

# **The Quest for Policy Coherence in Education for Sustainable Development**

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An Analysis of Conceptualisations among  
International Organisations

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Spring 2012

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## **Abstract**

This study aims to analyse the international institutional support behind the concept of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD). Specifically, it investigates if there is coherence in the conceptualisations and policy frameworks on ESD among International Organisations (IOs) and moreover in relation to the United Nations Decade for Education for Sustainable Development. This study uses a qualitative research design, following a text analysis approach, and draws on literature and theory on Sustainable Development, ESD and International Relations. For the latter domain, theory on Network Governance, International Organisations and Policy Coherence is particularly used. The results show that there is a general lack of involvement among IOs in the ESD policy domain. Moreover, a lack of both intra- and inter-organisational coherence in the conceptualisations of ESD is identified among the actors. A common tendency appears to be the focus on aspects of ESD that correspond to the organisation's own agenda. Finally, in the light of the theoretical framework is argued that incoherence could diminish the influence of IOs in international policy processes on ESD, and moreover hollow out the ESD concept, hinder its implementation and ultimately threaten its long-term survival.

**Keywords: Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), Education, Sustainable Development, Policy Coherence, International Organisations**

## **Acknowledgement**

I would first like to thank my supervisor, Andreas Bjurström, for his engagement and valuable guidance throughout this study. I would also like to greatly thank Antoine Nunes, George Georgiadis and Yaroslav Bulych for their encouragement, and Simone Hofner for her outstanding support. Thanks to the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe for giving me the opportunity to pursue an internship at the organisation, and notably for allowing me to gain insights on international political processes on Education for Sustainable Development and Sustainable Development. This confirmed my will to engage further and wholeheartedly in matters regarding the well-being of our planet and its inhabitants. Finally, I would like to thank my family and Neil for offering a loving ground to stand on, and for always believing in me.

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## **List of abbreviations**

DEP	Development Education Program
EE	Environmental Education
EESD	Environmental Education for Sustainable Development
EET	Environmental Education and Training
ESD	Education for Sustainable Development
GE	Green Economy
ILO	International Labour Organisation
IO	International Organisation
MESA	Mainstreaming Environment and Sustainability in African Universities
SD	Sustainable Development
TVET	Technical and Vocational Education and Training
UN	United Nations
UNDES	United Nations Decade for Education for Sustainable Development
UNEP	United Nations Environment Program
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
WB	The World Bank
WBI	The World Bank Institute

## 1. Introduction

Since the apparition of the sustainable development (SD) concept, different efforts have been elaborated to make it internationally mainstreamed. Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) gained momentum with the United Nations' announcement of the Decade for Education for Sustainable Development (UNDESD) between the years 2005-2014. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) was appointed lead agency, thus coordinating the efforts of the various UN agencies, programmes and organisations related to the Decade. According to the UNESCO, the UNDESD is an international political educational effort that will “encourage changes in behaviour that will create a more sustainable future /.../ and a just society for present and future generations” (UNESCO-1, 2012). In this sense, ESD has been introduced as a new sustainability device, aiming to rethink educational programmes and systems that currently uphold unsustainable societies. ESD targets lifelong learning and recognises that the educational needs of people change during their lifetime. Therefore, “ESD is not a particular programme or project, but rather an umbrella for many forms of education that already exist” (UNESCO-2, 2012).

Ultimately, ESD builds on the concept of sustainable development. Sustainable development, however, is known to be lacking a fix definition that is agreed upon by the entire international community (Kates et al., 2006: pp. 438). Indeed, contextual adaptation is considered to be an essential part of the concept, and different actors favour different aspects to it depending on their prioritised agenda. Subsequently, disagreements and controversies have occurred on the international political level regarding what SD should really entail.

For ESD to be successfully implemented, substantial back up from all societal levels will be required since many actors are involved in its working processes (UNESCO Review, 2009: pp. 64; Hopkins & McKeown, 2007: pp. 25). On an institutional level, International Organisations (IOs) have an important role to play. According to the Bonn Declaration, IOs should work to promote ESD's shared vision, demonstrate commitment through unified approaches and coordinated action, as well as implement coherent policy frameworks (Bonn Declaration, 2009). However, based on the aforementioned SD tendency to favor specific sustainability dimensions to suit one's agenda (Jabareen, 2008: pp. 179), it becomes interesting to investigate if this is also the case for ESD, notably in the IO landscape.

## **1.1 Research Question**

This thesis outlines ESD's role on the international political level by addressing the international institutional support behind the concept. More specifically, it investigates how IOs are involved in conceptualising ESD in relation to the United Nations Decade on Education for Sustainable Development. The overall research question is defined as:

- Is there coherence in the conceptualisations and policy frameworks on ESD among International Organisations, notably in relation to the United Nations Decade on Education for Sustainable Development?

To capture this question, the following sub-questions are addressed:

- How are the IOs defining their overall agenda and main priorities?
- How is ESD conceptualised among these actors?
- How are these conceptualisations relating to coherence theory?
- Is there a tendency among actors to favour aspects of ESD that correspond to their overall agenda?

## **1.2 Purpose**

By focusing on these research questions, the thesis combines several purposes. First and foremost, a descriptive purpose is explicit in the overall aim of this thesis to map the conceptualisation and frameworks of ESD among IOs. Secondly, the thesis incorporates an evaluative purpose, defined to be an evaluation of a social process from certain normative criteria (Halvorsen, 1992: pp. 25-26). Recognising the evolvement of ESD (see point 1.5 Background on p. 9), the concept itself can be seen as a social process. The use of “normative criteria”, on its side, corresponds rather to the analytical process of the thesis. More specifically, the understanding of ESD among IOs will be evaluated according to broader UNDESD and UNESCO frameworks on ESD and SD – concepts that are commonly recognised to consist of fundamental normative dimensions.

## **1.3 Delimitations**

To limit the scope and time horizon, ESD will be investigated in relation to the international frameworks set up by the UNDESD and the UNESCO. In this sense, the thesis focuses on the current aspects of ESD rather than on its former features. True is that ESD results from



historical changes, but since the concept aims for future developments a synchronic analysis that treats ESD's role in the contemporary society seems to be of stronger relevance.

Moreover, the thesis will be looking at ESD's role on the international political arena, and therefore treats neither regional policies and guidelines, nor national or local initiatives. It seems important to first untangle question marks on this political level when recognising that international frameworks have a strong impact on national and local processes (Dai, 2007).

Additional delimitations are the choices of IOs, policies and guidelines upon which the analysis is based. Specifically, the thesis is looking at key agents of change among IOs relating to the traditional social, environmental and economic pillars of the SD concept. For the economic pillar, documents produced by the World Bank are analysed. The ecological pillar is covered by investigating the United Nations Environmental Programme and the social pillar by analysing the International Labour Organisation. Moreover, the UNDESD and the UNESCO are treated as a point of reference for the understanding of ESD (see point 2.2.2 on p. 11).

#### **1.4 Relevance**

The relevance of the thesis is three-fold as it brings input to academic and professional domains, as well as to the society per se (Esaiason et al., 2007: pp. 31-32). Even if SD has been substantially acknowledged during the past 30 years, and accordingly, studied, the educational aspect of the concept has not been equally well examined. Previous studies on Education for Sustainable Development make reference mainly to the contents of the curricula, children's learning processes, and the educator's role in teaching SD (Björneloo). In other words, pedagogical research has been dominating the area. Few studies, however, have been done on the role of ESD on the international political arena and on ESD-related policy frameworks among IOs. Therefore, more research related to the academic domain of International Relations is of importance.

Since international policy makers are currently discussing what international ESD program should be implemented post UNDESD (i.e. post 2014), the outcomes of this thesis will also be of interest to professionals. More specifically, the relevance regards the policy frameworks and recommendations that could be implemented for ESD's further effectiveness.

The societal relevance of the thesis is related to education per se. ESD is considered to be important for all citizens of the world notably as education has an impact on people's

lifestyles, living conditions, and potential for self-development (UNESCO Review, 2009; Bonn Declaration, 2009). To identify potential hindrances for the mainstreaming of ESD would therefore be meaningful for the development of people all over the world, and further on – for the development of the planet itself.

## **1.5 Background**

Education for Sustainable Development can be seen as a relatively young project as efforts promoting the concept accelerated first with the United Nations Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. However, the concept was settled at the backdrop of numerous international conferences held on sustainable development and Environmental Education (EE) (Sida, 2010). The United Nations Conference on the Human Environment held in 1972 in Stockholm was the first international political effort that recognised the importance of addressing issues in our common environment. This was followed up by the first Intergovernmental Conference on Environmental Education organised in Tbilisi (Georgia) in 1977, and the 1980 World Conservation Strategy produced by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN, 2004).

To raise awareness for SD and unite countries in working for this purpose together, the UN established the Brundtland Commission, formally known as the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED). In 1987 the WCED published the report “Our Common Future” where SD appeared for the first time as a politicised concept, and was defined as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (UN WCED, 1987). The Brundtland Commission called for an international conference to take place where more concrete initiatives and goals could be outlined, and so the UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) was held in 1992 in Rio de Janeiro (also called “the Earth Summit”). The UNCED outcome document, Agenda 21, further defined SD to consist of three main pillars, notably economic growth, environmental protection and social equality. Moreover, the Agenda 21 recognised education as a key tool for mainstreaming the SD concept, notably through the Chapter 36 titled “Promoting Education, Public Awareness and Training” (Sida, 2010: pp. 11; UNECE, 2004). Governments, international agencies, business and civil society groups were now called upon to incorporate environmental and development notions into all educational programmes, and to make this type of education available to people of all ages (ibid).

In 1997 the “International Conference on Environment and Society: Education and Public Awareness for Sustainability” took place in Thessaloniki (Greece), which stated that education for sustainability was to incorporate a broad vision of SD (UNECE, 2004). During the 2002 World Summit of Sustainable Development in Johannesburg, the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (UNDESD) was proposed and accepted by the UN member countries for the period 2005-2014. Through this international political effort ESD gained its main recognition, and is now considered to be an important component of broader SD strategies and policy making (Sida, 2010: pp. 11).

Moreover, in 2011 the UNESCO member States adopted a decision to have a follow up programme on ESD post 2014 (UNESCO-3, 2012). This was also agreed on by the States present at the Rio+20 Conference held in 2012 (UNCSD, 2012: pp. 44). In this sense, ESD is indeed a concept to stay.

## **2. Methodology**

This chapter presents the research methods that were used to explore the research question and its sub-questions. First, the rationale for using a qualitative study approach to illuminate ESD conceptualisations among IOs will be discussed. Second, a detailed account of the particular qualitative research means and their application in the study are provided. Third, considerations are taken into account on how the study is bounded by choice of samples. Finally, aspects of data validity and limitations of the study are presented.

### **2.1 Rationale for Research Design**

This study uses a qualitative research design, following a text analysis approach. Specifically, it aims to explore how ESD is conceptualised on the international political level and among IOs, to apply theories to clarify this understanding, and to make a contribution to the body of literature on ESD and SD. In order to develop an understanding of ESD conceptualisations, the research methodology needed to be feasible for uncovering the perspectives of different actors involved in the policy processes. Here, qualitative research methods are suitable as they allow for gaining profound insights when searching to understand a specific phenomenon (Sprague, 2005: pp. 119). Moreover, text analyses are particularly acknowledged for looking into sociological questions and problems (Bergström & Boréus, 2005, pp. 33).

## **2.2 Data Collection Procedure**

### **2.2.1 Literature Overview and Theoretical Framework**

For the literature overview and theoretical framework, a mixture of primary and secondary sources was used, such as literature on SD, ESD and the study of International Relations. Searches were initially made on the University's database, Google Scholars and JStore. Research was also made at the libraries in Geneva (Switzerland), Halmstad and Gothenburg (Sweden). These studies helped guiding a further review of related documents, articles and books.

### **2.2.2 Selection of Sample and Units of Analysis**

The research questions informed by the literature review and theoretical framework guided the choice of sample. As discussed further in Chapter 3, a key theme in governance theory is the engagement of multiple actors in governing. Following the institutional orientation of this thesis, research was conducted to find out what IOs are majorly involved in SD and could have a role in conceptualising ESD on an international political level. First, the UNDESD and its leading agency UNESCO were set up as points of references for the overall understanding of ESD. Then, other organisations and agencies of the United Nations were selected to represent the specific case studies. To vary the scope and to facilitate the analytical procedure of investigating the tendency among actors to favour aspects of ESD that correlate to their own agendas, one IO from each of the three traditional SD dimensions was chosen. Consequently, the economic pillar was represented by the World Bank, the ecological dimension by the United Nations Environmental Programme, and the social stand by the International Labour Organisation. In conclusion, this thesis conducts a restricted study as it addresses a macro level of analysis, and carefully examines a few particular cases.

### **2.2.3 Documents for Analysis**

To gain a comprehensive understanding of how the IOs conceptualise ESD, web based information related to ESD, education and SD were first collected for each of the three actors, such as statements and definitions of the concepts. To add more substance to the analytical process, related guidelines, strategies and policy documents were then investigated. These sources of information were used throughout the data analysis.

### **2.3 Data Analysis**

The process of data analysis followed a methodology for analysing qualitative data. Esaiason et al. (2009) highlight the usefulness of decomposing the research question into more precise questions or themes that can be “asked” to the different sources of information (pp. 243). Building on the literature overview and theoretical framework discussed in Chapter 3, the following questions were chosen beforehand to give general guidance to the research:

- How does the IO refer to ESD? What aspects of the concept are highlighted or included in the conceptualisation? If ESD is not referred to – how does the IO envision education particularly in relation to sustainable development?
- How does the IO conceptualise SD? What “pillars” are included? Is the IO taking a more eco-centric or anthropocentric approach to SD?
- What major themes are highlighted in the source of information?

To avoid missing important themes and creating a bias in the analysis, one “open question” was added for unexpected subjects:

- What major themes are evolving throughout the document?

To make sure to capture the first two questions, key words were also set up. For ESD these included: Education for Sustainable Development, education, Environmental Education, culture, values, attitudes, knowledge, reflective, transformative, and Technical and Vocational Education and Training. For the SD concept, key words were such as: sustainable development, sustainability, development, human, nature, natural resources, and technology.

The coding or analytical procedure involved the organisation of gathered material by themes and re-emerging topics. Special acknowledgement was given to variations in the meaning of words, concepts and thought patterns, as well as to emotionally charged words (Esaiason et al, 2009: pp. 250, 253). Materials were hand coded, following an interpretative approach.

### **2.4 Validity**

In order to strengthen the validity of the findings, the thesis presents a clear description of the methodology and research process. Many scholars working with qualitative analysis underline the role of the author as she may have an influence on the outcomes when interpreting the information according to her prior understandings (Halvorsen, 1992; Esaiason et al, 2009;

Bergström & Boréus, 2005; Sprague, 2005). Transparency is thus largely favoured throughout this thesis especially to counter subjective or biased outcomes.

## **2.5 Limitations**

First of all, recognising that ESD is a vague and debated concept, an operational definition on how to measure it will be a matter of interpretation. Moreover, outcomes of the study may have been different had ESD been investigated in relation to another political effort, level of analysis, and choice of sample. In other words, had the study concentrated on a national level of analysis or investigated other IOs, there is a chance that the results would have changed and that other conclusions could have been possible. A last limitation relates to the fact that this is a policy study and not an actor-centered study. Since policy documents are the essential source of information for this thesis, there could be a limited amount of empirical material used, notably regarding the IOs participation in meetings and conferences.

# **3. Literature Overview and Theoretical Framework**

## **3.1 Sustainable Development**

In the following I will outline how sustainable development (SD) has been discussed in various schools of thought. This will be an important component when further investigating ESD conceptualisations.

The Brundtland and Agenda 21 definition of SD incorporating economic security, ecological integrity and social equity as three equally reinforcing pillars is the most common definition of the concept (Sneddon et al., 2006: pp. 256). However, not everyone agrees on this and many scholars have searched to advance their alternative definitions. This has led to some arguing that SD is profoundly contradictory and conflicting, and ultimately a product evolving with the global political dialogue (Kates et al., 2005: pp. 20),

In broad terms, the understanding of SD can be divided in two camps, favoring either anthropocentric or eco-centric views of the relation between nature and human society. The former suggests a centrality of the human race in nature, or that nature is dominated by her. Anna L. Peterson (2006) refers to this as a process of “humanization” of the environment (pp. 388). This approach of “light ecology”, or “weak sustainability” focuses on what facilities

nature can provide for the human society (Kates, 2010: pp. 20; UNESCO Review, 2009: pp. 27). The anthropocentric view has also been elaborated within the Environmental Economics and Ecological Modernisation schools of thought. Ecological Modernisation incorporated Environmental Economics in the attempt to bridge economics and ecology (Sneddon et al., 2006: pp. 261). In this view, sustainability is delimited to an environmental political question thought to be solved by implementing technological solutions and economic means of control. No conflict is seen between ecological and economic growth, but economic growth is rather seen as a prerequisite for human welfare and environmental development (McGreggor Cawley, 2001). Therefore, the challenge of SD is ultimately considered as feasible within the existing social order.

The second stand, represented by the eco-centric point of view refers to nature as an integral part of human society, and stresses that nature has a strong intrinsic value (UNESCO Review, 2009: pp. 27). The Earth has a certain carrying capacity that cannot be stretched, and therefore it is crucial to keep a constant level of natural resource capital. This has also been referred to as a “strong sustainability” approach (Jabareen, 2008: pp. 182). To avoid an ecological collapse, political structures must be fundamentally reformed, and people need to lower their living standard to be able to live in harmony with nature (McGreggor Cawley, 2001, pp. 85).

Another controversy turning around SD is which and how many pillars the concept should entail. Several scholars have called for the integration of additional dimensions to the traditional three-legged definition (Kates et al., 2005: pp. 11). Notably, political, cultural, and individual dimensions are commonly seen contribution to overall SD, as well as a more encompassing value dimension. Robert W. Kates et al. (2006) stress that a “sustainability transition /.../ will take place within the context of broader values and trends /.../” (pp. 427), and define values as “abstract ideals /.../ [that] often evoke emotional reactions [and] define or direct us to goals, frame our attitudes, and provide standards against which the behavior of individuals and societies can be judged” (ibid: pp. 414). Ultimately, the authors argue that SD should be understood as a concept combining values for what to sustain with values for what to develop (ibid: pp. 415).

### **3.2 Education for Sustainable Development**

This section aims to outline how the SD controversy is mirrored in Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), and thus look at how the previous concept can be understood in relation to the former.

Different understandings of ESD are to be found in relation to educational concepts such as Global Learning for Sustainable Development (Anderberg et al., 2009) and Peace Education (Bhagabati, 2006). Although, main attention has been given to the inter-relationship between ESD and Environmental Education (EE) (Tilbury, 1995). Since environmental educators were the first group to incorporate ESD in their curricula, EE has undoubtedly contributed to the development of ESD frameworks (Sida, 2010). However, the UNESCO – backed up by several scholars – argues that ESD was created to build on the lessons of EE and not simply preserve it under another name (UNESCO-5, 2012). Indeed, EE has been defined to concentrate essentially on environmental aspects of SD (Stapp et al., 1969; O'Connor & Pooley, 2000), whilst ESD incorporates a broader vision of SD (Sida, 2010; UNESCO Review, 2009). Therefore, disregard of their different backgrounds and manifestations can lead to misunderstandings in their operationalisation and, ultimately, hinder ESD policy implementation (Sida, 2010; UNESCO Review, 2009: pp. 28).

The United Nations (UN) proclaimed the years 2005-2014 to be the Decade of ESD, and the General Assembly named UNESCO the lead agency for the international political effort. In this sense, the UNESCO approach to conceptualise ESD and its surrounded aspects is dominating the global ESD processes<sup>1</sup>. The UNESCO states that “ESD is not a particular programme or project, but /.../ rather an umbrella for many forms of education that already exist, and new ones that remain to be created” (UNESCO-2, 2012). Consequently, “the broader the interpretation of /.../ particular educations, the more they resemble ESD” (UNESCO-5, 2012).

Regarding ESD's understanding sustainable development, it recognises the evolving nature of the concept (UNESCO-4, 2012). Being more specific, however, the UNESCO defines ESD to deal with “the well-being of all four dimensions of sustainability – environment, society, culture and economy” (ibid). The UNDESD International Implementation Scheme merges these four dimensions into three, although keeping the same content through advocating the equal inclusion of the socio-cultural, environmental, and economic dimensions (Sida, 2010; UNESCO Review, 2009: pp. 6). Moreover, ESD incorporates a value dimension of SD. Indeed, the UNESCO specifies that ESD “is based on the principles and values that underlie sustainable development” (UNESCO-4, 2012). In favouring cultural and value-oriented SD,

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<sup>1</sup> When speaking of “Internationally recognised frameworks on ESD”, “International frameworks on ESD”, and “UNDESD frameworks” throughout the study, these often involve the UNESCO's understanding of the ESD concept.



ESD thus encourages a broader version of the concept than the traditional three-dimensional definition.

ESD is also seen as a tool for developing sustainable attitudes, as well as reflective, analytical and transformative capacities among individuals (Sterling, 2003). Ultimately, it is seen as a tool for individuals to develop attitudes and capacities that will be beneficial also for the sustainable development of the broader society. Indeed, the UNESCO holds that ESD “aims to help people to develop the attitudes, skills, perspectives and knowledge to make informed decisions and act upon them for the benefit of themselves and others, now and in the future” (UNESCO; 2012; UNESCO Review, 2009: p. 26). For this purpose, ESD also promotes pedagogical techniques that favour participatory learning. Specifically, it “calls for lifelong learning and recognizes the fact that the educational needs of people change over their lifetime” (UNESCO-2, 2012). Given its focus on individual or human development, scholars have been arguing that ESD takes an anthropocentric approach to SD, emphasising human’s role in society (Kopnina, 2012).

As regards the content level and issues emerging in the ESD debates, it appears that whole-community and whole-school approaches are achieving major attention. According to LG Hargreaves (2008), a whole school approach to ESD “means that a school will incorporate teaching and learning for sustainable development not only through aspects of the curriculum, but also through sustainable school operations such as integrated governance, stakeholder and community involvement, long-term planning, and sustainability monitoring and evaluation”.

Other issues regarding the content level are the need for ESD engagement within formal, non-formal and informal education settings (UNESCO-4, 2012), as well as the integration of ESD in Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) (Hopkins & McKeown, 2007, pp. 21). TVET is here defined as “a comprehensive term referring to those aspects of the educational process involving, in addition to general education, the study of technologies and related sciences, and the acquisition of practical skills, attitudes, understanding and knowledge relating to occupations in various sectors of economic and social life” (UNESCO TVET, 2005).

### **3.3 Network Governance and International Organisations**

The theoretical framework of governance can be used to illuminate the process by which a variety of actors, and notably International Organisations (IOs), engage in international politics and policy making for ESD.

The literature of governance moves away from the traditional understanding that power is concentrated in governments (Jessop, 1998). Indeed, governance can be seen capturing a new mode of steering (Ansell, 2000; Rhodes, 2007), encompassing “the whole range of institutions and relationships involved in the process of governing” (Pierre & Peter, 2000: pp. 1). Two subcomponents, however, lie at the feet of this explanation. That is, to understand governance power diffusion and networking become central elements. On the one hand, R.A.W. Rhodes’ (2007) concept of “hollowing out the state” has been widely recognised as describing why power diffuses (pp. 1243). More specifically, through examining the governance structures in Great Britain, he shows that the country is hollowed out on three levels: “from above”, leading to power diffusion to international and regional organisations; “from sideways”, resulting in power diffusion to previous state and now privatised entities; and “from below”, i.e. to networks and marketisation forces. Another reason why power diffuses is said to be the growing complexity of issues. Indeed, in order to tackle complex problems, resources of a broad range of actors are required (Agrawal & Lemos, 2007). Therefore, a multitude of actors engages in governing (Himley, 2008), or rather – is empowered in the processes around policy formation and governance in general. On the other hand, the theme “networking” regards the process of governing itself. Actor involvement in governance is understood as happening within and through networks, which include different kinds of actors. In this sense, the path to policy design and implementation can be described as resulting from a negotiating process between all actors of a network (Rhodes, 2007).

The focus on this paper is put on one particular kind of network actor, notably International Organisations. Several scholars have studied the potential means of influence of IOs on the international political arena (Gustavsson & Tallberg, 2010; Andreev; Keohane, 1988). J.B. Baylis & S. Smith (2001) argue that IOs are distinct structures of global politics and communication, and particularly important agents in producing their own policies. Policy-making, in turn, is seen to represent a large influence in governance structures as it sets the rules of the game (UNEP IEA, 2012). The growing influence of IOs in policy making is also acknowledged by social constructivist scholars who identify IOs as potential agents of change

(Andreev). This is seen as a result from their capacity to set their own agendas, rules, norms and values. Recognising that policy-making ultimately has a normative dimension, IOs thus have a potential to create larger societal norms and values, and to have a long-term influence on International Relations and international political outcomes (ibid).

In this sense, IOs are also seen to have a major role to play for international sustainable development processes. James Meadowcroft (2007) points out that the concept of SD difficultly translates into specific policy guidelines since its goals often are conflicted, vague or ambivalent (pp. 300). This is agreed by Duncan A. French (2002) who specifies that SD therefore needs to be appropriately integrated within International Organisations and programmes, and that their disagreements regarding the concept must be managed (French, 2002: pp. 142, 144). In other words, IOs must have a uniform voice in order to fully unfold their potential for shaping and impacting the international SD processes. This idea is also explored by Robert O. Keohane (1988) who claims that successful international cooperation “requires that the actions of separate individuals or organizations /.../ be brought into conformity with one another through a process of policy coordination” (pp. 380).

The importance of coordination and coherence is further developed in the Bonn Declaration, resulting from the UNESCO World Conference on Education for Sustainable Development held in 2009. The Declaration states that IOs have a significant role to play in the mainstreaming and implementation of ESD. However, it also recognises that for these processes to be successful, IOs need to promote ESD’s shared vision, demonstrate commitment through unified approaches and coordinated action, and implement coherent policy frameworks (Bonn Declaration, 2009).

### **3.4 Policy Coherence**

Peter J. May et al. (2006) have been investigating the role of policy coherence in policy making. The authors highlight the fact that increased policy coherence seems to correlate with greater policy stability and more regular policy supplies, and inversely, that policy inconsistency is commonly used for explaining gaps in policy acceptance and implementation (ibid: pp. 381, 398, 400). The authors especially underline the role of policymaking institutions as “important intermediaries in shaping the policy coherence of policy domains because of their role in shaping the interplay of issues and interests” (ibid: pp. 399). James G. March & Johan P. Olson (1984) turn this argument around stating that “coherence is necessary in order to treat institutions as decision makers” (pp. 738). In this sense, policy

coherence and IOs have a closely interlinked relationship. Indeed, policy coherence would be a crucial instrument for IOs sending impulses into the governance network in order impact international political processes, and accordingly – outcomes related to ESD.

According to May et al. (2006) “policies within a given policy area cohere because of consistent issue framing, supportive policy publics or clients, and integrative policy properties” (May et al., 2006: pp. 383). A policy domain is defined to comprise of “a set of political questions that have to be decided together because they are linked by the political processes in an international organization” (Baylis & Smith, 2001). In this particular thesis, the UNEP, WB and ILO will be used as case studies for the policy domain of ESD. First, May et al. (2006) argue that policy areas with greater issue focus are more likely to have stronger policy coherence than those with little focus, covering a variety of issues (pp. 383). Secondly, the authors claim that policy coherence is influenced by the underlying interest group involvement. That is, an effective set of interests will bring attention to a more restricted set of issues, thus imposing greater possibility for coherence (ibid: p. 384). Thirdly, the *relationship* between issues and their interests is seen to affect coherence. May et al. (2006) specify that coherent policies need to “contain integrative properties that link issues and interests” (pp. 384). A policy’s integrative capacity depends on two factors: the commonality in the perception and language of the specific policy, and the policy targeting (ibid: pp. 384, 390). Ultimately, the authors highlight that policy domains with a diversity of issues or interests do not automatically need to be incoherent since they may be linked by a common set of ideas or greater targeting (ibid: pp. 385).

## **4. Results**

This section describes the conceptualisations and policy frameworks on ESD that are produced by the chosen IOs, using a qualitative research design following a text analysis approach. To facilitate the structure, the three actors will be analysed separately.

### **4.1 United Nations Environment Programme**

The UNEP is an IO with a clear-cut devotion to environmental SD matters. Indeed, its overall goal is stated as “provide leadership and encourage partnership in caring for the *environment* by inspiring, informing, and enabling nations and peoples to improve their quality of life without compromising that of future generations” (UNEP, 2012).

#### 4.1.1 UNEP's Strategy during the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development

In relation to the UNDESD, a Strategy was set up for the UNEP Environmental Education and Training programme (EET) – thus targeting the UNEP’s own organisation, as well as other policy-makers and stakeholders especially involved in Environmental Education and Training (UNEP Strategy, 2005).

The UNEP has an outspoken idea of ESD, and takes a positive tone when making reference to the concept. The IO defines the UNESCO’s vision of ESD as “a world where everyone has the opportunity to benefit from quality education and learn the value, behavior and lifestyles required for a sustainable future and positive societal transformation” (UNEP-1, 2012). Moreover, the UNEP recognises that ESD is a concept that “goes far beyond environmental education” to include aspects of “education for poverty alleviation, human rights, gender equality, cultural diversity, international understanding, and many more” (ibid). In general terms, ESD is understood as an international educational initiative concerned with the underlying values and principles resulting from education. It also “encompasses all streams of education, both formal and non-formal, basic education and all the key issues related to education for sustainable human development” (UNEP-1, 2012). Visible in this quote is also a focus on human development, which adds an anthropocentric touch to ESD. This is even more explicit in the statement “[ESD is the] educational process of achieving *human* development /.../ in an inclusive, equitable and secure manner” (ibid). In this sense, UNEP’s overall conceptualisation of ESD is well similar to that of internationally recognised frameworks.

The UNEP’s understanding of SD moves beyond the traditional three-legged definition. Indeed, the Strategy claims to adopt a holistic approach covering “the interrelationship between biophysical, social, cultural, political, and economic dimensions” (UNEP Strategy, 2005). When referring to the UNDESD’s understanding of SD, however, the UNEP confirms it to include “three key areas: society, environment and economy, with culture as an *underlying* principle” (UNEP-1, 2012). Apart from the slight diminishing of the cultural dimension, this understanding of ESD’s underlying SD dimensions can be seen corresponding to the UNDESD’s own vision.

Investigating the UNEP’s deeper approach to sustainable development, there is an indication on the organisation following an anthropocentric school of thought. As already outlined in the overall goal of the actor (stated in the first paragraph below the UNEP title), there is an

explicit focus on “*nations and peoples*” improving “*their* quality of life”. The anthropocentric tendency is also strengthened by the fact that no reference is made on eco-centric standpoints such as nature’s intrinsic value, and the importance of keeping a constant natural resource base (McGreggor Cawley, 2001).

The major themes highlighted in the UNEP’s Strategy are found when analysing its more concrete, operationalised contents. Looking at the Strategy’s overall goal, defined as “achieve greater impact and strengthened delivery of *EET programmes* within the context of ESD”, the issue focus on Environmental Education and Training becomes obvious (UNEP Strategy, 2005: pp. 7). For understanding the more profound meaning of EET the following statement is relevant: “The Environmental Education and Training (EET) activities of the United Nations Environment Programme are founded on its mission of inspiring, informing and enabling nations and peoples to improve their quality of life without compromising that of future generations. This is achieved by promoting innovative, action oriented, and value-based *environmental education for sustainable development* by ensuring that *environmental considerations* are taken into account” (UNEP-2, 2012). This confirms that the environment is achieving the main attention in the IO’s more practical understanding of ESD and SD.

Other outlined aims of the UNEP in relation to the UNDESD include:

- Providing a focal point for advocacy and promotion of *environmental education and training* around the world;
- Providing innovative and responsive professional development and training for people working in the various fields of *environmental education*;
- Supporting the development of high quality *environmental education* learning support materials;
- Establishing, maintaining and strengthening mechanisms for facilitating networking and partnership to advance *environmental education and training* around the world. Special attention should be given to indigenous people and peasant communities;
- Undertaking ongoing research into *environmental education and training* and the promotion of Information and Communication Technology (ICT), and evaluating existing approaches, particularly with respect to the integration of *sustainable development* principles across all educational sectors;
- Establishing awareness raising initiatives to increase peoples understanding the *main role of environment in the context of sustainable development*;

- Ensuring that *environmental information* is easily accessible through mass media and public education initiatives in different mediums and forms around the world;
- Promoting regional action, partnerships and networks;
- Ensuring effective monitoring and evaluation as key components of effective project management (UNEP Strategy, 2005: pp. 8).

These goals clearly show the UNEP's focus on EET and environmental development. Sustainable development per se is rather referred to in the shade of the environmental dimension. Nothing is explicitly mentioned on the social, economic or cultural dimensions that are highlighted in international frameworks relating to ESD. Additionally, no remark is made on the UNEP's own defined political dimension of the SD concept.

The tendencies to focus on EET instead of ESD, and to mention SD in the light of the environment are also confirmed when analysing the "key outcomes" of the Strategy. These are defined as: "strengthened advocacy and promotion of *environmental education*; improved *environmental* policy processes; improved professional development and training programmes; availability of flexible and adaptable learning support material; improved networking and partnerships; ongoing research on *ESD and the use of ICT*; increased awareness on *environmental issues in the context of the DESD*; improved media and public education; [and] a crop of well equipped, action oriented *environmental* advocates in all parts of the globe as *agents for sustainable development*" (UNEP Strategy, 2005: p. 12). Indeed, this demonstrates that ESD is given more of a secondary role.

To conclude, the focus on EET and the environment in the UNEP's more practical conceptualisation and undertakings is becoming over-dimensioned when relating this to overall ESD frameworks. Moreover, this can be seen somewhat contradictory to the IO's overall – broader – conceptualisations of ESD and SD.

#### **4.1.2 Mainstreaming Environment and Sustainability in African Universities (MESA)**

Another UNDESD-related effort (or "flagship programme") set up by the UNEP is the MESA universities partnership – short for Mainstreaming Environment and Sustainability in African Universities. The MESA offers an ESD Innovations Toolkit that is available online. Here, ESD and the UNDESD are defined according to UNESCO frameworks. The MESA sees itself as a proponent of a broader orientation to ESD, and holds that "ESD prepares people of all walks of life to plan for, cope with and find solutions for issues that threaten the

sustainability of our planet” (MESA, Orientation: pp. 8; MESA Introduction: pp. 2). To reorient education towards SD, the MESA also highlights a variety of ESD components recognised in UNDES D frameworks, such as increased participation in education, and the development of reflective, analytical, and transformative capacities among individuals.

Regarding sustainable development, the Toolkit defines the concept to require “the full participation of both men and women in ensuring *economic, cultural, social and ecological vitality*”. In this sense, MESA recognises the four SD dimensions evoked in relation to the UNDES D. The Toolkit also claims to capture “the bigger picture of sustainable development – adding to it purpose, focus, value, vision and the vital intergenerational connection” (UNEP-1, 2012). In yet broader terms, however, SD is not seen as a fix concept but rather a process of continuous problem-solving and learning. This aspect corresponds to the ESD’s recognition of the changing nature of the sustainability concept. Ultimately, the MESA holds that “perhaps the most fitting role for universities is to provide space for debate about the concept of sustainability” (MESA, Introduction: pp. 10-11).

Investigating the MESA’s eco-centric or anthropocentric approach to SD, outcomes are not as straightforward. On the one hand, the eco-centric recognition of a close relationship between human and nature is expressed. Indeed, the Module 1 of the Toolkit’s refers to the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment Report that was produced in 2005, and emphasises “the importance of viewing the world as an *interrelated socio-ecological system* – [that] *we cannot separate nature from society (which includes our cultural, economic and political systems) or society from nature*” (MESA Module 1: pp. 10). Moreover, the eco-centric argument of keeping a constant level of natural resources is evoked. This is shown in the statements “development that is sustainable */.../ protects ecological integrity and ensures sustainable utilisation and management* of Africa’s great wealth and diversity of natural resources”, and “the challenge for sustainable development is to enhance agricultural productivity while *maintaining the natural resource base*” (MESA Module 1: pp. 7; MESA Introduction: pp. 10). On the other hand, this previous quote indicates a vision of continuous productivity for human purposes (agriculture) – a human-centered vision that would rather correspond to anthropocentric debates. Additionally, through defining ESD in relation to internationally recognised frameworks, the MESA incorporates a main focus on human development. Noteworthy is also that the actor neglects the crucial eco-centric argument of nature’s intrinsic value. In this sense, the actor can be categorised with a less strong anthropocentric approach that also incorporates some eco-centric elements.



Analysing the themes highlighted in the MESA's ESD Innovations Toolkit shows that ESD and SD – in their full aspects – are the main issues referred to. The overarching goal of the MESA course is to “create a scientific knowledge base *about Education for Sustainable Development* in Africa, for all students and staff, and to develop action competence and awareness which benefit the lives and careers of the direct programme participants” (MESA Introduction: pp. 4). The following objectives are also defined:

- To enhance the quality and policy relevance *of university education in Africa in the context of sustainable development /.../;*
- To *increase knowledge on ESD* so that the future business managers, scientists and political leaders of the continent will incorporate values and principles of sustainable development in their decision-making;
- To raise awareness and spread a new way of thinking about *environment, development and society* beyond the university boundaries /.../;
- To offer unprecedented opportunities for collaborative projects between universities/civil society/communities and the private sector;
- To contribute to Africa's higher education system, and to strengthen African scholarship and African partnerships for *sustainable development*.

Indeed, this operational definition of objectives takes an encompassing approach to both ESD and SD and therefore also corresponds to the MESA's broader understanding of the concepts.

Furthermore, a theme evolving in MESA guidelines is defined as the “systems perspective” to education. A system perspective recognises “the inter-related nature of individual and collective action within broader social and institutional structures that are internally influential within departments, faculties and within universities as a whole” (MESA Orientation: pp. 7). In other words, the MESA identifies a need of addressing stakeholders both in and outside universities, and therefore targets the university management, teaching staff, students, the private sector, civil society and communities (MESA Introduction: pp. 5). This holistic approach to actor involvement in educational settings corresponds well to that of the “whole school” and “whole institution” approach defined in international frameworks on ESD.

## **4.2 International Labour Organisation**

The International Labour Organisation (ILO) is an IO “devoted to promoting social justice and internationally recognised human and labour rights, pursuing its founding mission that

labour peace is essential to prosperity” (ILO-1, 2012). In this light, the ILO expresses a specific involvement in labour conditions and matters regarding overall social development.

When analysing information, policies or other guidelines produced by the ILO, the one major reference on ESD was found in the report “Skills for Green Jobs: A Global View” (ILO, 2011), targeting mainly international and national policy makers. The report concentrates on skills development – “understood in broad terms to mean *basic education, initial training and lifelong learning*” (ibid: pp. 173). This shows on the relevance of the report and the skills development concept for the IO’s conceptualisation of ESD and overall education.

In the quest for skills development, the ILO calls for a reform of current educational systems. Below the title “General education and teacher training”, the ILO confirms that “new and additional skills are imparted not only through training systems but also as part of general schooling and tertiary education” (ILO, 2011: pp. 134). Here, the UNDESD and ESD come into picture. Indeed, the Report notes that “the UN Decade on Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) has spurred further initiatives in this field and developed a wide resource base assembling good practice examples from all around the world” (ibid: pp. 135). ESD is defined in a general manner “to integrate the values, principles, and practices of sustainable development into all aspects of education and learning” (ibid: pp. 135). The ILO admits that ESD has achieved some progress on international, regional and national levels, but argues that it “needs to work on identifying ways to translate general themes into particular applications responsive to local needs” (ibid: pp. 135). As no further recognition is given to the concept throughout the report, a somewhat critical resonance can be identified in the ILO’s overall conceptualisation of ESD.

When analysing the ILO’s understanding of the sustainable development concept, it shows that the organisation identifies three main pillars. SD is defined as “development activity that meets the needs of present generations without jeopardising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. The concept offers a vision of progress that integrates immediate and longer-term objectives and local and global action, and *regards social, economic and environmental* issues as inseparable and interdependent components of human progress” (ILO, 2011: pp. 172). This vision corresponds well to the Brundtland and Agenda 21 definition of SD but neither includes the fourth cultural dimension, nor the value aspect proposed by the UNDESD.

The previous quote also highlights the ILO's anthropocentric approach to SD, notably through its focus on *human* progress. This tendency becomes even clearer when adding the fact that the IO refers to nature mainly in terms of natural resources and the economic services they provide for human society (ibid: pp. 15). This is particularly seen in the statement “destruction of natural habitats, natural resources and ecosystems leads to decline of income-generating opportunities (ibid: pp. 56).

For what concerns the main themes highlighted in the report, several tendencies are explicit. As mentioned earlier, the report turns around *skills development*. The main argument is that skills development, education and training is a “key factor *both* in stimulating a sustainable development process and in facilitating workers' and enterprises' transition from the informal to the formal economy” (ILO, 2011: pp. 23, 44). More specifically, the ILO holds that “skills development systems /.../ need to play a catalytic role in *future economic growth and resilience* by enabling enterprises and entrepreneurs to adapt technologies, compete in new markets, diversify economies and thus accelerate job growth” (ibid: pp. vi). In this sense, an underlying issue focus can be defined to regard the increase in employment, productivity, and economic growth resulting from skills development and education. This theme, however, can be seen differing from the UNDESSED's vision of education as also having a fundamental role in shaping sustainable attitudes and principles among individuals, ultimately contributing to the sustainable development of the society as a whole.

The emphasis on economic outcomes can be seen in relation to another large theme of the report. Notably, the “Skills for Green Jobs: A Global View” report is a contribution to the Green Economy Initiative that was launched in 2008 by the UNEP (UNEP GE, 2012). A green economy (GE) is not to be considered as a substitute for SD, although a crucial building block. A GE or the greening of the economy has been defined as “the process of reconfiguring businesses and infrastructure to deliver *better returns* on investments of natural, human and economic capital, while at the same time reducing greenhouse gas emissions, extracting and using fewer natural resources, creating less waste and reducing social disparities” (ibid: pp. 172). In other words, innovation and technological progress specifically in economic and ecological domains are seen to be important tools for approaching green economies and overall sustainable processes.

Partly in relation to this can be identified another major theme of the ILO report. Indeed, it expresses a particular need of Environmental Education and Training, and Technical and

Vocational Education and Training in overall skills development. The ILO holds that the “challenge for skills development policy is to integrate *environmental* awareness and the right *technical training* for green jobs into education and training provision” (ILO, 2011: pp. xix). On the one hand, workers in *Environmental Education* are therefore considered to have a crucial role in “disseminating basic knowledge about *environmental* changes and affecting the behaviour of individuals in matters of *environmental* sustainability” (ibid: pp. 12, 123). EET, however, is not formally defined throughout the Report. Instead, different conceptualisations are to be found in the summary of various country studies. In relation to the analysis of Egypt, EE is spoken of in a basic manner “aimed at raising public *awareness of environmental* issues and development of human resources within the field of the *environment*” (ibid: pp. 276). In relation to Brazil, however, the EE definition is taking a broader scope. Indeed, “environmental education is seen as a set of processes which *build social values, knowledge/skills, attitudes and skills aimed at environmental conservation* which are essential to the country’s quality of life and sustainability” (ibid: pp. 228). Even if this latter definition incorporates ESD characteristics such as the development of values, knowledge, and attitudes, it is still essentially aimed at “environmental conservation” and its role for overall SD. In this sense, both of the EE definitions differentiate from the ESD concept which puts equal weight on the environmental, social, cultural, and economic SD dimensions.

On the other hand, the ILO highlights the need of TVET programmes in overall educational settings. Notably, the development of TVET will be “crucial in producing a skilled workforce capable of adopting and maintaining clean technologies, introducing further innovation, and implementing policies and regulations in various green and greening industries” (ibid: pp. 125). In this regard, the ILO aims at developing aspects of TVET or TVET programmes themselves rather than – what is highlighted in relation to the UNDES – the incorporation of ESD into TVET systems.

A last theme highlighted in the report can be referred to as “core skills”. Throughout the report, the following “core skills” were mentioned: strategic and leadership skills; coordination, management and business skills; systems and risk analysis skills; entrepreneurial skills; innovation skills; communication and negotiation skills; environmental awareness and willingness to learn about SD; marketing skills; consulting skills; networking, IT and language skills; and portable or transferable skills (ILO, 2011: pp. 93, 176). Many of these skills correspond to the qualities put forward by ESD frameworks. However, recognising that the term *skills* is used “as an overarching term for the knowledge,

competence and experience *needed to perform a specific task or job*” (ibid: pp. 176-177), the analytical outcomes become different. Indeed, the ultimate goal of the defined core skills now become to reach employability, not to develop deeper individual capacities that can contribute to reach sustainable development.

### **4.3 The World Bank**

According to the World Bank (WB), it is a “vital source of financial and technical assistance” to countries around the world, and aims notably at increasing levels of development and reducing those of poverty (WB-1, 2012). In this sense, the actor can be seen as substantially involved in overall developmental issues, however taking an economic orientation – something confirmed also by the actor’s name “the World *Bank*”.

The major finding in relation to the WB is that it neither refers explicitly to ESD as a concept, nor mentions its possible contribution to the UNDES. Therefore, documents and policies produced by the WB on *education* relating particularly to sustainable development were analysed to examine its correlation to internationally recognised frameworks on ESD.

#### **4.3.1 Development Education Program**

Part of the WB’s organisational structure and part of the World Bank Institute (WBI) – defined as “the learning arm of the World Bank” – is the Development Education Program (DEP). The DEP was set up as a means for students, teachers and larger educational institutions to “explore sustainable development” (WB DEP-6, 2012). More specifically, the DEP “designs tools and resources to help teachers and students, principally at the secondary school level, study -- and think critically about -- the often complex *social, economic, and environmental* issues of sustainable development affecting their countries, their regions, and the world” (WB DEP, 2012).

This statement shows the DEP’s vision of sustainable development to incorporate three pillars. Although, more explicit is the quote “people concerned about sustainable development suggest that meeting the needs of the future depends on how well we balance *social, economic, and environmental* objectives--or needs--when making decisions today” (WB DEP SD, 2012). Referring to the needs of future generations moreover confirms the DEP’s acknowledgement of an intergenerational SD component. However, space is neither given to

cultural aspects of SD nor to the more encompassing value dimension highlighted in the UNDES and UNESCO frameworks on ESD.

When investigating the underlying approach to SD, it becomes clear that the DEP embraces anthropocentric elements. This is explicit in the DEP's definition of natural resources as "materials that occur in nature and are essential or useful *to humans*, such as water, air, land, forests, fish and wildlife, topsoil, and minerals" (WB DEP-3, 2012). In other words, natural resources are not viewed with an intrinsic value but rather as something valuable for mankind. The one seemingly eco-centric aspect is the DEP's indication of the importance of keeping a constant level of natural resources, notably when claiming that a "responsible use of natural resources now will help ensure that there are resources available for sustained industrial growth far into the future" (WB DEP-1, 2012). However, recognising that the reason behind this sustained natural resource stock is to benefit future human generations (in terms of industrial growth), the underlying approach can still be categorised as anthropocentric.

The highlighted themes of the DEP are to be found in the programme's more concrete guidelines, defined as the point of view, main goals, and learning outcomes. Starting off with the role of teachers, however, the DEP briefly defines it as one that should "progress from facilitating comprehension to reinforcing critical thinking skills, and /.../ encourage student participation and group leading" (WB DEP-2, 2012). This statement corresponds well to international frameworks on ESD, notably regarding participatory teaching methods and the development of critical and analytical capabilities among students.

When analysing the specific statements in the "point of view" of the DEP learning modules, there appears a tendency to focus on economic but also environmental SD dimensions. Indeed, such statements include:

- *Economic development* is a means to a better life for people everywhere, especially those living in low- and middle-income countries;
- The relationship between *economic development* and the *environment* is complex, and reliable data are often scarce;
- Rising *economic* activity can both cause *environmental* problems and, with the right policies and institutions, help solve them;
- The increased interdependence among countries that accompanies *economic development* can benefit all countries.

Social development is not clearly outspoken in the “point of view”, but can be understood as incorporated in the more subtle wording “standard of living”. However, this is still referred to much in the light of economic and environmental dimensions, as suggest the following statements:

- All countries, rich and poor, face *environmental* problems that are often closely linked with efforts to reduce poverty and improve people's *standard of living*,
- Greater *economic* strength and higher *standards of living* in all countries contribute to a *healthy, vigorous world economy* (WB DEP-2, 2012).

Some educational aspects appear to be shared with the UNDESD and UNESCO frameworks for ESD when examining the main goals of the DEP. These are outlined as follow:

- To increase students' *knowledge and understanding* of the often complex relationship between sustainable development and the social, economic, and environmental conditions in a country; and
- To strengthen students' *ability to perform statistical calculations, to make and interpret* maps, charts, and tables; to *analyze and synthesize* information to make inferences and generalizations; and to *think critically* when analyzing information, making decisions, and solving problems” (WB DEP-2, 2012).

Indeed, the goals correspond to ESD’s vision of what intellectual capacities should be developed among individuals. A point of difference, however, is that the DEP here neglects education’s role in shaping deeper attitudes and behaviours among participants.

The identified trend to focus on purely intellectual capacities is also seen in the DEP’s expected learning outcomes (WB DEP-2, 2012). As a result of using the learning modules, the DEP specifies that students should be able to: “*recognize* basic areas of social, economic, and environmental concern that affect people in all countries; *compare and contrast* social, economic, and environmental conditions in developing and industrial countries; *demonstrate an understanding* of the relationships between population growth rate, GNP per capita, and access to clean water; *make inferences from statistics* about living conditions, levels of economic development, and issues of sustainable development; [and] *express opinions* about sustainable development and *use statistics* to support them” (ibid). This confirms the fact that

nothing is mentioned on developing sustainable attitudes, mindsets or transformative capacities.

### **4.3.2 The World Bank Group Education Strategy 2020**

Another finding of importance is that ESD neither is mentioned in the WB's Education Strategy set up for the period 2011-2020 (WB, 2011). According to the WB, the Education Strategy was created on the backdrop of the deep economic downturn that has been characterising the world lately. In this regard, the IO puts "new emphasis on addressing such challenges as managing risk, *fostering sustainable development*, and promoting multipolar growth (pp. 24). Sustainable development, however – like ESD – is not given a formal definition throughout the document. Instead, *development* is used as the major reference.

In the Strategy can be identified an anthropocentric approach to development. The WB puts humans at center of development by stating that "the *human* mind makes possible all other development achievements" (WB, 2011: pp. 1), and that countries around the world therefore "need to unleash the potential of the human mind" to increase levels of development (ibid).

The main theme highlighted in the Strategy is education's role in development. The Strategy holds that "the development benefits of education extend well beyond work productivity and growth to include better health, reduced fertility, an enhanced ability to adopt new technologies and/or cope with economic shocks, more civic participation, and even more environmentally friendly behavior" (ibid: pp. 13). In a more subtle way, this quote suggests a vision of development as incorporating economic, social and environmental dimensions. Moving further, education is seen as an important tool for empowering people with capacities to improve their lives, which in the longer run will boost societal welfare as well. Indeed, the WB holds that "by unleashing the power of the human mind, education provides individuals with opportunities to improve their own quality of life and allows them to make meaningful contributions to their communities" (WB Strategy Brochure, 2011; WB, 2011: pp. 25). This aspect attributed to education is well corresponding to the ESD school of thought, fundamentally aiming at developing capacities among individuals that will also benefit overall sustainability. An additional aspect relating to ESD is the acknowledgement of the role of values in education as well as for development. This is confirmed in the IOs statement that education, in "building and harnessing the life and work skills, values, and attitudes of young adults" should be at center of development policy (WB, 2011: pp. 28).



Another major theme highlighted in the WB Strategy is learning. Indeed, the complete name of the Education Strategy is “Learning for All: Investing in People’s Knowledge and Skills to Promote Development” (WB, 2011). According to the WB, the Strategy “focuses on Learning for All for a simple reason: growth, development and poverty reduction depend on the knowledge and skills that people acquire” (WB Strategy Brochure, 2011). In other words, learning is seen as a crucial driver of growth and development. Moreover, the Strategy recognises the fact that people learn throughout life (WB, 2011: pp. 25), which is also an aspect well corresponding to international ESD frameworks. Regarding the specific learning outcomes, the WB states that the knowledge and competencies required for people to live prosperous lives are much broader than reading, writing and arithmetic skills (ibid: pp. 26). Indeed, “social, communication, teamwork, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills are invaluable for people to function well at home, in their communities, and at work /.../ [and] specific technical or vocational skills related to an occupation are also important for success in the labor market” (ibid: pp. 26). In this sense, the broad set of competencies evoked by the WB Education Strategy is well similar to that of the ESD school of thought.

A final aspect highlighted in the WB Strategy is the “system approach” to education. The actor holds that a system approach to education will be fundamental for reaching the goal of Learning for All (WB, 2011: pp. 67). An education system is here defined as “the full range of learning opportunities available in a country, whether they are provided or financed by the public or private sector /.../. It includes formal and non-formal programs, plus the full range of beneficiaries of and stakeholders in these programs—teachers, trainers, administrators, employees, students and their families, and employers. It also includes the rules, policies, and accountability mechanisms that bind an education system together, as well as the resources and financing mechanisms that sustain it” (WB ES, 2011: pp. 5). Linking this to overall ESD understanding, a correlation can be identified with the ESD’s “whole school” or “whole community” approach to education.

## **5. Discussion**

The overall research question of this thesis has been to investigate if there is coherence in the conceptualisation and policy frameworks on ESD among International Organisations, notably in relation to the UNDESD. To answer to this question, the IOs’ conceptualisation of ESD

and SD, and their anthropocentric or eco-centric approaches have been examined, as well as the highlighted and emerging themes of the analysed documents.

To analyse the results more explicitly in relation to the theoretical framework, this discussion builds on May et al.'s (2006) definition of policy coherence, consisting of the three interrelated components interest group involvement, issue focus, and integrative properties. Incorporated in these titles, however, will also be the above-mentioned research questions. To end the discussion, theoretical implications resulting specifically from the discussion on coherence will also be brought to the light.

### **5.1 Interest Group Involvement**

The interest group involvement regards the involvement of International Organisations in the overall ESD policy domain.

Despite the Bonn Declaration's (2009) acknowledgement of IOs needing to demonstrate commitment to ESD, the main part of the analysed actors fails to make considerable reference to the concept. The UNEP is the only organisation that substantially mentions ESD and the UNDESD. Indeed, the UNEP's Strategy during the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005) is a clear contribution to the UNDESD. Likewise, the MESA universities partnership and ESD Innovations Toolkit is defined as a UNEP flagship programme set up in relation to the Decade. The ILO and the WB, however, either make little or no reference to ESD as a school of thought. As regards the ILO, the main reference on ESD is found in one paragraph in the "Skills for Green Jobs: A Global View" report (2011), whilst the WB excludes the concept in all analysed documents.

In sum, a clear lack of involvement appears among IOs in the ESD policy domain (May et al., 2006) resulting from a general lack of published strategies, guidelines and policy frameworks aiming specifically at ESD.

### **5.2 Issue Focus<sup>2</sup>**

ESD itself is a concept focusing on several aspects of education and SD. This internal diversity of issue focus seemingly affects the themes and ESD components highlighted among

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<sup>2</sup> Note that the phrasing "highlighted/emerging themes" and "issue focus" are corresponding to each other and therefore will be used interchangeably throughout the discussion.

the IOs. Noteworthy is the common tendency among actors to focus on educational settings or ESD components that correspond to their own agenda and more general goals. This tendency was described initially in this study, although in relation to the SD debate.

The broad environmental devotion of the UNEP clearly translates into a focus on environmental aspects in the UNEP's Strategy during the UNDESD. In spite of the UNEP's encompassing definition of the ESD and SD concepts, the major themes highlighted in its practical undertakings regard Environmental Education and Training (EET) – or what is referred to as *Environmental Education for Sustainable Development* (EESD). More recognition is also given to the environmental component of SD than to the social, economic and cultural ones that are highlighted by UNDESD frameworks. In this sense, the UNDESD ultimately becomes an opportunity for EET to manifest itself as a school of thought, and for the UNEP to further develop its efforts in environmental sustainable development.

Looking at the UNEP's affiliate MESA, however, the tendency to favour environmental related issues disappears. Instead, the MESA highlights ESD in its full aspects and incorporates this understanding throughout all activities. This is confirmed by the positive correlation between its conceptual understanding of ESD and the more operationalised objectives. This intra-organisational incoherence between the UNEP Strategy for the UNDESD and the UNEP's MESA is also a point worth further problematisation as it shows on the complexity inherited in an organisation. Indeed, thinking of an organisation as *one* actor becomes a sort of simplification as it often incorporates several sub-programmes and sub-actors that potentially accentuate different issues within and outside the overall organisation.

For what regards the ILO, the tendency to focus on issues corresponding to its own interests is again vibrant. Within the skills development concept, the organisation attributes main attention to the development of EET and Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) in education systems, motivated by the fact that they will be important components for emerging professions. In broader terms, the ILO concentrates on the link between education and the job opportunities it generates. Recognising that the ILO's is crucially involved in labour conditions, these focus points become of clear relevance for the IO's overall agenda.

Like the UNEP, the WB shows an internal division of issue focus, although in the conceptualisation of *education*. Both sides, however, correspond in one way or the other to the actor's key issue, defined as economic development. On the one side, the Education Strategy emphasises the role of education and learning in overall *development*. On the other side, the DEP concentrates on the more practical intellectual capacities that are to be developed among students, teachers and educational institutions when learning about sustainable development. Specifically, the DEP shows a focus of *economic* but also environmental aspects of the SD concept. One interesting point to raise, however, is that the focus on economic aspects does not translate into an education programme on *Economic Education for Sustainable Development*. This would have corresponded to the UNEP's Environmental Education for Sustainable Development and the attempt of integrating ESD in the organisation's key agenda.

To sum, International Organisations show signs of incoherence on both inter- and intra-organisational levels in their issue focus. Relating to the UNDESSED frameworks on ESD, the actors generally fail to focus on ESD in its full dimension.

In this sense, neither of the issue focus or interest group involvement proves to be points of coherence for the ESD policy domain. Although, as stated in the theoretical framework presented by May et al. (2006), there is still a possibility for a policy domain to cohere if it possesses integrative capacities (May et al., 2006: pp. 385). This will also be discussed here below.

### **5.3 Integrative Properties**

According to May et al. (200) the integrative properties of a policy domain is divided in two sub-components: coherence in the language and perception of the issue, and coherence in the envisioned target group.

#### **5.3.1 Language and Perception**

The first subcomponent for a policy domain's integrative capacity regards the commonality in language and perception about ESD (May et. al., 2006).

For what concerns the *language*, it is important to recognise the tone undertaken by the IO. In this regard, there appears a clear distinction between the analysed actors. Even if the UNEP concentrates on EET and EESD in more practical terms, it still leaves a positive resonance to

its more encompassing conceptualisation and definition of ESD. This optimism is even more explicit in the MESA programme which focuses on ESD in its full aspect. The ILO, however, ends up with a more critical view on ESD. Despite recognising ESD's progress on some political levels, the IO states that the educational concept needs to develop more concrete initiatives for its further local implementation (ILO, 2011: pp. 135). The WB, on its side, makes no reference to ESD and can therefore neither be categorised as optimistic, critical or negative to the concept.

For understanding the different IOs' *perception* of ESD among IOs, their conceptualisation of sustainable development becomes highly relevant. Indeed, Education for Sustainable Development fundamentally builds on the SD concept.

The UNDES and the UNESCO speaks of SD in terms of social, cultural, ecological and economic development, and moreover adds a value dimension to the concept (UNESCO Review, 2009; Sida, 2010). This definition is shared by the UNEP, however is not fully expressed among the other two IOs. Both the ILO and the WB's DEP define SD to comprise of economic growth, environmental protection and social equality, i.e. the three traditional SD pillars. The WB's Education Strategy holds no formal definition of sustainable development, but recognises the value of adding a value-dimension to overall *development*. In this light, complete consistency neither appears between IOs themselves, nor in relation to international ESD frameworks.

Another aspect influencing the perception of ESD – and ultimately of SD – is the International Organisations' anthropocentric or eco-centric approach. Here, a main commonality appears between the IOs to emphasise anthropocentric elements (Peterson, 2006; Kates, 2010). This is moreover a common denominator with the ESD concept itself, concentrating largely on human development.

Starting with the UNEP, it shows signs on incorporating a human-centered approach notably in the organisation's overall goal, envisioning the improvement in quality of life of "*nations and peoples*" (UNEP, 2012). The ILO, on its side, conceptualises the sustainable development concept mainly in relation to the impact it has on *humans*. This is explicit in the statement "social, economic and environmental issues as inseparable and interdependent components of *human progress*" (ILO, 2011: pp. 172). The same logic can be identified within the WB Education Strategy, although the argument is turned around somewhat differently. Indeed, the

actor holds that “the *human* mind makes possible all other development achievements” (WB, 2011: pp. 1).

Another clear anthropocentric tendency among the IOs regards their view of nature in terms of the natural resources it provides for human benefits (Peterson, 2006; Kates, 2010). Neither of the actors mentions the intrinsic value of nature. On the contrary, the ILO focuses explicitly on the “income-generating opportunities” that ecosystems provide for the society (ILO, 2011, pp. 56). The WB proclaims a “responsible use” of natural resources, but recognising that the reason behind is to benefit future generations in human terms (WB DEP-1, 2012), the underlying approach can still be categorised as anthropocentric.

The one programme incorporating eco-centric elements is the UNEP’s affiliate MESA. Most importantly, the MESA expresses a consciousness about the close interrelationship between human and nature (McGreggor Cawley, 2001). Indeed, the MESA proclaims “the importance of viewing the world as an interrelated socio-ecological system” (MESA Module 1: pp. 10). However, as indicated in the previous paragraph, the crucial eco-centric argument of nature’s intrinsic value is neither mentioned by the MESA. Moreover, through defining ESD in relation to internationally recognised frameworks, the MESA incorporates a main focus on human development. Consequently, the actor can be categorised with a somewhat weaker form of anthropocentrism.

Further investigating the anthropocentric approach identified among the IOs, clear links appear with the Ecological Modernisation school of thought. Notably, there is a common tendency among the IOs to envision continuous growth, and to put trust in innovation and technological development (Sneddon et al., 2006).

The ILO’s focus on growth is explicit both in relation to the skills development and overall green economy processes. On the one hand, the skills development concept incorporates a vision of growth in economic and employability terms. Indeed, the ILO holds that “skills development systems /.../ need to play a catalytic role in *future economic growth* and resilience by enabling enterprises and entrepreneurs to adapt technologies, compete in new markets, diversify economies and thus *accelerate job growth*” (ILO, 2011: pp. vi). Here, it also becomes clear that the organization puts trust in technological adaptation for achieving growth. This is also confirmed when recognising that one of the ILO’s main issue focuses in educational settings is to develop Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET).

On the other side, the ILO's skills development concept adheres to the "green economy" concept. As previously stated, the greening of the economy has been defined as "the process of reconfiguring businesses and infrastructure to deliver *better returns* on investments of natural, human and economic capital, while at the same time reducing greenhouse gas emissions, extracting and using fewer natural resources, creating less waste and reducing social disparities" (ILO, 2011: pp. 172). This clearly shows of growth as envisioned in terms of better returns, and specifically – no conflict is seen between economic and ecological growth.

The same tendency to envision a positive cycle of growth is seen incorporated in the WB. The DEP looks at growth in industrial terms when confirming the importance of ensuring "that there are resources available for *sustained industrial growth* far into the future". Moreover, a trust in continuous economic activity becomes explicit in the statement "*rising economic activity* can both cause environmental problems and, with the right policies and institutions, help solve them" (WB DEP-2, 2012). Regarding the WB's Education Strategy, elements envisioning unceasing economic growth are also present, as well as a vision of interrelated economic growth and sustainable development. The WB holds that new Education Strategy was set up to address "such challenges as managing risk, *fostering sustainable development, and promoting multipolar growth* (WB, 2011: pp. 24), and that the Strategy focuses on the goal Learning for All because "*growth, development and poverty reduction* depend on the knowledge and skills that people acquire" (WB Strategy Brochure).

For what concerns the MESA, it clearly envisions growth in terms of continuous productivity in the agricultural sector. The UNEP Strategy, on the other hand, does not explicitly mention a vision of continuous growth. However, this does not imply a resistance towards it. Indeed, nowhere in the Strategy is mentioned a vision of decreasing or stagnating growth. Therefore, one could rather believe that in this case, it is a matter of the UNEP Strategy having other issue focuses.

### **5.3.2 Target Group**

The second subcomponent for a policy domain's integrative capacity regards the target group (May et al., 2006).

Looking at the UNEP, it has a tendency of split targeting. On the one hand, the UNEP's Strategy during the UNDES is mainly directed to the organisation itself, its EET

programme, and other stakeholders involved in EET processes. On the other hand, the MESA targets African universities, institutions and overall communities. The target group of the ILO consists of international and national policy makers or other stakeholders that would be influential for investing in skills development. The WB, on its side, also shows signs of a divided targeting in its educational undertakings. Indeed, the DEP is mainly seen as a tool for students, teachers and educational institutions to learn about SD, whilst the Education Strategy rather has the same target group as the ILO, although aiming at stakeholders involved in overall educational purposes. Ultimately, these results can be put in relation to the UNDESD as an international political effort aiming to mainstream ESD around the globe and into all educational settings. In this light, no coherence appears in the IOs appointed target groups.

To sum the section on the policy domain's integrative properties, one can see that the major point of commonality regards the *perception* in terms of the anthropocentric approach to ESD and SD. Another common denominator among the IOs is the tendency to adhere to processes of Ecological Modernisation. However, this trend is less clear-cut since even if continuous growth is favoured among the actors, they refer to it differently. Looking further at the *language* and the *target group*, neither of the two shows signs of complete coherence between the IOs themselves or in relation to the UNDESD. Therefore, the policy domain's *overall* integrative properties cannot be defined as coherent.

In broader terms this means that complete inter-organisational and intra-organisational coherence neither exists in relation to the interest group involvement, nor in the issue focus or integrative capacities of the ESD policy domain.

#### **5.4 Theoretical Implications**

Several theoretical implications can also be drawn from the inter-organisational and intra-organisational incoherence identified within the ESD policy domain.

First of all, the identified inter-organisational incoherence in conceptualising ESD confirms the role of IOs as distinct structures of global politics, shaping *their own* policies, agendas, norms and values (Gustavsson & Tallberg, 2010; Andreev; Keohane, 1988). The analysed IOs all show a tendency to focus on different aspects of ESD, generally setting preferences to it that correspond to their own agenda. In this particular study, however, this tendency implies a risk for ESD as a concept as it is becoming acquainted with aspects that differ from



internationally recognised and agreed frameworks. The most common trend seems to be the exclusion of the culture and value dimensions inherited in the ESD and SD concepts. Recognising that a “sustainability transition /.../ will take place within the context of broader values and trends /.../” (Kates et al., 2006: pp. 427), this trend could have crucial impacts on the broader transition towards SD.

The tendency of IOs setting their own preferences to ESD also means that the formal definition is becoming eroded and, accordingly, that the aims of ESD are becoming spread out. As stated in the theoretical framework, concepts with goals that are conflicted, vague or ambivalent difficultly translate into specific policy guidelines (Meadowcroft, 2007: pp. 30). In this sense, a vicious circle could appear from the incoherence in ESD conceptualisations among International Organisations, where the process of implementation becomes impaired.

This matter is also indicated in the Bonn Declaration (2009). For ESD’s successful implementation and mainstreaming processes, it specifically calls for IOs to promote a shared vision of the concept, as well as to show commitment through unified approaches and coherent policy frameworks. In line with this argument, a lack of coherence and united commitment could thus oppositely hinder the implementation and mainstreaming processes of ESD, which ultimately could threaten its long-term survival.

On the other side, as was mentioned in the introduction, ESD – like SD – is a vague and contested concept that involves processes of different actors with different values and priorities. One could therefore question if it would really be possible for the international community to reach a common understanding of the subject, and implement it accordingly. However, taking into account the benefits of coherence, and recognising all the international political efforts that actually take place on SD-related processes, it is still reasonable to argue that a basic common ground is desirable, and maybe even required, for a successful transition towards sustainable development.

As regards the identified intra-organisational incoherence, this has an impact not only for the ESD policy domain as a whole but also for the IOs themselves. As stated in the literature overview and theoretical framework, March & Olson (1984) argues that “coherence is necessary in order to treat institutions as decision makers” (pp. 738). Intra-organisational incoherence could thus diminish the role of the particular IO in international policy processes on ESD as it would receive less recognition among other stakeholders. In other words, the

organisation would encounter difficulties in sending impulses into the governance network in order to impact ESD processes and outcomes.

## **6. Conclusion**

This study shows that there is a lack of involvement among IOs in the ESD policy domain. Generally, there is a lack of published strategies, guidelines and policy frameworks among IOs aiming specifically at ESD, and the main part of the analysed actors also fails to make reference to the concept in its full dimension.

Moreover, the outcomes show that there is a lack of coherence in the conceptualisation of ESD among IOs, notably in the issue focus, language and targeting of the concept. On the one hand, incoherence appears between IOs themselves and in relation to UNDESD frameworks – referred to as inter-organisational incoherence. On the other hand, incoherence appears within organisations – defined as intra-organisational incoherence.

Throughout this study it has also become clear that IOs to a substantial part follow their own agenda or overall priorities when conceptualising ESD or educational settings on a more operationalisational level.

Lastly, this thesis points on the fact that incoherence among IOs in the ESD policy domain implies a risk for the ESD concept itself. Specifically, the concept might be hollowed out which to a certain degree may hinder its effective implementation.

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