

Keynote:

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“Spiritual Dimensions of ESD from a Philosophy of Science Perspective”

In recent years, the intersection of sustainable development and inner development has underscored the importance of nurturing inner skills, mindsets, and qualities to address the challenges of current unsustainability. Inner development is viewed as a complementary and potentially deeper leverage point than changes in socio-economic structures, governance, and technological innovation. Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) is considered a crucial platform for promoting inner development, equipping learners with the skills and competencies needed for sustainability. This focus has led to the formulation of inner development goals and the creation of toolkits for educating future change agents.

In this talk, I argue that promoting inner development for sustainability contains an inherent contradiction. I hold that these efforts are essentially rooted in a positivist-instrumental understanding of science, depicting our current reality as unsustainable and viewing inner development as a means to rectify this outer unsustainability. Consequently, inner development within ESD becomes an instrumental enterprise, where technical solutions and measurable variables (inner development goals) are manipulated for the sake of outer sustainability.

An alternative to this instrumental approach could lie in an ESD that systematically explores the subjective experience of learners. It relies on a first-person phenomenological approach to science, suggesting that our lived experience is the foundation of our understanding and connection with the world. Such a phenomenological ESD is rooted in an emancipatory research and educational paradigm, fostering learners' capacity to respond based on their own values and beliefs, thus nurturing their response-ability and supporting them in making self-determined choices. ESD in this sense is a fundamentally spiritual pathway, allowing learners to deeply engage with their subjective experience as the ultimate unfolding of life's manifold facets and its meaning and purpose.

According to this perspective, the current state of unsustainability, the concept and purpose of sustainability, and the ways to achieve it are not predetermined. Sustainability as a future vision might not even be considered desirable. The meaning and importance of sustainability can only – but not necessarily - be discovered through a profound connection with our inner selves (whatever this self is) and our lived experiences.

From this perspective, sustainability is not a fixed goal but a dynamic and evolving understanding that implies deeply personal and spiritual dimensions. The predetermined vision of (outer) sustainability might, in a certain sense, even appear as a hindrance to inner development, in that it risks disguising key existential challenges of humankind, such as our finiteness, the permanence of suffering, injustice, and the condemnation of being free.

I will elaborate on key principles that can guide inner development within ESD, rooted in this paradigm. Education, in this sense, is necessarily a facilitation of self-inquiry, where educators provide the space, activities, and emotional support for learners to explore their subjective experience. This inquiry involves the systematic exploration and development of all facets of subjective experience (e.g., intellectual, sensorial, affective-motivational, bodily, and intuitive), with the ultimate goal of fostering response-ability and deepening the mutual and continuous exploration of what it means to be alive.