‘We must urgently learn to live differently’: the biopolitics of *ESD for 2030*

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**ABSTRACT**

Recently, the new global policy framework for implementing education for sustainable development (ESD) – *ESD for 2030* – was launched officially. Drawing on Foucauldian theory, this paper explores biopolitical elements in *ESD for 2030*. The paper contributes to previous research on ESD policy by employing a biopolitical perspective, and by highlighting problematic aspects of the framework’s will to include and to adapt to different contexts. The analysis brings attention to the framework’s notions of life and to how different human populations are separated. Furthermore, the analysis of the framework demonstrates how notions of transformative pedagogy, community, and the individual, assume the functions of biopolitical techniques. The findings point to a biopolitical differentiation where rich and poor populations are assumed to need different educational interventions, adapted to their socio-economic contexts, in the global educational policy quest for sustainable development. Ultimately, we consider the potential of Foucauldian ethics as an affirmative alternative to the current mode of biopolitical differentiation in global ESD policy.

**Introduction**

A new global framework for implementing education for sustainable development (ESD) has been adopted: *ESD for 2030*. This new framework was officially launched at the UNESCO World Conference on Education for Sustainable Development 17–19 May 2021, one year behind schedule due to the COVID-19 pandemic. *ESD for 2030* intends to build a more just and sustainable world through strengthening ESD and contributing to the achievement of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (UNESCO 2019a). The framework builds on the *United Nations Decade of ESD* (2005–2014) and the *Global Action Programme on ESD* (GAP) (2015–2019) but it is, as indicated by its name, more closely connected to the United Nations 2030 Agenda. The official launch of the framework at the named conference was preceded by the UNESCO General Conference’s approval of a proposed framework text (UNESCO 2019a) which was also acknowledged by the United Nation’s General Assembly in the same year (UN 2019); the launch of a roadmap for implementing the framework (UNESCO 2020a); the production of a
toolbox to facilitate implementation (UNESCO 2021); and a series of preparatory online workshops (UNESCO 2020b).

We conceive of *ESD for 2030* as a global education policy arrangement. Following Lingard and Ozga’s (2007, 2) definition, education policy is understood broadly as a field that deals with ‘all texts, apart from curricula, which seek to frame, constitute and change educational practices’ and that ‘indicates the politics involved in the production and implementation of a policy and in the actual purposes and language of the policy text’ (ibid).

This paper explores biopolitical elements in *ESD for 2030*. This venture, which forms part of a larger research project on the biopolitics of ESD, emerged from a concern with how ESD discourse manages to reconcile a strong cosmopolitan rhetoric with the fact that the world is a grossly unequal place where people lead very different lives. A biopolitical perspective, we argue, brings attention to the way *ESD for 2030* distinguishes between different forms of life, and to how different categories of populations are assumed to be in need of different educational interventions. However, the paper should not be understood as a critique of policy efforts to adapt ESD to different local circumstances per se. Rather, this paper problematises the ways differentiation and inequality are interlaced in *ESD for 2030* and, in stark contrast, considers prospects for a more affirmative differentiation.

Foucauldian theory of biopolitics is employed in the paper (e.g. Foucault 1998, 2008). Biopolitics, according to Foucault, is a form of politics, operating at the level of populations, aiming ‘to ensure, sustain, and multiply life, to put this life in order’ (Foucault 1998, 138). Hence, the target of biopolitical interventions are the lives and lifestyles of populations. In this case, a biopolitical perspective enables an analysis of how different populations are assumed to be addressed differently in a global policy regime like *ESD for 2030*. Elsewhere, we have developed a methodological framework for exploring ESD biopolitically (Hellberg and Knutsson 2018a, 2018b); and this framework has also been used in recent studies of how ESD and biopolitical differentiation interlace in various contexts (Knutsson 2020, 2021; see also Bylund and Knutsson 2020). The present paper builds on these previous works.

Our analysis of *ESD for 2030* is based on a careful biopolitical reading of the following material: the framework text approved by the UNESCO General Conference (UNESCO 2019a), the roadmap for implementation (UNESCO 2020a) and various texts found in the ESD toolbox (UNESCO 2021). These are important documents as they define *ESD for 2030* and provide guidance for implementation.

This paper contributes to two areas of research: firstly, and primarily, to previous literature on environmental education (EE) and ESD policy, and, secondly, to studies of education policy more generally where biopolitical theory is applied.

Scholarly interest in EE/ESD policy is growing. Recently, we have seen a significant number of contributions on various aspects of this topic, including entire special issues (Lysgaard, Reid, and Van Poecck 2016; Payne 2016; Rickinson and McKenzie 2021), edited volumes (Van Poecck, Lysgaard, and Reid 2018), and individual papers (e.g. Aikens and McKenzie 2021; Glackin and King 2020; Reid 2020; Stratford and Wals 2020; Verschueren 2021). Yet, the field is not new as EE/ESD policy has been subject to academic research for over 50 years. In an extensive review of the literature spanning from 1970 to 2013, Aikens, McKenzie, and Vaughter (2016) reveal some relevant issues for the present study. First, Aikens, McKenzie, and Vaughter’s review demonstrates that international policy imperatives are important drivers of national and sub-national EE/ESD policies. Given the purported magnitude of the global policy level, it is relevant to explore the (biopolitical) rationalities mediated by *ESD for 2030*. Second, they reveal a recurring issue in the literature; a tension between the claims to universality of international EE/ESD declarations and the simultaneous exclusion of certain groups of people and devaluation of local knowledge. The present paper, however, is not so much concerned with the exclusion of marginalised groups in *ESD for 2030*, but rather with their dubious inclusion in this enterprise and with the problematic ways in which contextual difference is currently recognized. Third,
Aikens, McKenzie, and Vaughter (2016) contend that there is a need for more critical research of EE/ESD policy. The present paper responds to this call by offering a biopolitical analysis of ESD for 2030. Biopolitical studies of EE/ESD policy are sparse. One exception is Gough’s (2017) analysis of discursive shifts in international EE/ESD declarations and policies. Yet, while Gough demonstrates how ecological reason has become subsumed to technocentric biopolitics, the present paper is more concerned with biopolitical divisions and techniques in the new global policy framework for ESD.

In the broader literature on education policy, biopolitical theory is more prominent with notable contributions by, for example, Ball (2013), Gulson and Webb (2017), Lingard, Martino, and Rezai-Rashti (2013), Peters (2001), Pierce (2013), Simons (2006), and Tikly (2003). These studies have brought attention to rationalities and technologies of biopolitics and neoliberal governmentality and to how these, in various ways, are put to work in education policy. However, how different populations are constructed and separated in relation to the global project of sustainable development have not been problematised in the biopolitical literature on education policy.

The article is organized as follows. The first section provides a brief overview of ESD for 2030. The second section outlines the paper’s analytical approach. The third section, with two sub-sections, offers a biopolitical analysis of ESD for 2030. The final section summarises our findings and concludes by considering prospects for a more affirmative differentiation.

ESD for 2030: an overview

ESD for 2030 is the new UNESCO framework for implementing ESD globally. It is the follow-up to the United Nations Decade of ESD (2005–2014) and the Global Action Programme on ESD (GAP) (2015–2019). As noted in the introduction ESD for 2030 aims to ‘build a more just and sustainable world through strengthening ESD and contributing to the achievement of the 17 SDGs’ (UNESCO 2019a, annex II, 7). The framework also connects to UNESCO’s global priorities on Africa and gender as ESD is put forth as particularly ‘relevant for populations in extreme poverty’ and takes an approach that ‘links gender equality to specific gendered challenges related to each of the SDGs’ (UNESCO 2020a, 20).

Although ESD for 2030 was officially launched only recently, preparations have been going on for some time. The framework was prepared in three steps: a review of the GAP implementation; a series of four brainstorming symposia with experts and different stakeholders; and a consultation process on early drafts with key partners, experts and other UN agencies. The process resulted in the current framework (UNESCO 2019a), which was approved by the 40th UNESCO General Conference (40C resolution 14) and acknowledged by the UN General Assembly at its 74th Session (Resolution 74/223) in 2019. In addition to the framework text, ESD for 2030 includes a roadmap for implementation (UNESCO 2020a) as well as an online toolbox (UNESCO 2021) with resources intended to facilitate implementation among member states and regional and global stakeholders.

ESD for 2030 targets policy makers, institutional leaders, learners, parents, educators, youth, and communities and emphasises three ‘key features’: to mobilize action towards the achievement of the 17 SDGs and raise awareness on how the SDGs connect with individual and collective lives; to focus on ‘big transformation’ with changes in individual action intertwined with reorganisation of societal structures; and to focus on member states’ leadership to mainstream ESD in all ESD-related activities at the country level (UNESCO 2020a, 16–20). To achieve these key features, member states as well as regional and global stakeholders are called upon to develop activities within five priority action areas: (1) Advancing policy; (2) Transforming learning environments; (3) Building capacities of educators; (4) Empowering and mobilizing youth; and (5) Accelerating local level actions (UNESCO 2020a, 25–34).
Hence, the implementation of ESD for 2030 operates through different stakeholders’ initiatives within the prioritised areas with UNESCO’s support. This includes a range of activities and tools (UNESCO 2020a, 39–49), including guidelines for country level support and platforms for collaboration and exchange of ideas. UNESCO further supports the implementation through evidence-based reports and dissemination of knowledge at global meetings and training programs as well as offers material and guidance through the ESD for 2030 toolbox. The progress of the five priority action areas will be monitored and evaluated by UNESCO throughout the implementation period, including one major mid-term evaluation.

In sum, ESD for 2030 constitutes an ambitious policy framework seeking to promote and guide global ESD implementation over the coming decade, in attunement with the United Nations broader agenda for sustainable development, and building on experiences from the Decade and the GAP.

A biopolitical analysis

This article conducts a biopolitical analysis of ESD for 2030. The analysis builds on the methodological framework developed in Hellberg and Knutsson (2018a, 2018b). The framework is informed by Foucauldian theory of biopolitics and governmentality, and focuses on how problems of ‘life’ and ‘populations’ are conceptualised within ESD. This section briefly describes our approach.

Biopolitical and governmentality theory address the questions of how populations and subjects are made governable in contemporary society, particularly societies characterised as neoliberal. In this context, neoliberalism does not refer to a particular ideology but rather a way, or an art, of governing that makes use of different forms of power, including sovereign power (juridical power), disciplinary power (power directed at individual bodies), and biopolitics (power that operates on the level of the population) (Dean 1999; Foucault 1991, 1998, 2003, 2008; Lemke 2011; Peters 2007). One central feature of neoliberal ways of governing is that they make use of the agency of free subjects to achieve its goals (ibid). In order to do so, one technique is responsibilisation, which places responsibility onto individuals and communities rather than on states or other formal governing institutions (Rose 1996; Rose and Miller 2010). The responsibilisation of individuals involves making them active and responsible for their own governing through the different individual choices they make (Rose 1996). Individuals are thus understood as capable of conducting themselves responsibly – and in the context of ESD: in a sustainable way. Examples of responsibilisation processes of individuals are when citizens are expected to make informed choices about schools for their children or health facilities for themselves and their family and, more ESD related, how they are to act and make choices in relation to environmental concerns and their livelihoods. Responsibilisation of communities, in turn, is based on the rationale that while communities are ‘localized, heterogeneous, overlapping and multiple’ (Rose 1996, 333), they are also bound together by an ‘ethical component’. This ethical component means that community members are not only responsible for themselves but that they also have – through emotional bonds and through processes of identification – specific and unique responsibilities and obligations towards the community (Rose 1996, 333–334).

The governing through individual choices and the broader technologies of responsibilization of both individuals and communities take place within the context of the market. It is the market, in tandem with government regulations, that establishes the range of possibilities open to these actors. Therefore, a governmentality/biopolitics analysis emphasizes that the actions of both individuals and communities should be understood as both produced and limited by capitalist economic relations, corporate power and governance structures.

The methodological framework referred to above, which is also used to analyse ESD for 2030, addresses the issue of responsibilisation within the wider framework of what we call neoliberal
biopolitics. The concept of neoliberal biopolitics have, in different ways, been employed by several scholars in the context of sustainable development (e.g. Fletcher et al. 2019; Gutiérrez-Zamora 2021; Knutsson 2016; Reid 2013). In this particular paper, the concept refers to a form of governance, operating at the aggregate level of populations, that uses the agency of ‘free’ subjects to produce ‘responsible’ action, and distinguishes between different types of life (Hellberg and Knutsson 2018a, 2018b).

From the perspective of this framework, such an endeavor involves exploring how different populations are constructed as appropriate for particular forms of ESD. Furthermore, it involves studying the different biopolitical techniques that are put forward as responses to sustainability challenges through education. A third aspect is also suggested in the framework; that attention should be paid to the biopolitical effects of ESD interventions in different locations. This third aspect is indeed an important component of understanding the biopolitics at play in ESD. However, it will not be considered here as the present article is concerned with the production of meaning around the notion of population(s) and the techniques proposed for educational intervention within the frames of global ESD policy. Notably, the analysis of ESD for 2030 is not to be considered as representative for the workings of ESD in its entirety, especially since it focuses solely on written policy texts and not on outcomes of particular ESD interventions. This research, however, provides important insights into the dominant rationalities of contemporary global ESD policy.

The key documents that make up ESD for 2030, as referred to above, are investigated through the lens of some of the core components and themes of biopolitical theory. Analytical questions posed to the texts are as follows: How is life conceptualised in the ESD for 2030 documents? How are different populations categorised and distinguished between? What kind of assumptions and rationalities underpin such constructions and distinctions? How do the documents describe how individuals, both in relation to and in contrast with each other, should be targeted? How does this relate to the idea of population(s) and what do such constructions tell us about how the global biopolitical community is envisioned? And further, in terms of techniques: what instruments are proposed as ways to govern individuals and populations and how do technologies of responsibilisation relate to larger (bio)political imperatives and distinctions? How do technologies of responsibilisation play a part in constructing particular ideas of the good and sustainable society, the good life, and the good citizen/subject?

The biopolitics of ESD for 2030

This section presents findings that emerged from our analysis of the biopolitical rationalities of ESD for 2030. The first sub-section focuses on notions of life and how different human populations are distinguished and separated in the framework. This analysis is also related to the problem of inequality. The second sub-section brings attention to how notions of transformative pedagogy, the individual, and the community, assume the function of biopolitical techniques in ESD for 2030.

Life at stake and divided populations

The biopolitical elements of ESD for 2030 are straightforward. In the very beginning of the roadmap, readers are informed that:

For our very own survival, we must learn to live together on this planet. We must change the way we think and act as individuals and societies. So, in turn, education must change to create a peaceful and sustainable world for the survival and prosperity of current and future generations. (UNESCO 2020a, iii)
What is at stake, allegedly, is nothing less than our own survival, and in order to secure our existence, educational interventions supposedly play a pivotal role. This message, which is repeated about a dozen times throughout the document, illustrates how the securing and sustaining of life is at the centre of this global policy framework, something which clearly resonates with Foucault’s conception of biopolitics (Foucault 1998). But who is this indefinite ‘we’ whose life is to be sustained? Answering this seemingly simple question is somewhat complicated; however, biopolitical theory can help shed some light on the various lines drawn between different forms of life in ESD for 2030.

It is, firstly, quite clear that the main concern of ESD for 2030 centres around the sustaining of the human species. Throughout the framework human beings stand out as a privileged species and referent object in several ways. Often, this privilege is spelled out explicitly in formulations about how ESD should contribute to the ‘survival and prosperity of humanity’ (UNESCO 2020a, 12 and 47) and about various learning contents’ supposed ‘contribution to humanity’ (UNESCO 2019a, Annex II, 8). Yet, the privileged position of the human species can also be traced indirectly by looking at the prevalence of certain words. If we use the search function and type ‘human’ in the roadmap and framework documents we get 26 hits as compared to one for ‘animal’ and zero for ‘plant’. Hence, the framework appears to mediate a hierarchy of life in terms of its significance.

The human-centred rationality is not altogether surprising as, in the words of Stanescu, ‘the line drawn between the human animals and other animals is one of, if not the most, important division in the biopolitical terrain’ (Stanescu 2013, 135; see also Hellberg 2018). Previous research on ESD policy has indeed also pointed to an anthropocentric bias (e.g. Kopnina 2012, 2014) and in research on EE/ESD more broadly posthuman and new materialist critiques of anthropocentrism are also increasingly common. Still, it is worth pondering why non-human living beings are given so little attention in a framework concerned with sustaining life on the planet? If nothing else, humans depend on other organisms to survive. In the same vein, it is noteworthy that humans are sometimes presented as separate from rather than a part of nature. For example, readers are informed that the ‘failure to conserve eco-systems will have catastrophic effects on people as well as nature’ (UNESCO 2020a, iii, our emphasis). Such formulations seem to perpetuate notions of humanity’s split from the natural world and of our biopolitical primacy. How to overcome this split and learn to become with nature remains, indeed, a formidable, but critical, educational challenge as suggested by posthuman and new materialist scholars (e.g. Common Worlds Research Collective 2020).

Who, then, is humanity? The framework’s outreach efforts are clearly global and ESD is depicted as an inclusive project of concern ‘to learners in all walks of life across the world’ (UNESCO 2020a, 22). ESD for 2030 often also refers to humanity as a collective subject. For example, readers are informed that the environmental sustainability crisis is a result of ‘the collective activities of human beings’ and that ‘humankind is directly responsible’ for the unprecedented and dramatic changes that are taking place (UNESCO 2020a, 6). Hence, responsibility for the environmental emergency is located at the level of our species. Now, if it is empirically accurate (or, for that matter, conducive to change) to hold humanity collectively responsible for current environmental problems can of course be, and has indeed been, debated. According to Malm and Hornborg, for example, the evidence is clear that wealthy segments of the world’s population have a vast global impact in terms of emissions whereas the poorest segments have a close to zero impact. This points to a major crack in the ‘Anthropocene narrative’ about our entire species dominating the biosphere (Malm and Hornborg 2014). Similar critiques have also been offered in the context of education (e.g. Gough 2021).

However, ESD for 2030 sometimes deviates from the idea of humanity as a collective being and instead speaks of different categories of human populations. For example, readers are informed that:
ESD approaches that may work for populations living in more fortunate situations may not necessarily be effective for populations in need. ESD approaches need to be contextualized to the realities of target populations. (UNESCO 2019a, annex II, 5)

The document continues:

the approach for populations in extreme poverty may require more attention to the fundamentals. [...] Providing people with basic and other relevant life-skills, or skills to ensure their livelihood in order to confront and overcome extreme poverty, is a priority. (UNESCO 2019a, annex II, 6)

These passages illustrate how lines are drawn within humanity and how different populations are categorized and constructed as in need of different types of educational interventions. Readers are informed that ESD, according to the framework, applies in different ways to people depending on whether they are poor or rich. Such distinctions between different human populations, supposedly in need of different types of ESD interventions adapted to their living conditions, can be seen as biopolitical divisions (cf. Hellberg 2018).

The quotation in the title of this paper, which is from the roadmap document (UNESCO 2020a, 6), subtly captures ESD for 2030s ambiguous take on humanity. The word ‘differently’ is curious. It can, and that is no doubt the official intention of the original formulation, mean ‘otherwise’, that is to say that humanity collectively has to change its current behaviour and learn to live in better harmony with nature. However, there is an unintentional twist as the word can also mean ‘dissimilarly’, implying an internal division of humanity where different categories of people must (learn to) live their lives in different ways. The abovementioned passages certainly point in such a direction and, in our argument, they tell us something significant about how the global ESD community is envisioned; jointly responsible and engaged, and yet biopolitically divided in terms of roles, responsibilities and lifestyles in the worldwide educational quest for sustainable development. The framework’s proposition that ESD needs to be adapted to the different living conditions of different populations further brings us to the issue of inequality. In UN discourse more broadly, inequality is typically portrayed as a key challenge of our time and it is emphasized that ‘reducing inequalities and ensuring no one is left behind are integral to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals’ (UN 2021).

One prominent theme in ESD for 2030 is gender equality. The framework repeatedly acknowledges that sustainable development has gendered dimensions and also stresses that women are more vulnerable in relation to the effects of climate change and disproportionately affected by environmental challenges (e.g. UNESCO 2020a, 20 and 57). ‘Women’ is thus a category that is singled out as in need of particular consideration and as a group that can be empowered through ESD activities. However, compared to gender equality there are few references to the problem of income inequality in ESD for 2030. The roadmap briefly states that inequality is ‘intertwined with the cause and impact’ of environmental problems as well as social and economic challenges (UNESCO 2020a, 6). Later, in a model presenting how ESD can contribute to all the SDGs respectively (p. 17), readers are briefly informed that ESD should ‘address the unequal distribution of wealth’ (SDG1) and ‘tackle inequalities in all forms, with particular emphasis on environmental justice’ (SDG10). Hence, despite acknowledging that inequality is part of the cause of global environmental problems and that poverty emanates from unequal distribution of wealth, the issue of inequality is largely absent in the documents and little guidance is offered in terms of how ESD is supposed to address inequality. Some guidance, however, is offered in the Toolbox for ESD for 2030 which, as indicated by its name, can essentially be seen as a set of governing instruments for implementing the framework into practice. In the toolbox, under the heading Sustainable development goals – Resources for educators and
SDG10, inequality is related to discrimination of disadvantaged and vulnerable groups of people and education is described as a tool:

to empower and promote the social, economic and political inclusion of all, irrespective of age, sex, disability, race, ethnicity, origin, religion or economic or other status. (UNESCO 2021)

This narrow conception of inequality is also evident when examples are given on how SDG10 could be concretized in classroom activities. The examples are limited to issues of migration (in primary school) and human rights (in upper secondary school). Considerations of global inequality, or how inequality and environmental problems interlace, are not included. The suggestions on how inequality should be unpacked in teaching are therefore far from the roadmap statements referred to above. The suggested classroom activities reformulate the problem of inequality from a matter related to causes and effects of environmental problems to a matter of discrimination of different groups. Discrimination due to gender, disability and ethnic origin are certainly important issues but in relation to environmental justice, such perspectives are likely to be limiting if their intersectionality and their interplay with wider economic global inequalities and power-relations are not considered. Our point is that a conceptualization of equality as freedom from discrimination runs risk of overlooking the issue of redistribution of physical resources and of environmental impact.

ESD for 2030 thus seems to have an ambivalent relationship with inequality. The framework recognises, albeit briefly, that inequality has detrimental effects on the environment and emphasises the importance of environmental justice. Yet, such perspectives are not made visible in the suggestions for classroom activities as equality is conceptualised as freedom from discrimination. More importantly, however, ESD for 2030 does not seem to problematise differences in rich and poor populations’ lifestyles in terms of inequality, nor does it consider the different ‘realities of target populations’ (UNESCO 2019a, annex II, 5 our emphasis) as something that is produced through unequal political ecologies and economies. Hence, rather than challenging inequalities, the framework appears to presuppose and adapt to them by suggesting that different populations should be educated for sustainability in different manners depending on their socio-economic and geographic contexts (cf. Knutsson 2020). In our argument, such adaptations risk normalising and even (re)producing inequality, and it serves as a salient example of how biopolitics and inequality interlace in the context of global ESD policy.

However, the framework also exposes a certain discursive tension, or inconsistency, as regards to the lines drawn between different human populations and how these relate to the very notion of (education for) sustainable development. In the framework document, readers are informed that:

Some consider that ESD is a ‘luxury’ in the context of extreme poverty or other challenging life situations (e.g. conflict or refugee situations). There is some truth to this in that the complexity and relevance of the concept of sustainable development does not immediately resonate with people trying to survive on a daily basis, but this does not negate the importance of ESD to populations in need. (UNESCO 2019a, annex II, 5)

This passage is curious. The ESD for 2030 documents have repeatedly suggested that human life is at stake and that ESD has a crucial role in securing the survival of the human species. As was indicated in the section overviewing ESD for 2030, ESD is also put forth as particularly ‘relevant for people in extreme poverty’ (UNESCO 2020a, 20). However, when the documents close in on poor populations whose existence is literally at stake, the relevance and meaning of sustainable development is suddenly downplayed and ESD becomes something mostly associated with more privileged populations. This passage slips into a well-known narrative in environmental discourse generally and in relation to the notion of sustainable development particularly. In this narrative, poor populations are seen as unable to act responsibly and sustainably because of their absence of alternatives, a condition explicitly described in the Brundtland
report (WCED 1987) as the so-called ‘downward spiral’. Such a view of the poor and their relation to futurity dates to the problematisation of different populations by Malthus (1798) (cf. Tellman 2013; Hellberg 2020), originally based on a colonial imaginary that makes distinctions between the dangerous “savage” and economic “civilized” life’ (Tellman 2013, 135) and which portray wealthier populations as those who have the possibility to invest in the future and to make good and environmentally sound choices. The quote from ESD for 2030 above thus raises questions about what ESD is supposed to sustain and about the framework’s notion of the relationship between poverty and affluence and environmental care.

**Transformative pedagogy working through individuals and communities**

This sub-section demonstrates how the idea of transformative pedagogy runs through the ESD for 2030 documents. The section shows how it, in tandem with the role of the individual and community, is presented as a central technique to achieve a transformation towards sustainability.

Pedagogy (and learning environments) holds a pivotal position in the roadmap, put forth as the link between the SDGs as pedagogical content and the actual societal transformation argued to take place with the achievement of the SDGs. The feasibility of this policy vision could of course be seriously disputed given that the world is off track in meeting even the minimum requirements of SDG4 on quality education for all (e.g. UNESCO 2019c). However, again, our concern in this paper is with the rationalities of the framework, not with assessing its actual implementation.

To accomplish transformation towards sustainability, ESD for 2030 suggests interactive, project-based, and learner-centred approaches to enable learners to ‘live what they learn and learn what they live’ (UNESCO 2020a, 8). It is a lifelong learning perspective that encourages learners to become change agents with capacities to undertake transformative actions for sustainability. What is at stake, in relation to pedagogy and learning, is formulated in the following.

**We are increasingly asking if what people learn is truly relevant to their lives, if what they learn helps to ensure the survival of the planet. Education for sustainable development can provide the knowledge, awareness and action that empower people to transform themselves and transform societies.** (UNESCO 2020a, 2)

Hence, the pedagogical approaches of ESD for 2030 has biopolitical elements, as it targets the life of learners and connects individual transformation with transformation of societies and ultimately the survival of the planet.

This transformative pedagogy follows a certain pedagogical rationality called ‘transformative engagement’, developed during the UNESCO brainstorming symposia referred to above. According to the ‘transformative engagement’ document (UNESCO 2019b), which is included in the toolbox for ESD for 2030, transformation is explicated as possible change on two levels. First, ‘in the learner’, involving the process the individual undertakes towards meaningful engagement; and second, the level of impact the engagement of the individual has on established institutions and collective life (UNESCO 2019b, 3–4). However, these two levels are mutually dependent as individual action alone may not be able to produce societal change, and collective action, which is not rooted in personal commitment, may have limited transformative power (Ibid.). Hence, in relation to the commonplace individualistic focus of EE/ESD, which has been criticized by scholars in the field for a long time (e.g. Robottom and Hart 1995), ESD for 2030 arguably offers a somewhat more nuanced approach, although the focus on the individual still remains central.

Thus, in line with the above, ESD for 2030 produces the idea of the individual as the starting point for transformation.
There has to be more attention to individuals and how they are transformed. Fundamental changes required for a sustainable future start with individuals and their change of behaviour, attitude and lifestyle, while the contextual factors and institutional support provide an enabling environment and can bulwark individual contributions. (UNESCO 2019a, annex II, 4)

Here, structural factors are mentioned as providing support, while agency, capacity, and responsibility are placed on individuals in terms of the choices they make. Thus, meaningful transformation towards sustainability can, according to the rationality mediated by ESD for 2030, be fostered through changes in individuals’ behaviour, attitude and lifestyles. This is especially so for children and young people since their sense of identity is closely connected to their values and lifestyle. This makes ESD ever the more important in order to ‘provide them with critical thinking skills to reflect on individual values, attitudes and behaviours as well as lifestyle choices’ (Ibid.). Such techniques, aiming to steer changes in individual lifestyles to achieve a sustainable future, merge ‘self-techniques’ (i.e. individuals should scrutinise and act upon themselves) with government at the level of populations. That is, the ethos of the good and sustainable life becomes the medium through which the ‘self-government of the autonomous individual can be connected up with the imperatives of good government’ (Rose 2001, 18).

How then, are individuals to be governed through pedagogical techniques according to ESD for 2030? In the transformation of individual life, educators are described as key actors as they are to apply innovative pedagogics and ‘guide’, ‘empower’, ‘motivate’ and ‘facilitate’ learners’ transition to a sustainable way of life (UNESCO 2020a, 30). Hence, it is quite clear that the main task of educators is not to teach subject matter but rather to allow for, or entice, free subjects to conduct themselves in the ‘right’ way by transforming themselves. To ensure transformation, the individual is supposed to go through several stages, such as awareness, understanding of complexities, empathy, compassion, and empowerment (UNESCO 2019a, annex II, 4). It is argued that, if the learner perceives a gap between an ideal and the status quo, an awakening can happen, sparking critical thinking and self-dialogue. This new insight does not automatically trigger action but depends on facilitating factors such as empathy and how a matter relates to learners ‘own lives’ and has ‘manageable and actionable scale at their level’ (UNESCO 2019b, 6). All these stages are supposed lead to a tipping point: when all the cognitive, emotional, and societal observations translate into ‘a prompting action’ (ibid.). Thus, transformative pedagogy supposedly invokes self-governing techniques as they stimulate ‘operations on [individuals] own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being’ made in order to transform themselves (Foucault 1988, 18).

The message in the framwork is that the transformations of individuals are important since individuals not only are important for their own sake but also are the agents for change of society. In turn, these processes of change are primarily to take place in the community, although the relationship between community and society remains unclear throughout the documents as society and community are often conflated. The community is described as the most important space for lifelong learning and pedagogy outside the school environment with potential to evoke ‘ESD in action’ throughout the life of each individual (UNESCO 2019a, Annex II, 5). Community is also one of the key indicators for monitoring progress of ESD for 2030 (UNESCO 2020a, 49). That it is at the community level where the greatest achievements in terms of sustainability transformations are expected is expressed in the following paragraph:

Meaningful transformation and transformative actions for sustainable development are most likely to take place in the community. It is in their daily lives, at the community level, where learners and people make their choices for sustainable development and act upon them. It is also in the local community where people find partners for their sustainability efforts. This is why active cooperation between learning institutions and the community should be promoted to ensure the latest knowledge and practices for sustainable development are utilized to advance the local agenda. (UNESCO 2020a, 34)
Here, the community is described as a place of choice and action and as a space where people inspire and learn from each other. That the community is seen as a space which is bound up with both an ethical component as well as processes of identification is expressed in the following paragraph:

Last, but not least, the reflection on transformative action points to the absolute importance of community. In a community, which can be defined not only physically, but also virtually, socially, politically or culturally, learners find values and causes that concern them both individually and collectively. They can also find other fellow members and bond with them, which generates solidarity and facilitates collective action for transformation and a culture of sustainability. (UNESCO 2019a, annex II, 4)

It is also the lack of such shared identity and inherent ties related to community that are brought forth as an example on why ESD has to be addressed differently in relation to populations living in extreme poverty, such as refugee camps or other conflictual situations:

For example, the use of community, advocated above as the platform for action, may be approached differently in contexts of extreme poverty. Extreme poverty is often rampant among migrant populations. The ‘members’ of these groups are brought together artificially with no inherent ties or shared identity. Populations in refugee or other conflictual situations often face the same fate. For such populations, community, which could provide a useful platform for action, should take into consideration the particular issue of group identity. (UNESCO 2019a, annex II, 5)

In this paragraph, both ‘extreme poverty’ and migrant populations are pointed out as problematic in reference to the idea of community because of their lack of bonds and shared identity. At the same time, however, community formation is seen as potentially beneficial for these populations, although the special dynamics in relation to identity in these groups needs reckoning.

Hence, pedagogical techniques for transformation of individual life are assumed to be closely connected to sustainable transformation of communities, and the communities are, in turn, sites for life-long learning affecting the individual. This can be seen as an example of Nicolas Rose's (1996) remark that ‘the social’ may be giving way to ‘the community’ as a new territory for government and that the subjects of government are also ‘the subjects of allegiance to a particular set of community values, beliefs and commitments’ (p. 331). What is of particular relevance for this article, is the argument that, when community gains prominence as the relevant unit for governing, ‘society’, as an order involving ‘collective being and collective responsibilities and obligations’ (Rose 1996, 333) might lose importance as a relevant ‘zone’, ‘target’ or ‘objective’ (Rose 1996) and might have consequences for the way that difference and (in)equality are understood. This involves, in turn, the risk that inequalities between communities are normalized (Knutsson 2020) as what becomes important in this line of thinking are the conditions within particular communities rather than the relationships between them (Hellberg forthcoming; Knutsson 2020). Ultimately, ESD for 2030 produces an image that is detached from broader economic structures and realities on the ground.

Conclusions

The present article has explored biopolitical elements in ESD for 2030. This section first summarises the main findings and their contribution to previous research. Thereafter, we consider the potential of Foucauldian ethics, self-formation and critique as a way forward towards a more affirmative differentiation in the context of global ESD policy.

The starting point of ESD for 2030 is that we radically need to change the way we live in order to transform societies towards sustainability. Our very existence is presented as being under threat and the sustaining of life is at the centre of the new global policy framework. However, when the discursive machine built around the concept of sustainable development
starts working, it seems that the framework cannot deliver tools for such radical change. The notion of life that is mediated is hierarchical and has an obvious anthropocentric bias. Hence, ultimately, the sustaining of human life appears to be the main priority of ESD for 2030. In the abstract, humanity is repeatedly addressed at the level of our entire species, but when we look closer it becomes clear that different categories of populations are assumed to be targeted differently – i.e. ESD is supposed to be adapted to people’s socio-economic contexts. As we have argued elsewhere, this is problematic as this approach risks contributing to entrenching inequalities and unsustainable ways of living rather than creating conditions for sustainability (Hellberg and Knutsson 2018a, 2018b; Knutsson 2020, 2021). Simultaneously, however, and somewhat paradoxically, the language around different populations and their relation to futurity and sustainability seems to suggest that it is primarily the wealthier populations that are the ones expected to take on, and be relevant to, the task of creating sustainability, all while refusing to put their carbon- and resource-intensive lifestyle at risk.

The analysis has further brought attention to how notions of transformative pedagogy, community and the individual, assume the function of biopolitical techniques in ESD for 2030. The idea of transformative pedagogy runs through ESD for 2030 and is supposedly enabling a transition to a sustainable society. This transition is to be achieved through self-governing techniques of responsibilization, transforming individual environmental conduct, and enhancing learners’ capacities to act as change agents on collective level. Such collective engagement is primarily to be fostered within the community, argued within the documents to supply the causes, solidarity and partners necessary for individuals to participate in collective action for transformation.

This paper has contributed to previous research on EE/ESD policy, and education policy more broadly, by highlighting the biopolitical elements through which life is assumed to be governed and separated according to ESD for 2030. Previous literature on EE/ESD policy has stressed the importance of international policy imperatives for national and local implementation of ESD. The biopolitical imperatives, as showcased in our analysis, are likely to be of significance although their effects on actual implementation still remains to be explored. This will be done in our forthcoming work. In relation to the recurring discussions in EE/ESD policy literature about tensions between claims to universality in international EE/ESD declarations and simultaneous exclusion of certain people and devaluation of local knowledge, the present paper has offered a different perspective. In our argument, poor people are not excluded but rather assumed to be targeted in particular ways, in attunement with their socio-economic living conditions. Hence, while recognizing poor people’s ambivalent position in ESD for 2030, the paper has primarily brought attention to the dubious nature of their inclusion, and to the problematic manners in which contextual difference is recognized, in the new global policy framework.

What, then, are the implications of all this in the context of global ESD policy? People on the planet obviously lead very different lives and it seems awkward to suggest that they should all be exposed to identical forms of ESD without any contextual adaptation. One-size-fits-all does not seem like a viable option. At the same time, it is difficult to ignore the ways that differentiation and inequality interlaces in ESD for 2030. Is there a more affirmative alternative to the current mode of biopolitical differentiation in global ESD policy?

According to ESD for 2030, as shown above, the transformation of pedagogy and learning environments is supposed to enable learners to ‘live what they learn and learn what they live’. This slogan is possibly a gesture to previous UNESCO landmark reports on learning and living (e.g. UNESCO 1972, 1996, 2015) but what it actually means still remains unclear. Nevertheless, the two parts of the slogan might have different potentials in terms of radicality. If learners are to ‘learn what they live’, it seems like they are to learn from practices within their local community and lead their lives accordingly. This would hardly challenge the status quo of the inequalities separating rich and poor populations’ lifestyles. Instead, if learners are to ‘live what they learn’ the key for radical change seems to be to focus on how young people, regardless of their wealth, location or gender, and the intersectionality between these factors, can learn to live in an ethical
and sustainable way in relation to other humans and other living species. One productive response to this, we argue, could be to turn to Foucault’s thoughts on ethics, critique and transformation (e.g. Foucault 1992, 1997), and works on their significance to education (e.g. Ball 2017; Leask 2012; Sicilia-Camacho and Fernández-Balboa 2009; Besley 2005; Infinito 2003).

Ethics, for Foucault, is not about passive subjection to abstract normalizing codes of customary conduct but active subjectivation involving a continual process of ethical self-formation (Foucault 1992). It is a way of transforming oneself to live an ethical life, caring for oneself and others by constantly practising criticism and resisting the ways in which one’s conduct is being governed by others. As Foucault states, ‘the work of deep transformation can only be carried out in a free atmosphere, one constantly agitated by a permanent criticism’ (Foucault 1990, 155). Relating this to education, Infinito (2003) discusses what a potential educational framework built around Foucauldian ethics, self-formation and critique might look like. Such a framework would involve a form of critique that sees the world we inhabit as produced, as ‘the product of contingent “man-made” games of truth’, which, Infinito argues, allows for a useful understanding of our past and present situation and provides ‘both reason and resources for change’ (p. 169). We argue that this approach to critique might be useful to consider as a way of bringing attention to how global inequality among different communities has been produced and to how inequality is interlaced with the environmental crisis. Such an understanding of ‘the ethical’, which also resonates with Judith Butler’s work (e.g. 2012), could create possibilities for ‘being and responding otherwise’ and for ‘personal and political transformation’ (Morrison 2018, 542).

In relation to our findings, ethical self-formation based on a permanent critique could mean that instead of ‘finding’ already existing values and causes within the community, learners should actively practise critique by investigating how their own community and other communities have been formed in relation to each other and how the (different) ways we live our lives affect and are affected by others. This would entail affirmative differentiation, as learners in wealthy communities were to criticize their unsustainable consumptions patterns and unlearn their privileges whilst learners in poor communities were to acquire the critical skills necessary to scrutinize unequal power relations and distribution of resources. In our view, such a pedagogy would recognize learners as ethical beings with the potential to reflect on and participate in the construction of their identity and world, instead of being subject to already set values and moral codes (see Sicilia-Camacho and Fernández-Balboa 2009). By putting emphasis on existing power relations and the different lifestyles and responsibilities assigned to different populations in the quest for sustainable development, learners could get the tools to scrutinize such relations and, possibly, to resist them.

Important, however, is that neither ‘transformative pedagogy’ or an ‘affirmative differentiation’ in schools and communities alone can make the change needed for reaching the goal of a more sustainable world, even though what we propose here can create the possibility for a more radical ESD. Far-reaching changes in governance and corporate structures are fundamental for addressing unequal relations and unsustainable practices and need to be reckoned with in order both to reach the potentials, as well as acknowledge the limitations, of educational interventions for a more sustainable world.

Notes
1. For an excellent overview of different theoretical approaches to biopolitics see Lemke (2011).
2. Biopolitics and educational inclusion more generally has been discussed recently by Echeverri-Alvarez (2020).
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