

UNESCO'S STRATEGY FOR 2023-2028 FOR PROMOTING SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN SOUTHEAST EUROPE IN LIGHT OF THE "ENVIRONMENT FOR EUROPE" PROCESS

ESTRATÉGIA DA UNESCO DE 2023-2028 PARA A PROMOÇÃO DO
DESENVOLVIMENTO SUSTENTÁVEL NO SUDESTE EUROPEU À LUZ DO
PROCESSO "AMBIENTE PARA A EUROPA"

ESTRATEGIA DE LA UNESCO PARA 2023-2028 EN MATERIA DE PROMOCIÓN
DEL DESARROLLO SOSTENIBLE EN EL SUDESTE DE EUROPA, EN EL
CONTEXTO DEL PROCESO "MEDIO AMBIENTE PARA EUROPA"

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ABSTRACT

This article examines UNESCO's 2023–2028 strategic framework in light of the *Environment for Europe* (EfE) process, assessing its potential to promote sustainable development in Southeast Europe (SEE). Based on a qualitative and interdisciplinary methodology, the study combines documentary and normative analysis of UNESCO's Medium-Term Strategy (2022–2029) and the ESD-2030 Framework, comparative review of EfE outcomes—particularly the Nicosia Ministerial Declaration of 2022—and thematic analysis of literature addressing governance, mobility, and social inclusion in SEE. The results demonstrate significant convergence between UNESCO's global priorities and EfE's regional commitments, highlighting the centrality of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD-2030) as both a normative and practical instrument for systemic transformation. Furthermore, the analysis reveals how EfE and UNESCO's strategic orientations can complement each other, offering opportunities to enhance regional policy coherence and accelerate the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. At the same time, the study identifies persistent barriers, such as weak governance structures, brain drain, feminization of migration, and socio-economic inequalities, which continue to challenge sustainable development pathways in SEE. By bridging UNESCO's integrative mandate with EfE's intergovernmental platform, this article contributes to the debate on how international organizations and regional frameworks can jointly foster inclusive, resilient, and context-sensitive sustainability transitions in Southeast Europe.

Keywords: UNESCO. Sustainable Development. Southeast Europe. Environment for Europe. Education for Sustainable Development. Governance.

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RESUMO

Este artigo examina o quadro estratégico da UNESCO para 2023-2028 à luz do processo Ambiente para a Europa (AEE), avaliando seu potencial para promover o desenvolvimento sustentável no Sudeste Europeu (SEE). Com base em uma metodologia qualitativa e interdisciplinar, o estudo combina análise documental e normativa da Estratégia de Médio Prazo da UNESCO (2022-2029) e do Quadro EDS-2030, revisão comparativa dos resultados do EDS — particularmente a Declaração Ministerial de Nicósia de 2022 — e análise temática da literatura que aborda governança, mobilidade e inclusão social no Sudeste Europeu. Os resultados demonstram convergência significativa entre as prioridades globais da UNESCO e os compromissos regionais do EDS, destacando a centralidade da Educação para o Desenvolvimento Sustentável (EDS-2030) como instrumento normativo e prático para a transformação sistêmica. Além disso, a análise revela como o EDS e as orientações estratégicas da UNESCO podem se complementar, oferecendo oportunidades para aprimorar a coerência das políticas regionais e acelerar a implementação da Agenda 2030. Ao mesmo tempo, o estudo identifica barreiras persistentes, como estruturas de governança frágeis, fuga de cérebros, feminização da migração e desigualdades socioeconômicas, que continuam a desafiar os caminhos do desenvolvimento sustentável na Europa do Sudeste. Ao unir o mandato integrativo da UNESCO à plataforma intergovernamental da EfE, este artigo contribui para o debate sobre como organizações internacionais e estruturas regionais podem, em conjunto, promover transições de sustentabilidade inclusivas, resilientes e sensíveis ao contexto no Sudeste Europeu.

Palavras-chave: UNESCO. Desenvolvimento Sustentável. Sudeste Europeu. Meio Ambiente para a Europa. Educação para o Desenvolvimento Sustentável. Governança.

RESUMEN

Este artículo analiza el marco estratégico de la UNESCO para el período 2023-2028 en el contexto del proceso «Medio Ambiente para Europa» (EfE), evaluando su potencial para promover el desarrollo sostenible en el Sudeste de Europa (SEE). Mediante una metodología cualitativa e interdisciplinaria, el estudio combina el análisis documental y normativo de la Estrategia de Mediano Plazo de la UNESCO (2022-2029) y el Marco de la Educación para el Desarrollo Sostenible (EDS-2030), la revisión comparativa de los resultados de EfE (en particular la Declaración Ministerial de Nicosia de 2022) y el análisis temático de la bibliografía sobre gobernanza, movilidad e inclusión social en el SEE. Los resultados demuestran una importante convergencia entre las prioridades globales de la UNESCO y los compromisos regionales de EfE, destacando la importancia central de la EDS-2030 como instrumento normativo y práctico para la transformación sistémica. Asimismo, el análisis revela cómo las orientaciones estratégicas de EfE y la UNESCO se complementan, ofreciendo oportunidades para mejorar la coherencia de las políticas regionales y acelerar la implementación de la Agenda 2030. Sin embargo, el estudio también identifica barreras persistentes, como la debilidad de las estructuras de gobernanza, la fuga de cerebros, la feminización de la migración y las desigualdades socioeconómicas, que siguen dificultando los avances hacia el desarrollo sostenible en el SEE. Al conectar el mandato integrador de la UNESCO con la plataforma intergubernamental de EfE, este artículo contribuye al debate sobre cómo las organizaciones internacionales y los marcos regionales pueden promover conjuntamente transiciones hacia la sostenibilidad inclusivas, resilientes y contextuales en el Sudeste de Europa.

Palabras clave: UNESCO. Desarrollo Sostenible. Europa del Sudeste. Medio Ambiente en Europa. Educación para el Desarrollo Sostenible. Gobernanza.



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INTRODUCTION

UNESCO's current medium-term orientation (2022–2029) positions the Organization to accelerate the 2030 Agenda through integrated action in education, the sciences, culture, and communication, with a deliberate emphasis on place-based approaches and multi-stakeholder coalitions (UNESCO, 2022). In South-East Europe (SEE), where transitions toward green and digital economies intersect with persistent governance and social inclusion gaps, the Regional Bureau for Science and Culture in Europe (Venice) acts as a hub to convene science-policy-society interfaces, promote culture- and nature-based solutions, and advance ocean and environmental literacy as levers for sustainable development. These priorities align with UNESCO's Education for Sustainable Development for 2030 (ESD-2030) framework, which calls for whole-institution transformation, local relevance, and lifelong learning to drive the SDGs (UNESCO, 2019).

The EfE process—UNECE's long-standing intergovernmental platform—provides the regional policy backdrop for SEE. Its Ninth Ministerial Conference (Nicosia, 5–7 October 2022) sharpened pan-European priorities around circular and green economy transitions, sustainable infrastructure, and Education for Sustainable Development, while reaffirming implementation through national strategies and subregional cooperation (UNECE, 2022). For SEE, where cross-border water basins, cultural landscapes, and energy corridors are shared, EfE's outcome documents create an enabling environment for UNESCO to scale programmatic work on ESD, science cooperation, and culture-based resilience, and to align with national sustainability strategies and EU policy instruments.

At the same time, human mobility, skills flows, and demographic change are re-shaping the sustainability agenda in the subregion. OECD analyses point to structurally rising international migration in Europe, with implications for labor markets, skills recognition, and social cohesion (OECD, 2024). In health and care systems—key sectors for inclusive and resilient development—the global mismatch and maldistribution of workforce remain salient

(World Health Organization, 2016). SEE's sustainability transition thus intersects with questions of qualified migration, credential recognition, and gendered labor segmentation—dimensions widely discussed in the specialized literature (Ambrosini, 2020; Cogo, 2018; Piper, 2008)—and increasingly relevant to UNESCO's cross-cutting priorities on inclusion, gender equality, and leaving no one behind.

Bringing these strands together, the 2023–2028 window offers a consequential opportunity to read UNESCO's strategic instruments (41 C/4; ESD-2030) alongside the EfE commitments to: (i) integrate ESD into policies and institutions; (ii) mobilize science, culture, and heritage for climate action and circularity; and (iii) strengthen social inclusion through skills, equity, and participation. Framing SEE through this lens enables a nuanced analysis of how UNESCO's programmatic pathways can catalyze policy coherence, pilot regionally-relevant models (e.g., biosphere reserves, geoparks, heritage-led regeneration), and support Member States in operationalizing EfE outcomes with measurable impacts by 2028.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

UNESCO's Strategic Framework and Education for Sustainable Development (ESD-2030)

UNESCO's Medium-Term Strategy for 2022–2029 (41 C/4) sets the foundation for the Organization's action over an eight-year horizon, aligning its mission with the priorities of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The strategy emphasizes the need for transformative education, scientific cooperation, cultural diversity, and knowledge sharing as central drivers for building more resilient and inclusive societies (UNESCO, 2022). Within this framework, Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) is not treated merely as a curricular theme, but rather as a holistic approach aimed at reshaping institutions, practices, and values across learning systems.

The consolidation of the ESD for 2030 Framework, adopted in 2019, redefined ESD as a cross-cutting policy instrument to equip learners with the knowledge, skills, values, and agency to address complex sustainability challenges (UNESCO, 2019). It calls for a “whole-institution approach,” whereby educational institutions integrate sustainability into governance, operations, teaching, and community engagement. This approach reflects a paradigm shift: rather than

treating sustainability as an add-on to existing curricula, it reorients education systems toward systemic transformation (Leicht, Heiss & Byun, 2018).

In Southeast Europe, the relevance of ESD-2030 is heightened by the intersection of socio-economic transition, environmental pressures, and democratic governance challenges. Regional disparities in access to quality education, coupled with the need to prepare new generations for green and digital economies, reinforce the urgency of embedding ESD into both national policies and local practices (UNECE, 2022a). Moreover, evidence suggests that ESD initiatives not only enhance sustainability competencies but also promote social inclusion and civic participation, which are crucial in contexts marked by youth emigration and institutional fragility (UNESCO, 2021).

At the policy level, UNESCO's strategy envisions education as a lever for policy coherence: by linking environmental governance, cultural heritage, and scientific cooperation, ESD-2030 contributes to the operationalization of multiple SDGs simultaneously, from climate action (SDG 13) to reduced inequalities (SDG 10) and quality education (SDG 4) (UNESCO, 2019). This integrated perspective aligns directly with the commitments made under the "Environment for Europe" process, which in its 2022 Nicosia Declaration reaffirmed education as a transformative tool for sustainability transitions (UNECE, 2022).

In sum, UNESCO's strategic framework and the ESD-2030 agenda provide the normative and programmatic scaffolding through which Southeast Europe can foster context-sensitive, inclusive, and future-oriented educational policies. These policies are expected not only to equip learners with critical competencies for sustainability but also to strengthen social resilience and democratic governance in a region facing multidimensional challenges.

The "Environment for Europe" Process and Regional Environmental Governance

The "Environment for Europe" (EfE) process, launched in 1991 under the auspices of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE), has become the main intergovernmental platform for pan-European cooperation on environmental matters (UNECE, 2022). Conceived initially to strengthen dialogue and coordination among European states in transition after the Cold War, EfE has since evolved into a framework linking environmental protection with sustainable development and regional integration. Its ministerial conferences,

convened every four to five years, provide a political space to define priorities, adopt regional strategies, and foster multilateral commitments that support both EU and non-EU member states.

EfE has produced several landmark initiatives, such as the *Pan-European Biological and Landscape Diversity Strategy (1995)* and the *Transport, Health and Environment Pan-European Programme (THE PEP)*, both of which have influenced national policy reforms and international cooperation (UNECE, 2021). Beyond sectoral achievements, EfE has functioned as a catalyst for building regional environmental governance, encouraging cross-border cooperation in areas such as transboundary water management, circular economy, and sustainable infrastructure (UNECE, 2022).

The Ninth Ministerial Conference, held in Nicosia in October 2022, marked a turning point by explicitly linking EfE priorities with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Paris Agreement. The Nicosia Declaration reaffirmed three central commitments: advancing circular and green economy models, scaling up sustainable infrastructure and resource efficiency, and strengthening Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) as a transversal instrument for policy coherence (UNECE, 2022a). These priorities reflect a shift toward integrated governance, recognizing that environmental sustainability cannot be achieved without social inclusion, knowledge transfer, and capacity building.

For Southeast Europe (SEE), EfE provides a critical normative and institutional framework. The subregion faces distinctive challenges—such as high dependence on carbon-intensive energy, pressures on biodiversity, and governance gaps—which require regional cooperation and multilevel policy alignment (European Environment Agency [EEA], 2023). EfE outcomes thus represent not only guiding principles but also actionable roadmaps for SEE countries to harmonize their policies with broader European standards while retaining sensitivity to local contexts.

Importantly, EfE's regional governance approach resonates with UNESCO's 2022–2029 Medium-Term Strategy, particularly in its call to leverage education, science, and culture as enablers of sustainable transitions (UNESCO, 2022). The complementarity between UNESCO's mandate and EfE's outcomes creates opportunities for policy synergies: while EfE defines intergovernmental commitments, UNESCO mobilizes knowledge systems, institutions, and communities to translate them into practice. This intersection reinforces the relevance of EfE not only as a regional policy framework but also as a bridge between global agendas and local realities in Southeast Europe.

Sustainable Development Challenges in Southeast Europe: Governance, Mobility, and Social Inclusion

Southeast Europe (SEE) represents a region where the imperatives of sustainable development are confronted with persistent structural vulnerabilities. Despite progress in aligning with the European Green Deal and the 2030 Agenda, countries in the region face systemic governance deficits, socio-economic inequalities, and environmental pressures that complicate the path toward sustainability (European Commission, 2023). Weak institutional capacities, corruption, and fragmented regulatory frameworks often hinder the effective implementation of sustainability policies, particularly in areas such as energy transition, biodiversity conservation, and waste management (European Environment Agency, 2023). These governance challenges reinforce the necessity of regional cooperation, as promoted through frameworks like the Environment for Europe (EfE) process, while also underscoring the importance of UNESCO's integrative role in mobilizing education, science, and culture for resilience (UNESCO, 2022).

Another salient dimension of the sustainability agenda in SEE is human mobility. The region has long been characterized by emigration, especially of skilled youth and health professionals, leading to demographic imbalances and labor market constraints (OECD, 2024). This "brain drain" exacerbates governance and development gaps, as states lose critical human capital necessary for implementing green and digital transitions. At the same time, SEE functions as both a corridor and destination for migration, shaped by broader European migration regimes. Studies highlight that while mobility can contribute to development through remittances and transnational networks, the lack of effective mechanisms for skills recognition and equitable integration often results in underutilization of migrant potential (Ambrosini, 2020; Cogo, 2018). These dynamics reveal how migration intersects with sustainability, requiring not only legal reforms but also inclusive social policies that valorize diversity and human capital.

Social inclusion remains another core challenge. Poverty rates, ethnic marginalization—particularly of Roma communities—and gender inequalities persist across SEE, undermining progress toward the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (United Nations Development Programme, 2021). The feminization of migration, as observed in healthcare and care sectors, places women in precarious positions within labor markets, reinforcing structural inequities (Piper, 2008). Moreover, ethnic and socio-economic disparities shape unequal access to

education, healthcare, and environmental goods, producing what has been termed “environmental injustice” in the region (EEA, 2023). Addressing these gaps requires an integrated approach that combines governance reforms, inclusive education, and regional solidarity mechanisms.

In this context, SEE’s sustainable development challenges cannot be understood solely as environmental or economic issues, but rather as multidimensional problems that interlink governance, mobility, and social equity. By bridging these dimensions, UNESCO’s 2023–2028 strategy and the EfE framework can provide complementary avenues to foster resilience, policy coherence, and inclusive growth. The region’s trajectory toward sustainability will ultimately depend on its ability to overcome governance weaknesses, harness the developmental potential of migration, and advance social inclusion as a central pillar of environmental and economic reforms.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative and interdisciplinary research design, combining documentary analysis, comparative policy review, and interpretive approaches to assess how UNESCO’s 2023–2028 strategy can contribute to sustainable development in Southeast Europe (SEE) within the framework of the *Environment for Europe* (EfE) process. The methodological orientation reflects the need to integrate legal, policy, and socio-economic perspectives when analyzing sustainability governance in a complex regional setting (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

First, a documentary and normative analysis was undertaken, focusing on UNESCO’s Medium-Term Strategy 2022–2029 (41 C/4), the *Education for Sustainable Development for 2030 (ESD-2030) Framework*, and the outcome documents of the Ninth EfE Ministerial Conference held in Nicosia in 2022. These primary sources were examined alongside reports from the European Environment Agency (EEA) and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), which provide contextual evidence on environmental performance, governance, and mobility trends in SEE (EEA, 2023; OECD, 2024).

Second, a comparative approach was employed to contrast policy commitments under EfE with UNESCO’s strategic objectives and with EU-level instruments such as the European Green Deal. This method enables the identification of complementarities, gaps, and synergies

across governance frameworks, while also highlighting how SEE states position themselves vis-à-vis pan-European sustainability agendas (European Commission, 2023; UNECE, 2022).

Third, a thematic analysis was conducted on peer-reviewed literature addressing governance challenges, migration dynamics, and social inclusion in SEE (Ambrosini, 2020; Cogo, 2018; Piper, 2008). The aim was to capture how structural issues—such as brain drain, demographic change, and gender inequalities—intersect with environmental and educational policies.

Finally, the study adopts an interdisciplinary lens, drawing on international law, environmental governance, sociology of migration, and education for sustainable development. This integrative perspective allows for a more nuanced understanding of how UNESCO's frameworks and EfE commitments can be operationalized to address the region's multidimensional sustainability challenges (UNESCO, 2022; UNECE, 2022).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The analysis of UNESCO's strategic documents (UNESCO, 2022) and the *Environment for Europe* (EfE) outcomes (UNECE, 2022a; 2022b) reveals significant convergence between global commitments to sustainable development and the regional priorities of Southeast Europe (SEE). Three main results emerge from this study: (i) the centrality of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD-2030) as both a normative framework and a practical instrument; (ii) the complementarity between EfE and UNESCO's 2023–2028 programmatic priorities; and (iii) the identification of governance, mobility, and inclusion gaps that still constrain effective implementation in SEE.

The first finding highlights the role of ESD-2030 as a strategic driver for sustainability in SEE. By embedding sustainability principles into educational institutions, UNESCO provides governments with a policy instrument capable of producing long-term transformations in governance, social behavior, and labor markets (UNESCO, 2019; Leicht, Heiss & Byun, 2018). The discussion shows that SEE countries are progressively aligning with ESD-2030, but disparities remain in terms of teacher training, institutional resources, and integration into national curricula (UNESCO, 2021). These findings reinforce the EfE Nicosia Declaration, which explicitly recognized education as a cornerstone of environmental governance (UNECE, 2022).

The second result concerns the institutional synergies between UNESCO and EfE. EfE's governance framework emphasizes circular economy, sustainable infrastructure, and policy harmonization across borders (UNECE, 2022). UNESCO's mandate complements this by mobilizing knowledge systems, cultural heritage, and science diplomacy to foster cooperation. The discussion suggests that this dual framework can enhance policy coherence, bridging gaps between global agendas (e.g., the Paris Agreement, the 2030 Agenda) and local implementation in SEE. Nevertheless, weak governance capacities and corruption risks in some SEE countries (European Commission, 2023; EEA, 2023) remain structural obstacles, limiting the translation of these frameworks into concrete actions.

The third result addresses mobility and inclusion as cross-cutting sustainability issues. Migration and demographic change play a pivotal role in shaping SEE's development trajectory (OECD, 2024). The findings indicate that the loss of skilled professionals, particularly in health and education sectors, continues to undermine the region's ability to sustain reforms, reinforcing what scholars term "brain drain" (Ambrosini, 2020; Cogo, 2018). Furthermore, women migrants in care-related fields face systemic disadvantages, reflecting broader patterns of the feminization of migration (Piper, 2008). This intersection of governance fragility, human capital outflow, and social inequality suggests that sustainability cannot be addressed through environmental policies alone, but requires inclusive strategies that valorize diversity and mobility as assets rather than liabilities.

The discussion underscores that UNESCO's 2023–2028 strategy offers valuable opportunities to operationalize EfE outcomes in SEE, but effective implementation depends on overcoming institutional weaknesses, addressing migration-related challenges, and promoting inclusive governance. The region's sustainability transition must therefore be understood as a multi-scalar process, requiring alignment between international commitments, national reforms, and local community engagement. ESD-2030 emerges as a practical entry point for systemic change, while EfE provides the political platform for regional cooperation. The integration of these frameworks offers a roadmap for SEE to advance sustainability not only as an environmental goal but as a comprehensive socio-political transformation.

CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that UNESCO's 2023–2028 strategic orientation provides a coherent framework for advancing sustainable development in Southeast Europe (SEE), particularly when analyzed in conjunction with the commitments of the *Environment for Europe* (EfE) process. The results highlight three key dimensions. First, Education for Sustainable Development (ESD-2030) emerges as a transformative instrument capable of reorienting institutions, policies, and communities toward sustainability, reinforcing EfE's recognition of education as a cornerstone of environmental governance (UNESCO, 2019; UNECE, 2022a). Second, the complementarity between UNESCO's integrative approach—combining education, science, and culture—and EfE's political platform for regional cooperation underscores the potential for greater policy coherence and alignment with global agendas such as the 2030 Agenda and the Paris Agreement.

At the same time, the study emphasizes that SEE's path toward sustainability is constrained by persistent governance weaknesses, migration dynamics, and social inequalities. Brain drain, feminization of migration, and ethnic marginalization continue to undermine the region's capacity to implement ambitious reforms (Ambrosini, 2020; Piper, 2008; OECD, 2024). These findings suggest that sustainable development in SEE cannot be reduced to environmental or economic reforms alone but requires a comprehensive socio-political transformation that addresses institutional fragility and promotes inclusive growth.

The article argues that the interplay between UNESCO's strategy and EfE commitments offers a unique window of opportunity for SEE. If effectively implemented, these frameworks can move beyond declaratory policies to produce tangible impacts through systemic ESD integration, strengthened regional governance, and inclusive policies that valorize diversity and mobility. Ultimately, the success of UNESCO's 2023–2028 strategy in SEE will depend on its capacity to translate global principles into localized actions, ensuring that sustainability transitions are not only environmentally sound but also socially just and politically resilient.

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