (2023) have elucidated the given conflict area in the aforementioned, as yet unpublished example for middle schools.

The idea originates from the teaching practice of one other FAK member, confirming the criteria of design-based research as a decolonial methodology of change in schools (Nijhawan, 2025). The concept has been structured so that students can discover global justice across various dimensions, with the ultimate goal of forming multilayered judgments about controversial questions. Agency is important, albeit an ancillary goal. The students learn about normative international agreements and political strategies to facilitate their implementation. The extent to which national institutions and the international community can assume agency for achieving global justice is reflected. The question of a just and democratic organisation in the global society is represented as a central task of politics (Culp, 2014). The analysis of power structures as an integral part of GCE (Gaudelli, 2009) has always been a core element of public discussion and SSE in classrooms, despite the initial criticism of the KMK/BMZ about locating global justice within SSE. The teaching example is in accordance with the KMK's federal *Abitur* provisions for SEE and aims to enable young people to take co-responsibility "in the sense of a just, solidary, and democratic society" (KMK, 2005, p. 4, our translation). It is also congruent with the KMK's (2018) resolution on democracy education that, in theory, reads as a decolonial manifest but in practice, is effectless and system-sustaining. The meaning of global justice and mechanisms for its implementation constitute the centre of gravity against the backdrop of restrictions given by national legislation and institutions. Therefore, the FAK could only act in accordance with Horizon 1, with a willingness to be as genuine with ESD 2 as possible.

In the last 20 years, topics such as climate justice as a form of ecological justice (e.g., Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, 2008) have become established in SSE (Retzmann & Grammes, 2014).

The modular teaching example addresses global justice issues in the context of politics using the examples of climate justice and border regimes to remedy the chicken-and-egg question of amalgamating the climate and the social. It touches upon key values of international law, i.e., freedom of movement and the entrenchment of nation-states' sovereignty. To cater to the broad interests of upper secondary students and enhance their methodological skills, students will be given the opportunity to investigate their own questions of interest on implementing global justice within a specific policy area. The controversy is not only located within the varying perceptions of justice in concrete political implementation but also in how far national and international institutions can and should urge its enforcement, underlining Andreotti's (2006) critical approach to GCE. Furthermore, the FAK attempted to follow Vare and Scott's (2007) path of ESD 2 within the protected space of classrooms to inhibit the "classic double bind: the more we focus on delivering ESD 1, the less likely it is that we will be asking people to think for themselves through essential ESD 2" (p. 195). This aims to strengthen students' co-responsibility for a just, global, and democratic society and highlights that these are genuinely global challenges, with a core reference to the norms of international law, "dislodg[ing] Eurocentrism and support[ing] a situated and historical critique that decentres coloniality" (Pashby et al., 2020a, p. 47). Finally, as demanded by Andreotti (2011b, p. 395), a decolonial view of students is enforced by "discursive possibilities at work in a specific context", whereby teachers need to act as "cultural broker[s], negotiating between discoursive systems: disrupting old patterns and creating new possibilities". Table 1 gives an overview of the modules.

Table 1. Modular overview of the teaching example "Global Justice"

Module / Main ESD competence area	Description
Module 1: The world from above (creative lab) awareness and analysis and judgment	Development of an initial understanding of what transnational/global justice could mean in different policy areas based on students' preconceptions. Evaluation of justice concepts/ideas using previously developed criteria/categories. Assessment of the significance of different political orders and transnational power structures as a basis for agency.
Module 2: What does climate justice mean? judgment	Analysis of a real climate lawsuit by plaintiffs from the Global South in German courts to understand the relationship between global normative documents, national policies and their impact across borders, and (national) jurisprudence for sustainable development. Evaluation of the impacts of global normative documents and the actions of involved actors (objectives, interests, means of power). Creation of own statements on a given climate lawsuit case study to be able to participate in public discussion based on facts.
Module 3: What does justice of borders mean? awareness and analysis and judgment	Development of concepts based on the methods of SSE on the functions of borders, juxtaposed with freedom of movement of people from the Global North compared to the Global South. Analysis of global dependencies and subsequent regional structures of social inequality (glocality). Evaluation of the relationships between transnational and global cooperations, dependencies, and power disparities.

Module 4: What does global justice mean to us?	Formulation of own problem-oriented question on an issue that raises questions of justice at a global level (e.g. vaccine patents, financial transaction taxes, enforcement of reproductive rights, etc.).
awareness and analysis and judgment	Researching information on their selected topic from print and electronic media. Checking the quality and reliability of different information sources regarding their political and ideological interests. Comparing perspectives on cross-border issues from the viewpoint of different political and social actors from across the globe. Formulation of own judgment on the possibilities and limits of implementing global justice using their topic as an example.
Module 5: The world from above	Review and expansion of their (pre-)concepts of global/transnational justice and injustice.
agency	Evaluation of concrete solutions and alternative conceptions of justice on a global scale, taking into consideration the legacies of colonialism. Ability, based on their informed decision, to pursue SDGs in private, educational, and professional areas and to participate in their enforcement and implementation at the societal and political levels.

Each module suggests options for deepening understanding in the spirit of global and holistic ESD, mainly enforcing different perspectives and reflecting the inner self within a globalised world. These cases, along the lines of debates on current conflicts concerning climate justice and border regimes, require students to take a global view on the SDGs, integrate all the different categories as presented above, and facilitate perspective changes in also questioning nation states, mirroring GCE in SDG Target 4.7. Engaging with target complexes, paradoxes and dilemmas within the given scenarios across the many dimensions of sustainability provides generalisable insights.

The question of climate justice includes regulating global economic, ecological, social, and political interests, focusing on the states' legacies and roles in ecological regulatory policy. The center of gravity is set on actors from the Global South enforcing their rights as plaintiffs in front of German courts, ultimately amplifying the glocality approach. The controversy over border regimes explores the tension between international law's orientation towards protecting common interests and national interest groups. Possible privileges are pedagogically framed and reflected on an individual basis (an approach advocated by Stein et al., 2022), against the background of different reasons for migration. Human rights, fundamental principles of a free and democratic order, and scientific facts are not presented as controversial opinions open for debate, preventing criterionless relativism. However, tensions among these values and norms can lead to ongoing debates. Addressing global justice issues requires analysing national policies and questioning the nation-state as the sole problem-solving level. It is necessary to illuminate global structures and their operations that do not function analogously to everyday phenomena. The lawsuit in front of the German Federal Constitutional Court illustrates an alternative form of political action and engagement for citizens, to underline that civic engagement is genuinely global and can happen in line with international agreements meant to improve everyone's living conditions. Similarly, evaluating border regimes enables students to develop self-efficacy by understanding global questions through specific methods, avoiding incorrect analogies and addressing colonial continuities and structural racism

that operate differently from familiar, everyday forms of discrimination. Importantly, the example genuinely facilitates GCE and looks beyond the authority of nation states while teaching the grand questions of our time, as an integral part of ESD.

The contribution of the SSE has been released for public participation. Whether or not it will be accepted by the KMK/BMZ, however, remains uncertain, as the genuinely decolonial approach already had to face heavy criticism from the administration, analogous to the 2017 example. This was expected by the FAK beforehand, as with nearly every initiative that defies the odds and questions systems that are inherently self-sustaining and fail to emit decolonial forces. It is a realisation that civil disobedience within a democracy might be necessary to promote the agency of change thwarting national approaches to education in a globalised world from a rational and scientific perspective. If the chapter is finally rejected by the KMK/BMZ in the last instance, even after public consultation and revision, this would confirm the general rejection by the administration to decolonise SSE and set off for new shores.

8 CONCLUSION AND OUTLOOK

This article offered a progressive reading of ESD to decolonise SSE. The adoption of the SDGs with the 2030 Agenda, if read progressively, has emitted a new dynamic of how to frame ESD more globally and look beyond only saving the environment to understand sustainable development with a more planetary lens. SDG 4, as argued, offers a basis not only for decolonising schools as institutions by accepting a WSA as a possible remedy but also for critically rethinking SSE from a more global perspective in an environment where system constraints and opposing policy approaches jeopardise more global and educational justice. Amidst institutional attempts to standardise education and make it more comparable in the aftermath of every PISA round, the FAK of the *Orientierungsrahmen* for SSE designed a chapter, along with an innovative teaching example, coming as close as possible to the genuine and revolutionary idea of ESD 2, yet within the restrictions of horizon 1. Criticism that the example does not constitute 'a big hit' at all, however, is justified because, nevertheless, it fits current systems and practices of teaching.

For these reasons, the result of the FAK should not distract from the dilemma that ESD in its mainstreamed version cannot be a guiding principle of school education in and beyond Germany because ideas like PISA that place individualisation and a resource-based pedagogy into the background, work as a diametrical counterforce. Against such a background, it will go a long way not only to achieve SDG 4 in the sense of ensuring quality education in the German school system but also to the full set of SDGs. A WSA, equipping students with knowledge and skills to achieve the ambitious targets of the 2030 Agenda, is unlikely, as the delineated process shows. Without the engagement, agency and stamina of individuals and groups committed from all areas of society to decolonising SSE and education in general, such swift changes are not possible. This includes the readiness of the administration to be emancipated from out-of-date policy approaches, to internally reform and then engage in, encourage, and sponsor horizon 2 activities, and even possibly beyond. Otherwise, ESD's progressive idea of thought is in jeopardy by the constraints of present school systems. In other words, the danger is that school administrators attempt to transform ESD, for establishing the perfect and seamless fit for present practices and thus whitewash the systems. But actually, the reverse is needed: ESD, in line with the original and literal scope of SDG 4, is meant to transform those school systems. Only then can ESD be conclusively implemented, and decolonisation in education can ultimately become more than just a metaphor.

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Subin Nijhawan is a researcher at Goethe University Frankfurt. He is one of the elected and acting chairs of the FAK SSE that the KMK/BMZ group initiated.