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Education for sustainable development in Flanders: the UN Decade and beyond

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This chapter addresses the prospects for ESD policymaking in Flanders, a sub-national entity of Belgium, beyond the UN-Decade. An analysis of the policymaking process in the context of the Decade shows how policy discourses and practices are inextricably intertwined with three broader developments in environmental and educational policy: the increasing impact of ESD policy and discourse on environmental education, the framing of social and political problems as learning problems, and ecological modernisation. These trends give shape to the boundaries of a particular policy regime and, thus, affect what is possible and acceptable within Flemish ESD policy and practices in the field. However, this case study also reveals that these developments do not completely determine ESD in Flanders. Drawing on the lessons learnt from this analysis, we go into the proposals for future policymaking. We address two future ESD initiatives and elaborate how both the outcomes of the presented case study and the particular setting in which research and policymaking took place have influenced these policy intentions.

Introduction

In this chapter we address the implementation of the UN-Decade of education for sustainable development (ESD) as well as the prospects for future ESD policymaking in Flanders, the northern, Dutch-speaking part of Belgiumⁱⁱ. The implementation of the Decade in Flanders is highly shaped by the Strategy for ESD developed by the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE). At the high-level meeting of Environment and Education Ministries in Vilnius in 2005, Flanders committed itself to the implementation of the Strategy. An 'ESD consultation platform' was created in response to UNECE's appeal to install a coordination mechanism for the ESD Strategy so as to stimulate implementation, information exchange, and partnerships. The platform is composed of representatives of diverse public administrations on different levels including ministers' political advisors, and non-state actors such as NGOs, unions, institutes for higher education, school systems within compulsory education and strategic advisory councils. The environmental education (EE) unit of the Flemish government, which was responsible for stimulating networking and capacity building concerning ESD, coordinated the development of an Implementation Plan for ESD in Flanders. One of the policy objectives put forward in this Plan, as well as in the UNECE Strategy, was the need for scientific research on ESD practices and policymaking. As a major assignment of the EE unit is to serve as a centre of expertise on EE and ESD, a policy advisor (i.e. one of the authors of this chapter) was entrusted with this task. The rationale behind this decision was that by assigning a policy advisor to conduct the research by herself, the resulting knowledge development would simultaneously strengthen the unit. Moreover, the decision had to contribute to reducing the 'theory-practice gap' and the idea was that research outcomes could regularly inform ESD policy and practices. Considering that rigorous and critical academic research on ESD beyond a mere practice-based orientation is required, the policy advisor started doctoral studies at the University of Leuven.

In this chapter, we present some conclusions of this doctoral research project (Van Poeck, 2013) focusing on the implementation of the UN Decade of ESD in Flanders. Thereby, we also address the relation between research and policymaking within the context outlined above. Next, we present an analysis of a meeting of the ESD consultation platform during which Flemish ESD policy beyond the Decade was discussed. We conclude the chapter by going into two future ESD initiatives and addressing how both the outcomes of the doctoral research and the particular setting in which research and policymaking took place have influenced these policy intentions.

The UN Decade of ESD in Flanders

As the abovementioned doctoral research revealed, the implementation of the UN Decade of ESD in Flanders is inextricably intertwined with three broader developments in environmental and educational policy: the increasing impact of ESD policy and discourse on EE, the framing of social and political problems as learning problems, and ecological modernisation (see also Van Poeck, 2013; Van Poeck *et al.*, 2013). More precisely, our analysis showed how these developments give shape to the boundaries of a particular policy regime and, thus, affect what is possible and acceptable within Flemish ESD policy and, consequently, within educational practices.

The increasing impact of ESD policy and discourse on EE

The increasing impact of ESD on EE is a policy-driven tendency (Jickling and Wals 2007; Nomura and Abe 2009), highly affected by decisions made in international institutions. Although 'sustainable development' is omnipresent in policy discourses, the concept remains largely contested (Bruyninckx, 2006; Gunder, 2006; Jickling and Wals, 2007). Ever since the publication of the Brundtland Report (WCED, 1987), sustainable development is increasingly affecting environmental education policy and practice. The UN Decade is part of this evolution. As a result, a reallocation of resources (funds and personnelⁱⁱⁱⁱ) from EE to ESD occurred in Flanders, and EE policymaking was increasingly influenced by strategies put forward by international institutions (Van Poeck *et al.*, 2013).

However, the fact that ESD is becoming more and more established in EE does not imply that the relation between both concepts is clear for everybody. Several authors argue that a multitude of different perspectives exists simultaneously (e.g. Hesselink *et al.*, 2000; Reid and Scott, 2006) and in our case study we also observed efforts made so as to clarify the 'difficult concept' of ESD and to develop a shared understanding of how it relates to EE and other educational fields (Van Poeck *et al.*, 2013). For instance, a task force composed of members of the ESD consultation platform was established as an attempt to create a common conception of ESD resulting in the brochure 'ESD: Flag and Cargo' (Flemish government, 2011). Furthermore, opinions concerning the desirability of ESD as a new focal point for environmental education are sharply divided in scholarly literature (e.g. Jickling, 1994; Sauv , 1996, 1999; Gough and Scott, 1999; Huckle, 1999; Smyth, 1999; Foster, 2001; Scott, 2002; Sauv  and Berryman, 2005; Selby, 2006; Chapman, 2007; Jickling and Wals, 2007; Bajaj and Chiu, 2009; Mogensen and Schnack, 2010). In Flanders, too, diverse actors emphasised the value of 'basic nature education' and stressed that not the entire EE sector should be reoriented towards ESD. A key policy actor regarded the UN Decade of ESD as 'a trigger for reflection' on current EE practices. In particular, discussions arose concerning divergent interpretations of sustainable development as well as about the tension between an instrumental approach to education aiming at promoting predetermined 'sustainable' behaviour and a perspective that highlights 'pedagogical and

emancipatory' values such as critical thinking and autonomous decision making (Van Poeck *et al.*, 2013). The latter is closely related to a second development we take into account.

The framing of social and political problems as learning problems

In contemporary society, we face a tendency to frame social and political problems as learning problems (Biesta, 2004; Simons and Masschelein, 2006; 2009). 'Learning' emerges as a solution for numerous problems, that is, individual learners are expected to acquire the 'proper' knowledge, insights, skills, and attitudes so as to 'learn' to adapt their behaviour to what is considered desirable and make themselves competent to deal with societal challenges. Learning policy and experts in education are deployed to resolve social problems and educational policy and reform are designed to change people's behaviour, attitude, and mentality in a particular, preconceived way. Thus, the responsibility for social problems is increasingly reserved for individual people (Finger and Asùn, 2001; Simons and Masschelein, 2006).

This tendency applies to sustainable development in particular. Ever since the relationship between people and their natural environment has been conceived as problematic, appeals have been made to education in order to tackle the evolving ecological problems such as urban children's increased alienation of nature, problems of nature conservation, the environmental crisis and issues of (under)development (Postma, 2004). A field of educational theory and practice evolved from nature education over conservation education and environmental education toward education for sustainable development and is characterised by the prevalence of a conception of education as an instrument to tackle ecological challenges (Van Poeck, 2013). Policymakers assume that the pursuit of sustainability requires a continuous learning process of groups and individuals. Agenda 21, the plan of action adopted at the United Nations (UN) Conference on Environment and Development, considers learning as indispensable for reaching sustainable development (UNCED, 1992) and the UN Decade of ESD endorsed this framing of sustainability as a learning problem. An ecologically sound and sustainable society emerges then as a challenge that can be met by applying the proper learning strategies and, thus, education becomes first and foremost a matter of socialisation, that is, of the acquisition of particular knowledge, skills, or competences.

Also in our analysis of Flemish ESD policymaking, sustainability issues predominantly emerged as matters of individual learning and the aims of EE and ESD were almost exclusively defined in terms of individual dispositions (Van Poeck *et al.*, 2013). For instance, curriculum objectives translated sustainability in a set of 'key competences' individual pupils should achieve and the brochure 'ESD: Flag and Cargo' as well as policy documents regarding the relation between ESD and a green economy emphasise the transfer of knowledge and values, green skills, and competences such as systems thinking.

Ecological modernisation

A third development we want to address is the increasing hegemony of the discourse of ecological modernisation in today's Western societies. Hajer (1995: 44) describes 'discourse' as a 'specific ensemble of ideas, concepts, and categorisations that are produced, reproduced, and transformed in a particular set of practices and through which meaning is given to physical and social realities'. Basically, the discourse of ecological modernisation assumes that the existing political, economic, and social institutions can internalise the care for the environment (Hajer, 1995). Although the

structural character of the ecological crisis (i.e. its roots in the core institutions of modern society) is acknowledged (Mol and Spaargaren, 2000), a fundamental transformation of these societal structures does not appear here as a prerequisite for tackling this crisis. A fundamental assumption is the possibility of reconciling economic growth and the solution of ecological problems. This implies that everybody is expected to do their bit, that consumers should buy and promote techno-scientific innovations and that citizens and NGOs are regarded potential allies rather than adversaries (Læssøe 2010). Within this discourse, the environmental challenge emerges as a management problem rather than a political issue and as a 'positive-sum-game': 'there would be no fundamental obstructions to an environmentally sound organisation of society, if only every individual, firm, or country, would participate' (Hajer 1995: 26). Thus, ecological modernisation brought about a reconsideration, i.e. a narrowing of participatory practices (Læssøe 2007; 2010) focusing on consensus building and marginalising conflicts or contestation concerning values, political ideology, and the ever-present tension between private and collective interests.

In our analysis of ESD policymaking in Flanders (Van Poeck *et al.*, 2013), the influence of an ecological modernisation perspective is reflected in the discourse about a green economy 'where economic prosperity can go hand-in-hand with ecological sustainability' as well as in the prevailing conception of sustainability as a 'balance' between ecological, social, and economic concerns. However, we also observed that both issues were the subject of discussion among the actors involved. Furthermore, a reconsideration of participatory practices came to the fore in the role of the ESD consultation platform (i.e. contributing to the implementation of policy), the way it was composed of a variety of actors collaborating as a coalition of ESD advocates, and the persistent criticism about the lack of involvement of 'all relevant stakeholders'. Yet, here too, contestation emerged as well, particularly as to the desirability to build alliances (and, thus, consensus) with partners from business circles.

The boundaries of a policy regime

Our analysis of ESD policymaking in Flanders shows how the three abovementioned developments gave shape to the boundaries of a particular governmental regime. Referring to Foucault's 'governmentality' perspective, Ferreira (2009: 612) argues that within such a regime 'a range of semi-normative prescriptions [...] work to include, exclude and govern what it is acceptable (possible) to think and what it is acceptable (possible) to do' (Ferreira, 2009: 612). It sets the contours of what is 'sayable', 'seeable', 'thinkable', and 'possible' (Masschelein and Simons, 2003; Simons and Masschelein, 2010, 512). As such, this regime not only affects what becomes (im)possible in both EE/ESD policymaking and practices in the field but also how we can (or should) think and speak about it. That is, policymakers as well as practitioners and participants are somehow expected to be willing and able to see EE and ESD, think and speak about it and act toward it in a very particular way. The policy-driven emphasis on ESD promotes a consensual understanding of sustainability in favour of neoliberal economic and political thought and pushes into the background arguments for fundamental social change. The framing of sustainability as a learning problem contributes to individualisation and the attribution of the responsibility for unsustainability to individuals. The discourse of ecological modernisation also marginalises appeals for fundamental social and political transformations and reduces the space for conflict and contestation.

We showed above how this regime affects ESD policymaking in Flanders. Nevertheless, our case study also revealed that this regime does not completely determine Flemish ESD policy. We

observed, for instance, that the prevailing competence-oriented, instrumental conception of education has been the subject of discussion as well as the connection between ESD and green economy and the need to build alliances with partners from business circles. Furthermore, whereas stakeholders' role in the consultation platform has been set rather formalistically and consensus-oriented in terms of representation, consultation, and implementation of the UN Decade of ESD participants themselves referred to the platform as creating a space for a valuable dialogue, where differences could sometimes be articulated and could work as a trigger for reflection on existing educational practices and policy.

During the presented doctoral research we did not only analyse ESD policymaking in Flanders but we also studied seven diverse educational practices: the project 'Environmental Performance at School' ('Milieuzorg Op School'), the Transition Towns movement, an environmental education centre, a Community Supported Agriculture initiative, a transition arena for a climate neutral city, a regional centre for action, culture, and youth, and an organisation that offers workshops to promote ecological behaviour change (see also Van Poeck, 2013). These case studies, too, reveal how the elaborated social and political developments and the way they trickle-down in international and Flemish ESD policy contribute to the establishment of a regime that co-constructs what becomes (im)possible in concrete practices and how we can (or should) think and speak about these practices. Our analysis showed how the increased focus on the consensual catch-all term 'sustainable development' reduced the space for contestation and controversy within the examined EE practices. Furthermore, we found that the framing of sustainable development as a learning problem brought about an emphasis on socialisation and qualification within the examined EE practices. Finally, we repeatedly observed how the prevailing discourse of ecological modernisation encouraged practitioners to see sustainability issues and to think and speak about them in terms of 'collaboration' between 'allies' and of 'managing' ecological problems. Yet, just like in our analysis of ESD policymaking, we found that the studied practices were not fully determined by this regime and that, at particular moments, something different emerged. For instance, we witnessed practices where complex and contested sustainability issues and the often antagonistic values, interests, and knowledge claims inherent in them were thoroughly explored and discussed. We also observed educators explicitly questioning the consensual account of sustainability implied in the Triple-P perspective (the balance between People, Planet, and Profit).

Our analysis of ESD policymaking and practices within the context of the aforementioned social and political developments thus allowed us to understand how the bounds of a particular governmental regime are legitimised and maintained as well as counteracted (Duyvendak and Uitermark 2005, Ferreira 2009). As such, our inquiry aimed at contributing to what Ferreira (2009) calls 'unsettling the taken-for-granted' in EE and ESD. It illuminates how certain orthodoxies have become 'normal' and 'obvious' and, all the same, how these orthodoxies assume the possibility of infringement and subversion (Duyvendak and Uitermark 2005; Ferreira 2009).

At the crossroads of research and policymaking

As Masschelein and Simons (2003) emphasise, such a governmental regime cannot be understood as a 'system' that can be changed methodically in a preconceived direction. Rather, it generates effects by *appealing* to people. As such, the boundaries set by the three developments we described above do not *force* policymakers and practitioners into a particular way of seeing, speaking, thinking, and

acting. It is 'merely' appealing for it. And indeed, as we argued, at particular moments both the policymaking process and the practices we examined do resist this appeal. By describing this we want to invite and inspire the reader to be attentive to different ways of seeing, speaking, thinking, and acting. After all, Masschelein and Simons (2003: 87 – our translation) argue, 'resistance can take the form of simply doing different things'.

Considering the focus and context of the research project we briefly presented here, one might have expected that the report of this inquiry would contain a number of recommendations so as to stimulate an 'adequate' ESD policy in Flanders that fosters 'desirable' EE practices. For several reasons, we did not formulate such recommendations. First, we deliberately wanted to avoid a position where researchers – as experts – could easily derive from their analyses guidelines for a 'better' ESD policy. As Latour (2010: 166 – our translation) argues, taking the position of an expert reinforces the problematic demarcation between science and politics:

'Basically, the expert (no matter how sympathetic and modest he might be) always reinforces the impossible Demarcation, attempting as he does to conceal from the public the kitchen of science in the making and to protect scientists from the interests and passions of the public. And the worst is that the cover of expertise is just sufficiently solid to allow politicians to hide behind expert's advices so that they do not have to decide by themselves and for themselves.'

Therefore, the researcher did not approach the policymaking process and the cases she studied from an evaluative perspective and subsequently put forward instructions for policymakers and practitioners based on 'valid' knowledge and expertise. Rather, as indicated above, she aimed to describe policymaking and educational practices as an invitation to see, think, and speak about it in such a way that, she hopes, might inspire policymakers and practitioners to experiment with different practices and to reflect upon them. After a presentation of the research for civil servants, one of the participants explained how the insights and concepts we developed can indeed inspire policymakers and practitioners and stimulate reflection among them as they 'provide words' to think and speak about their experiences with EE and ESD. Such encounters are encouraging as to these – perhaps optimistic – aspirations. It indicates how presenting this research can incite a dialogue about and search for how educational practices can be understood and given shape in the light of sustainability issues and how, indeed, 'something else' might become possible. Researchers can thus contribute to this endeavour and incite reflection and dialogue among practitioners, policymakers, and scientists. Yet, it requires time and effort to engage in such a common search and experimentation. A second, more pragmatic, reason for not suggesting more practical recommendations – or better: considerations – for policymaking is precisely the lack of time and space for dialogue, reflection, and experimentation with professionals within the scope of the presented doctoral project. However, as we will explain in the remainder of this chapter, we do aim to take up this challenge in the future.

Beyond the UN Decade of ESD

In this final section, we address some prospects for future ESD policy in Flanders. First, we briefly analyse a meeting of the ESD consultation platform during which Flemish ESD policy after the end of the UN Decade was discussed in general. Next, we go into two concrete initiatives that are already being prepared, thereby explaining how the lessons learnt from the doctoral research have influenced these intentions.

Discussing future ESD policy in Flanders

During a meeting of the ESD consultation platform in April 2013^{iv}, the participants discussed prospects for Flanders' ESD policy after the end of the Decade. As we will show, this discussion aligned well with the aforementioned tension between, on the one hand, an attempt to systematically manage the policy process in a well-defined direction and, on the other hand, the need and willingness to experiment with and reflect upon concrete practices.

In preparation of this discussion, the members of the platform had been asked to answer a questionnaire about Flanders' future ESD policy. One of the policy advisors then analysed the participants' opinions, preferences, priorities, and intentions and reported on it in a note that was distributed before the meeting. One of the tensions highlighted in this document is the contradistinction between promoting ESD through pursuing formal policy measures (e.g. embedding tangible targets in official policy documents or obtaining structural funding within the Budget of the Flemish government) and ad hoc cooperation and experimentation with concrete practices based on voluntariness and commitment. Another, related tension concerns the choice between pursuing predetermined results or fostering reflexivity and dialogue about what can be considered valuable educational processes within concrete practices.

In the discussion during the platform meeting, divergent stances were voiced as to these tensions. Some participants argued for a rather managerial approach and emphasised the importance of systematic policy measures and formal agreements.

'We have to receive recognition. We should make an appeal to the Flemish educational sector and the minister and ask them to commit themselves to the target of realising sustainable schools and to set a deadline for it. Let's get inspired by the "sustainable schools framework" in the UK.' (report of the platform meeting – our translation)

Their concerns and proposals thereby mainly reflected an ecological modernisation perspective as well as the framing of sustainable development as a matter of individual learning. They advocated, again, the involvement of 'all relevant partners', collaboration with partners from business circles, efforts to promote competences for sustainable development, etc. Others, yet, contested this approach and argued for dialogue and reflection about the role of education in the light of sustainability issues and for creating space for experimentation with open-ended educational processes.

'If we focus too much on targets, we will be blind for the process which has to be open-ended. Otherwise, we will miss opportunities because we won't see what happens. This discords with a logic of planning. Is there a space for the process? Moreover: for inspiration, for passion, for people that move others? We cannot plan or predict such things. And it is insufficiently implied in an understanding of education in terms of competences.' (report of the platform meeting – our translation)

These participants implicitly challenged the boundaries of the abovementioned governmental regime, e.g. by valuing passion, commitment, enthusiasm, and inspiration over competences and expertise and by arguing for an approach to education as a distinct domain, separated from managerial problem-solving.

'In the end it is all about the question: what kind of a world do we want? Emancipation: that is the major power of education. [...] We have to avoid ending up as an instrument for a green economy, or

for a particular society. Education should remain critical.’ (report of the platform meeting – our translation)

In the preparatory note the policy advisor proposed 5 strands for future ESD policy in Flanders focusing on experimentation, reflection, and dialogue rather than on formal policy measures.

‘We preferred concrete cases as it is within such practices that the “how” and “what” of ESD comes to the fore. We want to encourage, support and value pilot projects and acknowledge the passion and commitment at hand. Therefore, we will gather people who develop similar initiatives and start a dialogue.’ (report of the platform meeting – our translation)

Pilot projects in diverse educational settings (teacher training, vocational training, primary education, non-formal education, etc.) and coaching were put forward as important ESD policy initiatives in the future.

A closer look at two initiatives

Finally, we end this chapter by illuminating the above elaborated approach to ESD policy with a closer look at two concrete initiatives that are already being prepared.

First, the EE unit will organise a series of conferences and symposia addressing the role of education in the light of sustainable development. Thereby, we will particularly address ‘hot items’ in (Flemish) sustainability policy today such as green economy, sustainable technologies, and transition management. The aim is to explore these issues, to present different (and often irreconcilable) perspectives at hand, and to stimulate reflection on the concomitant roles attributed to education. For instance, an EE conference will be organised focusing on green economy. Different conceptions of a green economy will be presented and debated and, afterwards, we elaborately address the role and purposes of education in this respect. A member of the UNECE Steering Committee on ESD will go into the international policymaking about ESD and green economy and an educational scientist will present a critical analysis of the policy discourse, particularly of the instrumental perspective on education and the omnipresent focus on individual competences. With this conference, we want to promote dialogue and reflection and thereby we deliberately aim to challenge and discuss the boundaries of the governmental regime that came to the fore in the doctoral research. Particularly, we will make an effort to move beyond a narrow focus on individual learning and beyond the discourse of ecological modernisation that strongly affect the international policy on ESD and green economy (Van Poeck *et al.*, 2013).

A second initiative is a pilot project in an EE centre of the Flemish government. In the context of the ESD implementation plan, educators of this centre used to organise trainings and workshops about ‘systems thinking’, a concept that received major attention in the brochure ‘ESD: Flag and Cargo’ and that is often mentioned as an important competence people should achieve through ESD. However, the educators involved were uneasy with the competence-focused way these workshops were set up and with the emphasis on rather abstract, didactical content (a brief theoretical introduction in systems thinking combined with an overview of exercises and teaching methods). The policy advisor that conducted the doctoral research collaborated with them so as to reconsider these trainings. This brought about an interesting dialogue and common search for a way of dealing with the complexities and uncertainties of sustainability issues without falling into an abstract teaching of the ‘right’ competences. Although the attention for complexity and uncertainty has certainly been enhanced by the increased influence of ESD on EE policy and practice, this common search brought about a

renewed interest in the merits of EE's long tradition and particularly in the existing body of EE literature. Sauv  (2005) described 15 currents in EE. The 'bioregionalist current' inspired us to develop a pilot project starting from the geographical environment of the EE centre and the complexities and linkages at hand. Rather than focusing on didactics and competences, we will experiment with educational activities that encourage participants to 'see a place from the point of view of natural and social systems, whose dynamic relations contribute to creating a sense of "living place" rooted in natural as much as cultural history' (Sauv , 2005: 21-22). By presenting these practices we then hope to inspire other educators and to foster reflection and dialogue.

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ⁱ This book chapter reflects the authors' personal opinions and in no way represents any official stand or opinion of the Flemish government.

ⁱⁱ Flanders is a sub-national entity of Belgium comprising the Flemish Community and the Flemish Region. The Belgian federal state (at the national level) consists of six sub-national entities: three communities (the Flemish Community, the French Community and the German-speaking Community) and three regions (the Flemish Region, the Brussels-Capital Region and the Walloon Region). In Belgium, ESD is a responsibility distributed to the sub-national level.

ⁱⁱⁱ The implementation of the Flemish ESD Implementation Plan largely depended on the redistribution of funds within the existing budgets of several departments. Initially, actions were mainly financed with funding for EE. Later on, however, other collaborating partners started to contribute, they too falling back on the reallocation of existing means. As to the deployment and division of personnel, the situation was very similar. New recruitment for ESD failed to occur but the DESD brought about changes in the tasks and responsibilities of existing personnel. In the EE Unit, two policy advisors were deployed to coordinate the ESD consultation platform and to study and foster ESD as an important trend in EE policy and practice. In other policy areas (e.g. the Department of Education and Training, the Tourism Flanders Brussels Agency, the Flemish Department of Foreign Affairs, the Department of Culture, Youth, Sport and Media and the Agency for Socio-Cultural Work for Young People and Adults) staff members were not full-time seconded but spent time on the promotion, coordination and implementation of ESD in their policy area.

^{iv} Our analysis of this meeting is based on a document analysis (preparatory notes and report) and participant observation (we attended the meeting as policy advisors).