Critical Analysis of United Nation's "Framework for the Implementation of Education for Sustainable Development" from the Perspective of Global South

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Abstract: This article analyzes the strengths and weaknesses of United Nation's "Framework for the Implementation of Education for Sustainable Development" in the context of Global South (GS). Its strengths are that the theory of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) system is very scientific and integrated, and the monitoring method is also very quantitative and specific. The weaknesses are that the ESD system designed by UNESCO is not closely connected with the local talent evaluation system of each country, does not pay enough attention to economy, and counts too much on education, which means that it is difficult to attract wide attention of the people in GS areas and cannot really drive people to learn the concept of sustainable development.

Keywords: Education for Sustainable Development, Global South, UNESCO

1. Introduction

In the global context of serious resource exhaustion and environmental pollution, Sustainable Development (SD) has become an increasingly concerned topic. Education, as an important way to achieve SD, has also attracted more and more attention from the academic community. This article focuses on United Nation's "Framework for the Implementation of Education for Sustainable Development", analyzes its strengths and weaknesses, and suggests improvements to its shortcomings.

2. Concept Definition

2.1. Sustainable Development

The concept of Sustainable Development (SD) was first introduced in a report "Our Common Future" which was also referred to as the Brundtland Report by the World Commission on Environment and Development in 1987. According to this report, sustainable development is to "meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (Brundtland, 1987) [1]. Brundtland report discussed environmental issues through the perspective of economic, social and political development (Redclift, 2005)[2]. Sustainable development emerged as a new paradigm of development and has been embraced by many governmental and non-governmental organizations all over the world (Lele, 1991)[3]. SD has three dimensions, usually referred to as the Triple Bottom Line: economy, environment, and the society (Wichaisri and Sopadang, 2018)[4].

Education is recognized as the key approach to promote the concept of SD and impart knowledge or skill of SD. The World Summit on Sustainable Development (2002)[5] emphasized the role and importance of education in attaining socio-economic and environmental goals and hence sustainable development. Ambusaidi and Al Washahi (2016)[6] emphasized the role and importance of education in achieving SD and stated that there is a need to change in the attitude and behaviour of the people in every field of life which is not possible without the active role of education in developing people attitude and behaviour at an individual and societal level. For the achievement of SD in the long-run, a change in the mindset of the public and the transformation of the educational system at all levels is necessary (Cortese, 2003)[7]. Higher Education Institutions can also play a key role in promoting attitude towards SD by integrating the educational process, university operations, and research in collaboration with the external community (Buckler and Creech, 2014)[8]. Education is not the only but one of the most important paths

to attain SD.

2.2. Education for Sustainable Development

Due to the undeniable importance of education in SD, the concept of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) was proposed. The ESD focuses on SD's three dimensions by developing individuals' attitude, knowledge, skills, and abilities through a holistic and integrated approach that helps the individuals make decisions in a sustainable manner and improving quality of life (UNESCO, 2012)[9]. The UN declared 2004-2015 as Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD). The goal of DESD was to promote and integrate the concept of SD in all learning opportunities to shape the attitude and behaviour of individuals and society as a whole. International Implementation Scheme for DESD emphasized the concept of SD should be promoted and integrated into the overall curriculum rather than individual subjects (UNESCO, 2005)[10]. By now ESD has been applied in many different contxt, but ESD in developed countries has been studied more these years, such as ESD in Russia[11], Europe[12]. Recently research of ESD in Global South has also emerged, such as Vietnam[13], Malaysia[14], China[15]. Given GS's importance to global sustainable development, there is an urgent need to study ESD in Global South context.

2.3. Global South

Global South (GS) is usually refers to African countries, Latin America and most of Asia. In addition, GS not only refers to decolonized states, but also to a worldwide "economic division between rich(er) and poor(er) countries."[16] As a relational and geopolitical entity, GS imposes the need for developing situated knowledge consistent with each particular circumstance. GS is mostly developing countries, economically lagging behind the countries of the North, so people's living standards are lower. In some areas, people are even in trouble with survival. This means that they focus more on current life, thus it is more difficult for them to understand the concept of SD, and even more difficult to connect SD with their own lives. Promoting ESD in GS is therefore very different from that in Global North[17].

3. Strength of the Application of UNESCO's Framework

3.1. Strong Theoretical and Methodological Bases

The theory of ESD system is very scientific and complete. UNESCO identified five Key Partners as a key player in implementing ESD, namely actors working on policy, education and training institutions, educators, youth and local authorities. These five partners work in the five Priority Action Areas – advancing policy, transforming learning and training environments, building capacities of educators and trainers, empowering and mobilizing youth, and accelerating sustainable solutions at local level. For each area, UNESCO has developed detailed strategies or guidelines, as well as methods for monitoring the progress of its work. At the same time, UNESCO is fully aware of the importance of non-formal education. UNESCO believes that formal education alone is not enough. It is non-formal education and informal learning, including intergenerational lifelong learning taking place in the community, that provides learners with critical opportunities to relate them to the realities that concern them and to be influenced to take the necessary actions[18][19]. This is a very advanced and comprehensive concept of ESD, UNESCO has done its utmost in terms of theoretical and methodological guidance.

3.2. Complete Database and Toolkits

At the same time, UNESCO has also taken advantage of its large database and rich monitoring experience, providing countries with a quantitative and concrete way to measure sustainable development experience. In terms of the content of the 2019 framework, UNESCO provides countries with three specific and feasible monitoring methods, even with a variety of evaluation toolkits. First, UNESCO will revise the existing survey questionnaire for the monitoring of Target 4.7 in order to measure the scaling-up in the Member States. The second type of monitoring is project-based, mainly focusing on ensuring the production of the planned outputs and the spread of their impact. Thirdly, UNESCO will carry out regular thematic surveys to identify and analyse key issues, trends and developments, which to support the evidence-informed principle underpinning the implementation of the post-GAP position. This is to embed critical insights, with evidence and data, into the most strategic and effective pedagogies to implement ESD for 2030. This thematic monitoring will complement the normative monitoring of

progress being made by the Member States that will be assisted by the survey tool for Target 4.7. It can be seen that UNESCO's monitoring system is not only highly operable, but also very integrated, which can even form a logical closed loop, in which different monitoring outcome can complement and explain each other.

4. Strength of the Application of UNESCO's Framework

4.1. Unsatisfied Localization

The ESD system designed by UNESCO is not closely connected with every country's local talent evaluation system, especially in the circumstances of GS. UN's 2019 implement framework emphasizes policy formulation, content construction and method construction of ESD, designing ESD itself very completely, but ignores how ESD is included in the original talent evaluation system of each country. Take East Asian countries such as China and South Korea as an example, where higher education entrance examinations are the baton of their basic education systems. From elementary school to high school, students in both China and South Korea are preoccupied with their exam[20]. Therefore, it is difficult to attract students' attention to knowledge that does not appear in the content of the exam. In addition, other forms of learning, including community learning[21], is undervalued. Beyond the exam-focused countries like China and South Korea, students in other GS countries do not necessarily have the spare time to worry about future development, as they are more concerned about the labor requirements of the job market. Due to the low level of economic development and the worrying employment situation in GS countries, students are very concerned about how to be employed, thus pay less attention to the next generation and even further future. Moreover, the transition of SD economy and society requires a certain destruction of existing conditions, requiring people to gain the courage to face change. But the conditions that people in GS countries already have are very limited. Many people find it difficult to navigate a rapidly changing world. Employers' requirement for SD talents will be a key driving force for people in GS area to learn new SD concepts and skills. UN should provide different ESD promotion paths and toolkits for different talent evaluation systems in different countries. For example, in countries such as China and South Korea, which focus on examinations, more efforts should be made to incorporate SD content into the content of the examination; In countries where the talent evaluation system is dominated by labor market demand, more efforts should be made to develop the SD industry and guide existing companies to change recruitment requirements. Although ESD is more process-oriented than outcome-oriented, which means emphasizing its inclusion in the evaluation system may seem contrary to its purpose, it is still necessary to establish a close relationship between ESD and their key parts of life in GS areas, namely examination and employment, in order to most effectively promote SD concepts and skills. Once SD is included in talent evaluation system, people will set up goals about SD skills and drive themselves into ESD.

4.2. Underestimation of Economic Section

Moreover, UN's implementation framework does not pay enough attention to the role of economy. While UN's effort of policy advocacy shows its close attention to political factors, there is little emphasis on the economy from UN. This is particularly evident that the five ESD Key Partners selected by UN do not include enterprise, which is an important participant in the economy, whose demand for talents is an important driving force for people in GS region to learn skills and improve themselves. Furthermore, the enterprises themselves can also become ESD providers and provide practical scenarios for ESD. As mentioned above, in the economically backward GS countries, people attach great importance to employment, and the main provider of jobs is enterprises. Therefore, the UN ESD framework should pay more attention to supporting the development of SD-related industries in the GS region to provide more SD-related jobs, attracting people's attention to SD and stimulating people's enthusiasm for ESD by expanding labor demand. Secondly, the UN ESD framework should also guide enterprises to prioritise SD behavior. Thus on the one hand, enterprises themselves can better participate in SD, on the other hand, the value orientation of enterprises can also affect people's attitude and cognition towards SD. In addition, enterprises can also become important subjects in providing ESD. ESD itself emphasizes practicality and the connection with the reality of life, so UN should encourage more enterprises to participate in the supply of ESD. Enterprises can provide ESD learning environments and even practical guidance for ESD teaching, which can more closely connect students' learning and their life or work, upgrading the quality of ESD. For example, steel mills can open part of their factory for students to learn how to reduce and discharge industrial waste correctly, intuitively teaching students

how to improve sustainability in industrial production.

4.3. Overestimation of Educational Effect

Finally, there is a primitive problem that UNESCO might rely too much on education. It is said that ESD is the key to realise SD, which is totally reasonable. But in its 2019 framework, it seems that UNESCO regard ESD as the first and the most important step to reach SD. However, whether education education can take the lead in social change has long been a controversial topic. Pierre Bourdieu's symbolical violence theory[22] suggests that education is just a way of symbolical violence, through which the ruling class indoctrinate students with ideas in the ruling class's favor. Viewing it this way, education may not make any difference unless there are changes in political area. Of course there are also theories like structural functionalism[23] can support the idea that education do have an impact on other aspects of society, but exaggerating education's role to the extent of pioneer in SD is still inadvisable. Instead of counting too much on education, UNESCO should pay more attention to other important aspects of society like politics and economics. UNESCO should contribute to study how education and other aspects of society influence each other and provide solutions to build a ideal politic and economic environment for ESD.

5. Conclusion

The United Nation's "Framework for the Implementation of Education for Sustainable Development" has a very thorough theory of ESD system and a highly instructive monitoring method, while it still has some downsides like poorly connecting to GS country's local talent evaluation system, overlooking the role of economy and counting too much on education. Based on the particularities of GS region, this article offers four suggestions: ①UN should advocate to include SD into the examination content or labor force requirement according to different GS region's culture; ②Guide GS region to develop SD industry; ③Urge enterprises to pay close attention to SD both in their production and in their recruitment; ④Include enterpriseas providers of ESD;⑤Study how to support ESD politically and economically.

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