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Civic Education for Sustainable Development of UNESCO – Decade 2005–2014

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Abstract

The aim of the research and investigation methodology was based on an expert survey, using questionnaires translated into German, English, French, Spanish and Portuguese languages. The experts, interviewed in this study as part of the international community, represent institutions or organizations, that are involved in educational policy or in university research and teaching contexts with the topics and content as well as the implementation of ESD. The answers of the experts provide a different and wide range of variations in assessments of the implementation of the UN Decade and its characteristics of democratic potential and support. This shows that the potential democratic influences can always be assessed much more positively through sustainable development than that of actual democratic changes, particularly in reference to good governance, to the basic and human rights, to the protection of minorities, to civil society participation and to the separation of powers and the rule of law.

Key words: World Decade of Education for Sustainable Development, Civic Education, UNESCO and United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE)

Introduction

The term sustainability, which is associated with universal ethical intentions and with a complex and multifaced conceptual history in initially ecological contexts, is currently emerging on an expanding scale in the most diverse social contexts and life contexts. The World Decade of Education for Sustainable Development proclaimed by the United Nations from 2005 to 2014, the coordination of which was entrusted to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), requires a profound social science evaluation if the high standards and education policy aims are to be met (Brunold, 2006, 2015). Significantly, it is about nothing less than opening up the same educational opportunities for all people to acquire knowledge, skills and values, behaviors and lifestyles to learn which changes are necessary for a viable future and the shaping of a sustainable society (Ohlmeier, 2013a, 2013b). The conclusion can be drawn that the guiding principles of sustainable development can only be anchored in people's consciousness if democratic structures are permanently established.

By 2030, it is planned that all learners should acquire knowledge and skills in order to be able to contribute to sustainable development. It is therefore necessary that more attention is paid to political education for sustainable development within the framework of the "Sustainable Development Goals" in the coming years.

The experts interviewed confirm that, particularly in the countries of the South, the potential for implementing political education for sustainable development is largely unavailable or not sufficiently used. The question of whether education for sustainable development should be seen more as a task of the state or as an individual responsibility of the citizens is unequivocal. Here the governments have a duty, while the citizenry or civil society cannot adequately perform this task. Consequently, top-down processes are in principle far more important here than bottom-up processes.

The UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development 2005–2014

There is no doubt that Sustainable Development is one of the great challenges of our time and an inclusive concept. It applies to all countries in the world, regardless of which hemisphere, and it will be central to all efforts towards the human shaping of the world through globalization processes. Within the extension of ecological, economic and political sustainability perspectives to society as a whole, it follows that there must bea conclusion that each generation has to solve its own problems without imposing them on the following generations. In this sense as a given state of global balance, the term "sustainable"or the "concept of sustainability" was mentioned for the first time in Donnella and Dennis Meadows' study "The Limits to Growth" in 1972. It was stated there, that

> *we are searching for a model output that represents a world system that is: 1. Sustainable without sudden and uncontrollable collapse; and 2. capable of satisfying the material requirements of all its people (...)* (Meadows et al., 1972, p. 142).

Consequently, the interdependence between environmental protection and economic development became the first requirementby the UN World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED). By the WCED's final Brundtland report in 1987, it was then proclaimed in its well-known definition, that "sustainable development meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." This requirement contains therefore two key concepts:

> *1. The concept of needs, in particular the essential needs of the world's poor, to which overriding priority should be given; and*
> *2. The idea of limitations imposed by the state of technology and social organization on the environment's ability to meet present and future needs* (United Nations, 1987, p. 46).

The objectives for the Decade were to facilitate networking, linkages, exchange and interaction among stakeholders in Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) and foster an increased quality of teaching and learning in ESD. It was also intended to help make progress towards the attainment of the millennium development goals through ESD efforts and provide countries with new opportunities to incorporate ESD into educa-

tional reform efforts. By UNESCO, the so-called key action themes had been integrated into the International Implementation Scheme, which had been selected as follows: Biodiversity, Climate Change Education, Disaster Risk Reduction, Cultural Diversity, Poverty Reduction, Gender Equality, Health Promotion, Sustainable Lifestyles, Peace and Human Security, Water und Sustainable Urbanization (UNESCO, 2006). The fundamental vision of the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development 2005–2014 (DESD) is described as follows:

> *The basic vision of the DESD is a world where everyone has the opportunity to benefit from education and learn the values, behaviour and lifestyles required for a sustainable future and for positive societal transformation* (UNESCO 2006, p. 4).

In addition, the differences and the connections between Environmental Education and Education for Sustainable Development are described as follows:

> *Environmental Education (EE) and Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) are considered by many to be equivalent. In practice, however, there are differences. EE typically focuses on the environmental impact on society of pollution, waste water, emissions from cars, factories, etc., their causes and effects and how to reduce them, as well as on concern for nature and nature protection. ESD more often focuses on the use of natural resources and the importance of their renewability (sustainability). (...) It is also recognized that a good environmental situation will not develop unless people have a decent social and economic situation, and that healthy environment is a prerequisite for a vital economy in the long term. Thus environmental, social and economic aspects are interwoven in ESD. Ethics and justice, as expressed in democratic government and social and global responsibility, become important components in the larger context of ESD (...) Well-balanced means that future generations and also developing countries can supply their needs. Sustainable development focuses on 'here and now' in combination with 'there and then'* (UNECE 2004, pp. 7–8.).

In this context the sector of education was declared as the main important focus-factor by the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE):

> *Education, in addition to being a human right, is a prerequisite for achieving sustainable development and an essential tool for good governance, informed decision making and the promotion of democracy. Education for sustainable development develops and strengthens the capacity of individuals, groups, communities, organizations and countries to make judgements and choices in favour of sustainable development. It can promote a shift in people's mindsets and in so doing enable them to make our world safer, healthier and more prosperous, thereby improving the quality of life. Education for sustainable development can provide critical reflection and greater awareness and empowerment so that new visions and concepts can be explored and new methods and tools developed* (UNECE 2005, p. 1).

In accordance with the International Implementation Scheme (IIS), the UNECE strategy focuses on the wide range of sustainability-relevant content priorities, including:

poverty alleviation, citizenship, peace, ethics, responsibility in local and global contexts, democracy and governance, justice, security, human rights, health, gender equity, cultural diversity, rural and urban development, economy, production and consumption patterns, corporate responsibility, environmental protection, natural resource management and biological and landscape diversity (UNECE 2005, p. 4).

Results of Investigation on the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development 2005–2014

A questionnaire was constructed and distributed by the authors of this article, which asked for six subject areas concerning Civic Education for Sustainable Development (Ohlmeier & Brunold, 2015):

I. Institutions/Organizations as actors
II. Education for sustainable development in the framework of the national educational system
III. Education for sustainable development and democracy
IV. Participation, public opinion and political communication
V. Education for sustainable development, political arenas and options for anchoring civic education
VI. Global aspects and international cooperation.

Comparing the response rates by UNESCO-Regions, the highest rate of questionnaires returned are from Europe and North America (173 returns). The lowest rate of return is seen in Asia (39 returns) followed by 52 questionnaires returned from the Arabic States.

Table 1

Response Rates by UNESCO-Regions

UNESCO-Regions	Return flow questionnaire
Africa	62
Arabic States	52
Asia	39
Europe and North America	173
Latin America and the Caribbean	150
Summary	476

Most of the questionnaires returned from universities, academic departments and institutes, particularly from Latin America and the Caribbean, Europa and North America. UNESCO Commissions sent back four questionnaires, among them two from Europe and North America, one from Asia and one from Latin America and the Caribbean.

Table 2

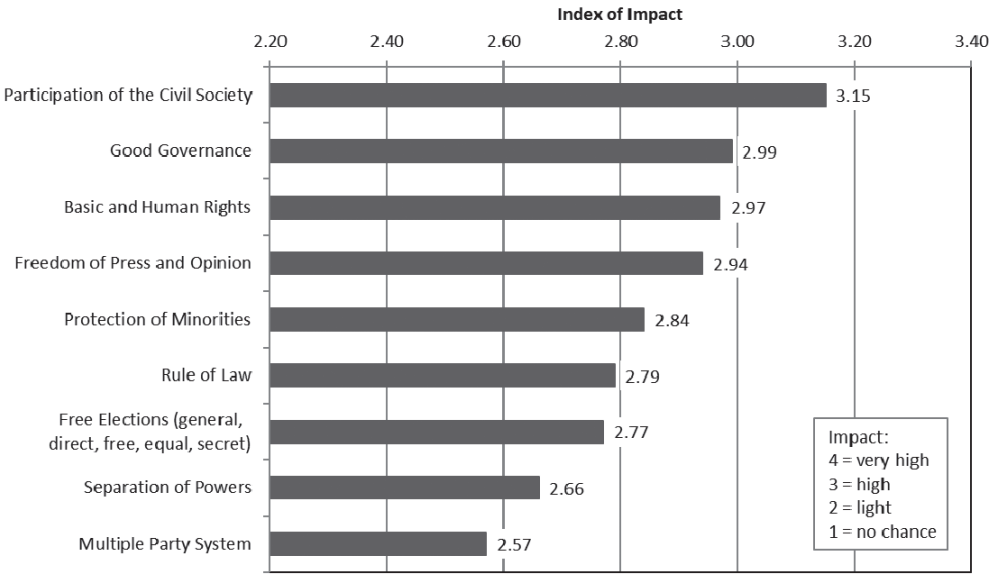
Response Rates by UNESCO-Regions

UNESCO-Regions	Universities Academic Departments and Institutes	Academic Institutions and Ministries in fields of Natural Sciences	Academic Institutions and Ministries in fields of Social Sciences	Academic Institutions and Ministries in fields of Education	UNESCO Commissions
Africa	33	6	8	1	–
Arabic States	31	7	3	2	–
Asia	27	2	2	7	1
Europe and North America	98	18	13	12	2
Latin America and the Caribbean	118	4	7	4	1
Summary	307	37	33	26	4

Looking at the potential impact by Sustainable Development on democratic elements, the highest impact is on participation of the civil society followed by high impacts on good governance, basic and human rights, and freedom of press and opinion. This points to a light impact on the multiple party system and the separation of powers.

Figure 1

Potential Impact on Democratic Elements by Sustainable Development From a Global Perspective



The questionnaire asked for stabilizing factors for the realization of Education for Sustainable Development within 13 given possibilities: security, social justice, good governance, citizen participation, work employment, technological innovation, health care, ecological awareness, economic prosperities, democratic political culture, social pluralism, transparency in public affairs and economic growth. The answers of scientific and educational experts from world regions of the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development to the question: "What could be the most stabilizing factors for the realization of education for sustainable development in your country (max. five answers)?" are illustrated in the following figure (percentage values with regard to the answers per region; on "Total" with regard to the answers to the whole).

Table 3

Stabilizing Factors for the Realization of Education for Sustainable Development

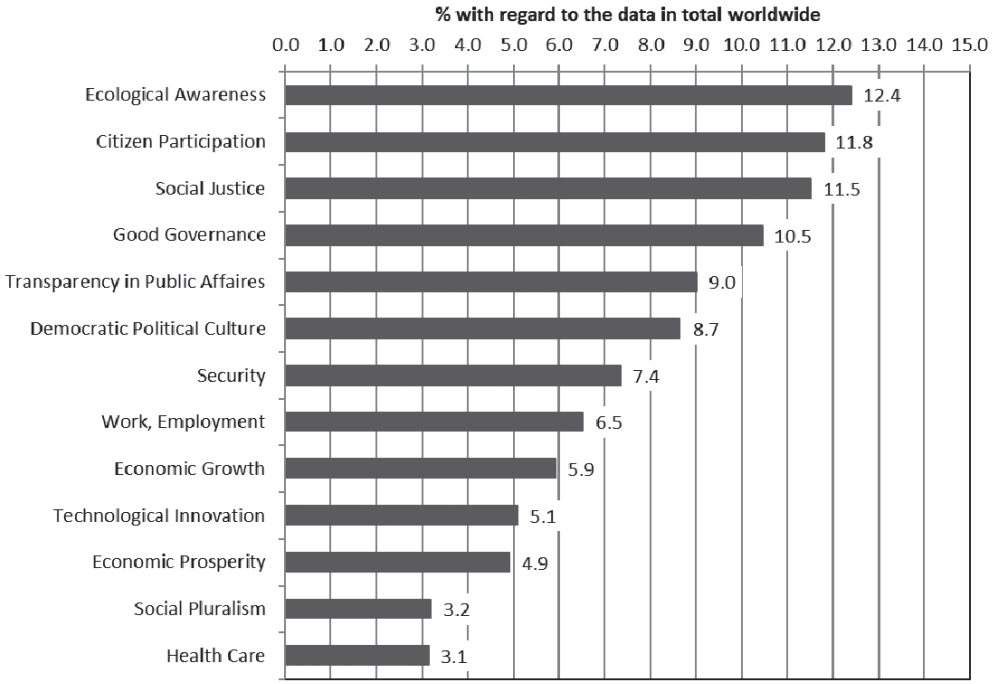
	Security	Social Justice	Good Governance	Citizen Participation	Work Employment	Technological Innovation	Health Care	Ecological Awareness	Economic Prosperity	Democratic Political Culture	Social Pluralism	Transparency in Public Affairs	Economic Growth
Africa	9.9	12.1	14.2	7.4	5.3	4.6	3.2	8.5	6.0	8.5	1.4	11.3	7.4
Arabic States	12.8	12.3	12.8	10.7	6.6	6.2	2.9	7.8	3.7	9.1	1.2	7.0	7.0
Asia and Pacific	6.1	14.0	13.4	9.8	4.3	6.1	4.3	11.0	5.5	6.7	2.4	9.1	7.3
Europe and North America	3.9	9.7	12.0	13.6	5.5	5.1	1.8	14.6	4.5	10.3	4.2	9.1	5.7
Latin America and the Caribbean	8.3	12.3	6.0	12.4	8.5	4.6	4.4	13.5	5.2	7.4	3.7	8.7	4.9
Total	7.4	11.5	10.5	11.8	6.5	5.1	3.1	12.4	4.9	8.7	3.2	9.0	5.9

It becomes apparent that the factors "Ecological Awareness", "Citizen Participation" and "Social Justice" have been chosen most frequently, while only 3.2 % of total have chosen "Social Pluralism"and 3.1 % of total the factor "Health Care" as an intense stabilizing factor. Africa's most selected factor is "Good Governance" (14.2 %) followed by "Social Justice" (12.1 %) and "Transparency in Public Affairs" (11.3 %). In contrast the Arabic States decided to choose "Good Governance" and "Security" with 12.8 % for their possible most stabilizing factors. Asian experts ranked "Social Justice" and "Good Governance" as the most stabilizing factors, while Europe and North America estimated the highest effect to "Ecological Awareness" (14.6 %) and "Citizen Participation" (13.6 %). In accordance with this result, Latin America and the Caribbean found these factors also very important (13.5 % and 12.4 % to this factors).

So it becomes evident that "Ecological Awareness" is the most chosen stabilizing factor for the countries of Europe, North America, Latin America and the Caribbean and Asia while Africa has chosen more governmental or economic factors. "Health Care" and "Social Pluralism" have not been ranked as a stabilizing factor for the realization of Education for Sustainable Development.

Figure 2

Stabilizing Factors for the Realization of Education for Sustainable Development



The questionnaire also asked what exactly was the specific aim of the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development. All UNESCO-Regions agreed, that in this aspect it would be"rather for governmental duties" than "for individual implementations". 70 % of 340 responses in total accepted with this option. The biggest spread is shown in Latin America and the Caribbean: 27.4 % decided for individual implementation, 72.6 % have chosen this aspect as a governmental duty (Figure 3).

To identify the "Meaning of Sustainable Development" in the different countries, it was asked what a sustainable development does mean to the respondent. It was possible to choose five answers in maximum. Table 4 shows the percentage values regarding the answers per region; on "Total" with regard to the answers on the whole.

Figure 3

What do you Think the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development is Aiming for?

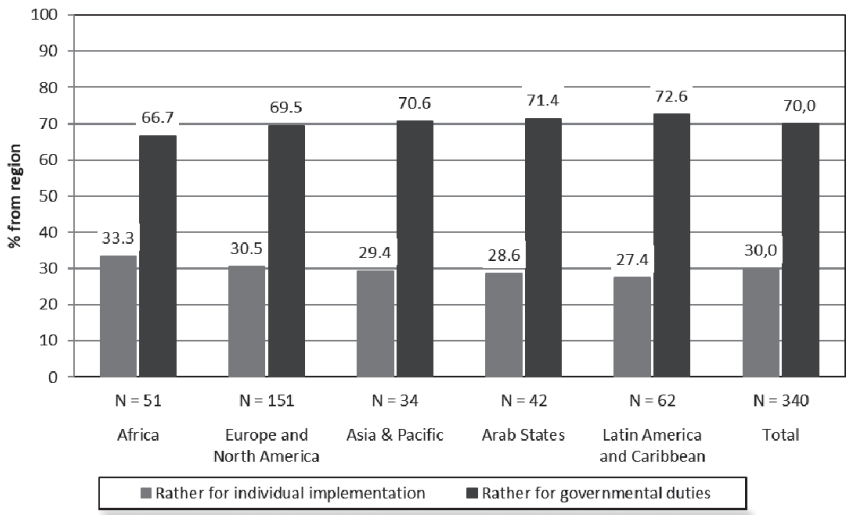


Table 4

The Meaning of a Sustainable Development

	Gender equality	Integration of ethnic minorities	The attempt to live more with nature	A programme for moderation and renunciation	Education for acting responsibly in matters of environment	A programme for peace and safe guarding of creation	The efficient use of resources by means of technological innovations	Generation equality / responsibility to future generations	Participation in decision-making by the population and democratization of the society	The creation of social and economic justice from the global point of view	The networking of economic, social, ecological and global aspects	A fundamental change of the consumers behavior (living good instead of possessing a lot)
Africa	4.2	4.6	8.0	0.8	15.3	8.0	11.1	13.0	6.5	9.2	8.4	11.1
Arab States	5.9	1.7	7.1	1.3	16.8	8.4	13.0	11.3	7.6	10.1	8.8	8.0
Asia and Pacific	3.5	1.8	9.4	0.0	16.5	7.6	11.8	13.5	8.8	9.4	9.4	8.2
Europe and North America	3.9	3.1	5.1	1.4	14.0	4.6	8.1	14.8	10.5	11.5	12.5	10.2
Latin America and the Caribbean	2.0	4.7	4.5	2.5	11.4	6.4	9.1	15.9	5.5	11.8	14.6	11.5
Total	3.5	3.5	5.9	1.6	13.8	6.3	9.6	14.5	7.9	11.0	12.0	10.3

The experts of African countries perceive Sustainable Development as education for acting responsibly in matters of environment (15.3 %), followed by aspects of generation equality and responsibility to future generations (13 %). Additionally, Arabic and Asian scientific and educational experts decided somewhat similarly. Experts in Europe and North America agreed but voted aside from that. Here, lots of answers were given to the networking of economic, social, ecological and global aspects, the creation of social and economic justice from a global point of view and the participation in decision making by the population and democratization of the society. By experts from Latin America and the Caribbean the meaning of Sustainable Development is more influenced by the aspects of generation equality and responsibility to future generations, closely followed by networking aspects.

In summary, for most of the experts, Sustainable Development is connected with generation equality and responsibility to future generations (14.5 % from total), while it seems not to be understood as a program for moderation and renunciation.

To find out which fields of action of Education for Sustainable Development are already implemented, scientific and educational experts have been asked for the fields of action their organizations is addressing.

Table 5

Fields of Action of the Education for Sustainable Development

	Environment education	Global learning	Civic education	Peace education	Democracy education	Economic education	Gender mainstreaming	Education for human rights	Development policy education	Intercultural and anti-racist learning
Africa	24.3	7.3	4.9	7.8	12.1	10.2	11.2	10.7	5.3	6.3
Arabic States	26.7	10.8	10.2	7.4	11.9	9.7	4.5	8.0	5.1	5.7
Asia and Pacific	20.3	9.8	9.8	8.3	6.8	6.8	8.3	7.5	16.5	6.0
Europe and North America	20.5	10.3	12.4	6.3	8.3	9.5	6.9	8.1	9.5	8.1
Latin America and the Caribbean	28.5	10.9	5.6	4.0	11.6	6.7	6.5	8.5	9.8	8.0
Total	24.0	10.1	8.9	6.1	10.0	8.6	7.2	8.5	9.1	7.4

The findings illustrate, that the most given answers to the fields of action is environmental education with a remarkable gap to the second leading field. 24 % said that their projects actually deal with environmental education, while every other field of action was selected by less than 11 %. It is outstanding, that peace education is implemented fewest in projects of Education for Sustainable Development, especially with having the definition of sustainable development stated above in mind (Figure 4).

It was also asked, if the experts would expect a general change in their educational system by the realization of ESD. The range of answers are remarkable: Experts from African countries answered by 87.9 % to the question "Yes, thoroughly or Yes, predominantly". In contrast, European and North American experts had only fixed 58.9 %

to this answer. In total (460 returns), 72.8 % of the experts are expecting a general change in their educational system by realization of ESD, although 27.2 % are rather not or not at all expecting any changes (Figure 5).

Figure 4

Fields of Action of the Education for Sustainable Development

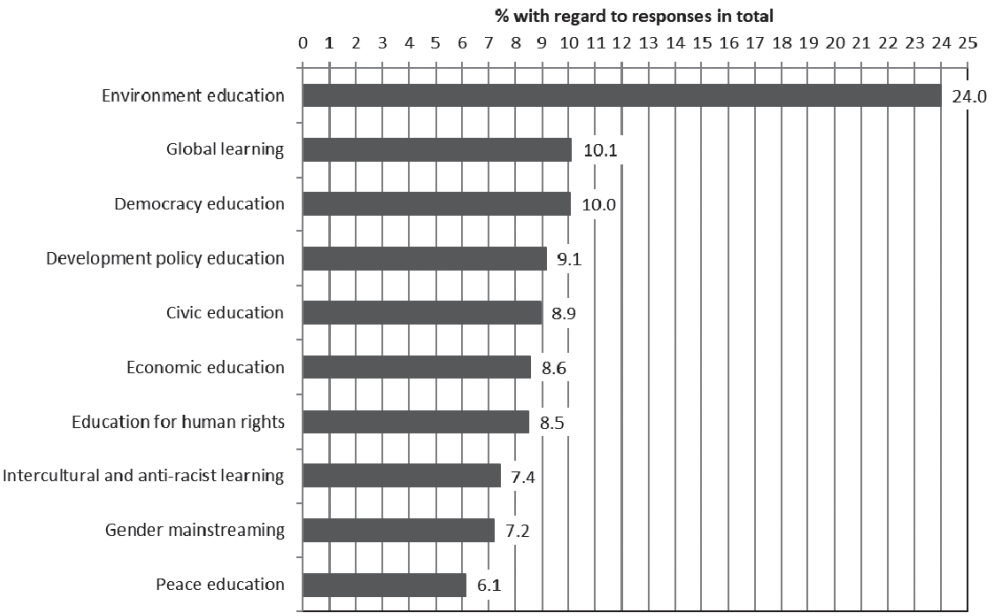
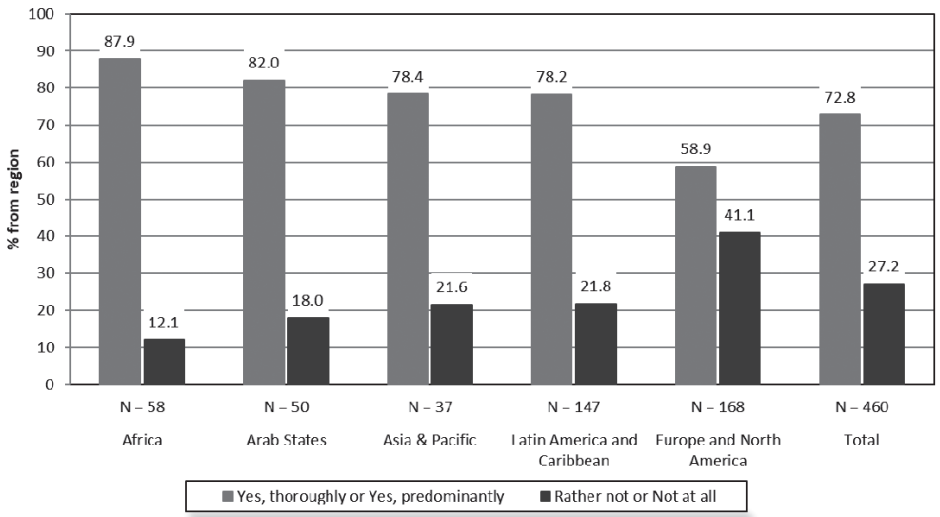


Figure 5

Do you Expect a General Change in the Educational System by the Realization of the Education for Sustainable Development?



Conclusions

The investigation shows, that the goals of the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD) had not been deeply anchored at international and regional level so far.

Specifically, it is a question of a long-term process of structurally embedded strategies into national education systems of all United Nations member countries. Concerning the strategies and measurements, it is therefore necessary to strengthen and give more importance to Civic (Citizenship) Education. According to this understanding, the implementation of concepts and politics of good governance must be seen as a prerequisite for achieving these objectives (Heasly et al., 2021). From this point of view, the UN Decade can be understood as an educational democratization project in the sense of global and good governance. It can therefore be assumed, that the targets of the UN Decade of ESD only can be achieved partially because of the heterogeneous contexts in the different regions worldwide.

In this respect, especially the countries of the African region are far behind, but also in the Arabic world and in the Latin America and Caribbean region, regional strategies and the implementation processes seems to be limited. In contrast, in the Asian and Pacific region as well as in the UNECE region, differentiated and transparent implementation programs were set in motion. The regional characteristics of the implementation process lead to the conclusion that the anchoring of Education for Sustainable Development regionally happens at different speeds.

However, the survey shows the necessity of global learning and education. While the governmental ability of countries is decreasing, many problems have to be regulated by a global civil society, demanding good governance in transnational relations. Civic Education for Sustainable Development implies therefore a change of consciousness, which includes the modification of lifestyles, a change of habits in production and consumption patterns and new planning and decision-making processes. As a conclusion it can be determined, that only processes of education can realize a change of consciousness. This must be seen as a main factor for living in a sustainable world.

With this worldwide expert survey, a snapshot could finally be taken of the implementation processes for the UN Decade on a global and regional level. The summarizing conclusion is therefore, that only the permanent establishment of democratic educational structures that consist of state-supported top-down and civil society-based bottom-up processes can expect, that the principles of sustainable development can give an impulse of change to be anchored in people's consciousness and acting. It is therefore necessary that ESD is considering more dimensions of Civic Education within the framework of follow-up activities by the UN Decade, as we see this within the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

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