Review of: Ewa Kurantowicz & António Fragoso (Eds.), *Education for Sustainable Development in the European Local Communities*. Wrocław: DSW University of Lower Silesia Press, 2025. 100 pp.

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The creation of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015 marked the beginning of a collective effort to mitigate critical socio-ecological challenges. A decade later, this volume offers significant insights into how SDGs are interpreted and implemented through higher education institutions' joint actions in four different countries: Italy, Poland, Portugal, and Sweden. The report builds on the findings of a previous volume (Nizińska & Galimberti, 2024), in which researchers from the ESDEUS project mapped university policies in the field of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), contextualizing their analysis within the national policies of the four countries. Following the first volume, this comprehensive report focuses on ESD and the role of universities, other organizations, and stakeholders. The current comparative study addresses three key issues: how actors interpret ESD, the actions they take to implement SDGs, and the collaborative networks created in this effort. It provides a comprehensive guide that showcases actors' perspectives on ESD and the actions they have implemented to promote SDGs, all within the context of local policies. As such, the volume becomes a resource to empower local and European universities, stakeholders, and social actors with tools to effectively address ongoing challenges related to social justice and sustainability issues.

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Preceded by a preface, the book has two main parts, comprising two chapters each. Part 1 summarizes the findings of mainly qualitative research in the four countries, where the researchers recorded the opinions of local stakeholders—including higher education institutions, local governments, NGOs, and social actors—on their understandings of EDS, the actions they take to implement SDGs, and the networks and collaborations they create to promote SDGs and ESD. The research findings are presented as reports from the four countries (Chapter 1), followed by a thorough comparative analysis of the reports (Chapter 2). Adopting a macro-level perspective, the analysis identifies similarities and differences among the countries under investigation regarding stakeholders' views, activities, and practices. The results are contextualized and interpreted within each country's specific historical and institutional characteristics. Part 1 concludes with recommendations for the implementation of ESD drawn from the reports' analysis. Part 2 presents examples from each country (Chapter 1), showcasing collaborative initiatives between higher education institutions and diverse stakeholder groups. The chapter is followed by a comparative analysis of those actions (Chapter 2) and the identification of essential similarities and differences, as well as a concluding part as a reminder of the transformative power of collaboration in the field of ESD.

One of the main strengths of this report lies in its comparative approach, particularly since most studies on ESD in higher education policies focus on national or institution-specific policies (Adjei et al., 2025; Cheeseman et al., 2019). The reports from the four European countries provide a wealth of information on innovative ways to promote SDGs through collaborative actions, while simultaneously investigating their educational aspects and the theoretical background supporting their implementation. Although the agenda for promoting SDGs has been adopted globally, its interpretation, application, and priorities vary significantly depending on the national context, socio-economic and historical conditions, and the policies of each country (Kopnina & Meijers, 2014; Rieckmann, 2018). The comparative analysis of these issues, based on in-depth research conducted in Poland, Italy, Portugal, and Sweden, not only confirms this position, but also reveals how the unique historical and social contexts of each country influence the discourse and practical applications of ESD. The findings contribute to the limited research on ESD, expanding the existing discussion (see: Dlouhá et al., 2017; Tilbury & Mulà, 2009) regarding the principles and values underpinning ESD in local, regional, and international contexts, as well as the barriers encountered in implementing ESD across different countries.

The book takes a holistic and multidimensional approach to exploring ESD in relation to higher education, a perspective proposed by other researchers (Sinakou et al., 2019; Ssossé et al., 2021) as the most suitable for capturing the complexity of the field. Together with the first volume, the report provides a comprehensive and multifaceted analysis of ESD issues by examining policy frameworks, perspectives, and practices. The conclusions are based on empirical research, primarily qualitative, which employs a bottom-up approach, engaging real-world actors—representatives of universities, NGOs, social organizations, and communities—and capturing their lived experiences, often overlooked by policy texts. This approach opened up a space for even the voices of marginalized actors to be heard and for criticism to rise, confronting dominant discourses.

As shown elsewhere (Caldana et al., 2023; Essomba et al., 2022), ESD activities in non-formal and informal settings exhibit a significant positive impact. The study embraces this view by approaching education from a broad perspective. By doing so, the reports presented in the volume include practical examples of ESD implemented not only in formal educational settings, but also in non-formal and informal contexts. As such, the findings support the idea that fostering sustainability skills and competencies is a lifelong learning process that expands across various contexts. The examples of collaborative actions between higher education institutions and other external actors, as demonstrated in the volume, offer innovative ideas and best practices for promoting SDGs in contemporary societies.

There is a substantial amount of criticism regarding the conceptualization and implementation of the SDG agenda, pinpointing its neoliberal, anthropocentric, neo-colonial, and contradictory nature (Adelman, 2018; Arora-Jonsson, 2023; Briant & Carant, 2017; Kopnina, 2020). One limitation of the study is that it is based on the theoretical framework of SDGs and ESD proposed by the UN, while it does not include alternative approaches (e.g., non-Western, indigenous approaches) to sustainability. A possible effort to include more perspectives and frameworks might have provided the study with a more holistic and contextualized approach to how sustainability issues can be managed and implemented globally to effectively address environmental and social challenges.

Such alternative approaches focus on the value of local and indigenous knowledge in combating ecological challenges through a bottom-up approach (Berkes, 2017; Loomis, 2000; Natcher et al., 2025); a more inclusive and active role for

women in sustainable development through a feminist lens (Azcona & Bhatt, 2020; Struckmann, 2018); and the prioritization of the environment over economic growth (Hickel, 2019). Probably the most intense criticism of the conceptualization of sustainability in the context of SDGs argues that its anthropocentric nature is based on a utilitarian ethos toward the ecosphere, with many limitations (Imran et al., 2014). On the other hand, the ecocentric approach promotes an alternative ethos, which emphasizes the responsibilities humans hold toward nature and all natural beings (Gansmo Jakobsen, 2017), including nonhuman animals (Boscardin & Bossert, 2015). The inclusion of these diverse approaches might have supported the presentation of the whole spectrum of ideologies and philosophies surrounding the discussion on sustainability and the role of education, as well as the objections raised to the hegemonic discourses promoted by international organizations. Nonetheless, the bottom-up approach used created the conditions for participants to raise their criticisms toward many aspects of ESD.

Notwithstanding the limitations, the country reports and paradigms presented in the book represent an important step toward bridging the policy-practice gap in the field of ESD. The in-depth work done by researchers from Poland, Sweden, Portugal, and Italy is an example of how abstract policymakers' texts and guidelines are checked on the ground, providing their recontextualization at the local and regional levels (Stevenson, 2006) through hands-on practical applications. Thus, this volume responds to the call for investigating and providing real-world examples of how ESD is taking place and how it serves SDGs (Kopnina & Meijers, 2014).

In conclusion, this is a valuable resource for academics, policymakers, stakeholders, ESD practitioners, and students interested in how higher education institutions promote ESD through networks with external stakeholders and organizations. Additionally, it showcases how real-life ESD actors perceive SDG and ESD ideological frameworks, their practical applications, and the challenges they encounter. With a cross-sector, interdisciplinary approach, this volume provides a wealth of best practices in the implementation of ESD, accompanied by the researchers' solid recommendations addressing higher education institutions, local governments, communities, NGOs, and other institutions on ESD management and implementation. Its comparative nature provides an excellent opportunity for policy exchange, allowing countries to mutually learn from each other and adopt practices that have been successfully implemented elsewhere. Thus, the volume enhances academic knowledge in the field of ESD and offers new directions for how and where efforts to promote SDGs could be directed.

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