

POLICYBRIEF

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Education for Sustainable Development in Colombia: How to get out of the public goods trap?

Alejandro Álvarez-Vanegas, Carlos Cadena-Gaitan, Shyama V. Ramani.

Highlights

1. Education systems, including Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), are not yet adequately equipped to confront global sustainability challenges.
2. Colombia is a country with complex socio-ecological conflicts that can be partially alleviated through Education for Sustainable Development (ESD).
3. Currently, Colombia is at a highly opportune juncture for strengthening sustainability education within its policies. The country has an advantageous constitutional framework, and a new statutory education law is being proposed.
4. Including real-world and community-based pedagogical strategies in Colombian HEIs can promote sustainability competencies for peace and environmental protection.
5. Policies aimed at promoting capacity-building for educators in ESD, fostering collaboration between HEIs and other societal partners such as NGOs, and including ESD as quality criterium, are necessary measures to advance sustainability education in Colombia.

Background

Among the 10 targets for Sustainable Development Goal 4: Quality Education, SDG 4.7 advocates for transferring knowledge, attitudes and skills for sustainable development through Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) by 2030 (UN, 2015). ESD is a framework to promote knowledge, skills, values and behaviours in youth and people for sustainable development (UNESCO, 2020). It calls for a transformation in the content of education and an exploration of diverse pedagogical strategies to develop key competencies for sustainability. Higher education institutions (HEIs) are facing increased pressure to integrate ESD into their curricula and train students to become sustainability champions.

The role of HEIs, particularly universities, in the transformation of Colombia is a timely discussion, as debates around a new statutory education law are taking place in the Colombian Congress. The chance to position ESD as a catalyst for achieving the country's most pressing goals is unparalleled, and there is a diversity of avenues that can contribute to this endeavour.

Colombia presents an interesting case for ESD incorporation. It is rich in terms of its geographical, cultural and biological diversity and is classified by the World Conservation Monitoring Centre as one of the world's megadiverse countries with a population encompassing mestizos (mixed European and Indigenous non-European), Indigenous, and Afro-Colombian cultures (Álvarez et al., 2021; Rodríguez-Zapata & Ruiz-Agudelo, 2021).

Yet, the country grapples with ecological issues regarding soil, water, air pollution and deforestation that put its biodiversity under threat; it is meanwhile one of the most perilous countries

alternatives (Fergusson, 2019). In a context of high inequality (Chancel et al., 2022), the effect of this trap intensifies as the concentration of economic power and the political influence facilitate the private provision, which in turn strengthens the lack of interest in improving the supply and quality of public goods, including education. While most OECD countries have around 30 per cent of their education in the hands of private entities, in Colombia (which is an OECD member), this figure rises to 47 per cent (OECD, 2016).

How can Colombia escape this trap and build a more equitable society?

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for environmentalists (Le Billon & Lujala, 2020). Colombian history has been furthermore marked by conflict and significant inequalities, and it continues to confront significant challenges related to violence, conflict, poverty and inequality, including educational disparities.

Given these challenges, the 2016 peace agreement between the Colombian Government and the FARC-EP militia group marked a turning point in the country's recent development. The ambitious government agenda includes a strategy of "Total Peace" as a state policy. While there is debate about the mechanisms and path forward, this has significant implications for HEIs, as any effort made in education policies must be connected to national reconciliation efforts.

However, as with other public services, education and HEIs in Colombia have fallen into a "public goods trap" (Cárdenas Campo et al., 2021). A public goods trap refers to a systemic context in which individuals resort to private solutions due to the provision of public goods being poor. Consequently, demand for state-provided goods is lowered, leading to a decrease in the state's supply of public goods and an increase in reliance on private

Present Regulation

Article 67 of the Colombian Constitution emphasises the role of education for environmental protection (Corte Constitucional, 2015). HEIs are regulated by Law 30 of 1992. This law

posits that HEIs must promote the preservation of a healthy environment and encourage ecological education and culture (Congreso de la República de Colombia, 1992).

The National Policy for Environmental Education in Colombia, including HEIs, dates to 2003 and seeks to materialise the purpose of environmental protection through education as outlined in Law 30 of 1992. Key priorities in this policy include reinforcing inter-institutional collaboration, integrating environmental dimensions into both formal and non-formal education and providing comprehensive training for educators and promoters. Additionally, recognising cultural diversity, promoting gender perspectives and encouraging citizen participation are emphasised for the inclusivity and relevance of environmental projects. Lastly, in this Policy, ongoing support from the National Environmental System and the National Risks Attention and Prevention System is considered crucial for the prevention and management of environmental risks in communities through education (Torres Carrasco, 2003). The main problem is that these tenets are ignored in practice

Key Policy Changes and Recommendations

Include real-world learning in the curricula

Action- and community-oriented practices such as service-learning, community-based learning and place-based learning are promising routes to reducing inequalities in Colombia and providing students with insights into the realities of their ecosystems. These pedagogical approaches have the potential to cultivate sustainability competencies (Álvarez-Vanegas et al., 2024a), and their incorporation should be included as a criterion for assessing the performance and quality of HEIs. It must become imperative that in every discipline, at least one credit-bearing course incorporates learning experiences that involve meaningful interaction with local communities and the ecological environment, emphasising the intrinsic value of nature and its essential role in promoting human well-being.

Train and incentivise educators to incorporate action-oriented pedagogies

Educators in Colombia are interested in ESD and have advanced in acquiring sustainability knowledge (Álvarez-Vanegas et al., 2024b). Nonetheless, there is a pressing need to offer educators from diverse disciplines capacity-building opportunities focused on implementing action-oriented pedagogical strategies, connecting their specialised knowledge with the challenges faced by the country. Research can be coupled with these teaching activities, engaging marginalised communities as peers in the research process to include their participation and draw on their Indigenous and local knowledge. Furthermore, incentives akin to those for academic publications (such as time allocation for integrating and implementing these pedagogical strategies, as well as recognition in the form of academic incentives or higher positions in academic indexes) should be extended to encourage the enhancement of teaching skills, encompassing the integration of action-oriented pedagogical strategies.

Integrate the Quadro Helix Model

The Quadro Helix Model was developed to address the challenge of rapidly and collaboratively integrating ESD into university curricula,

particularly in systems lacking incentives for such integration (Ramani & Álvarez-Vanegas, 2023). This model proposes the involvement of networks consisting of local government representatives, businesses, NGOs and HEIs. For instance, NGOs with extensive experience collaborating with community leaders can partner with academics who engage students in service-learning programs. Additionally, private companies interested in bolstering their volunteering initiatives can co-finance materials and other resources for these experiences, with their volunteers receiving training alongside students and community members. This collaborative approach fosters innovative solutions and accelerates the integration of ESD into university education.

Summary

This brief argues that integrating real-world pedagogies into Colombia's higher education system can alleviate education inequalities and address pressing social and environmental issues. By immersing learners in real sustainability challenges through a solution-oriented pedagogical approach, both public and private HEIs can contribute to advancing societal goals and promoting the common welfare, thereby helping to escape the public goods trap. This necessitates capacity-building for educators and collaboration with private and social sectors.

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