

# Liberalism all the way down? Multilevel discourse analysis of adult education for sustainable development policies

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## Abstract

*This study analyses adult education for sustainable development policies, examining their dominant discursive orientations – neoliberal, liberal, and critical – across global, EU, and national levels. Focusing on Slovenia and its transnational policy influences in this field, this study highlights the prevalence of liberal and neoliberal discourses combined in various ways alongside a comparatively limited presence of critical discourse. At the global level, the United Nations’ influence emphasises liberal discourse aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), while the EU policies exhibit a predominant neoliberal discourse, which has solidified at the national level, particularly in the Slovenian policies from the last decade. A prevalent interplay of neoliberal and liberal discourses characterises Slovenian adult education for sustainable development policies, reflecting the substantial influence of transnational actors.*

**Keywords:** adult education for sustainable development, education policies, Sustainable Development Goals, European Union, Slovenia

## Introduction

Sustainable development (SD) is crucial for fostering favourable living conditions for all people on this planet and ensuring its preservation, with (adult) education for sustainable development (ESD) playing a significant role, as already emphasised by various authors (e.g., Bourn et al., 2016; Buckler & Creech, 2014; Milana & Tarozzi, 2019; Webb et al., 2019). ESD, under the influence of the United Nations (UN), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), and more economically oriented intergovernmental organisations, such as the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the World Bank, has experienced accelerated



development since the turn of the millennium. Since 2015, following the adoption of the 2030 Agenda and its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), even more attention has been directed towards this educational concept. The role of ESD is embedded in Target 4.7 of the SDGs, which aims to ‘ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development’ (UN, 2015, p. 17).

However, there is a risk of an overly instrumental understanding and use of ESD and a danger of ascribing an overly ambitious social role to ESD while minimising the importance of diverse developmental factors (Wolhuter, 2022). This is because ‘too much faith in education as a driver of social development is unjustified’ since what is mainly needed is ‘global change in the areas of environmental and economic policies and better democratic standards’ (Skubic Ermenc & Niemczyk, 2022, p. 6). Simultaneously, with the advent of the 2030 Agenda, the role of adult learning and education (ALE) for SD has strengthened through increased political support for ESD initiatives for learners of all ages (Guimarães & Gontarska, 2020; UNESCO, 2020). This has raised hopes for ALE to adopt a more significant role in global educational agendas and policies (Elfert, 2019), despite criticisms of neglecting adult education in favour of lifelong learning and prioritising economic goals in education (Milana et al., 2017; Orlović Lovren & Popović, 2018).

The significant support that ESD receives at the global political level can, however, also lead to certain influences on its conceptualisation. Various policy levels affect this field because the issues ESD seeks to address are global and systemic and must, therefore, be addressed systematically. For instance, education policies must be formulated at various levels, which must be broadly conceived and must interlink the challenges of increasing social justice with the challenges of mitigating negative human impacts on the environment (Milana et al., 2016). Simultaneously, the policies and practices of SD often focus solely on its environmental dimension, even though this dimension is only one of SD’s three dimensions, alongside economic and social dimensions. Such a tendency may compromise the holistic nature of ESD as ‘education that encourages changes in knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes to enable a more sustainable and just society for all’ (Leicht et al., 2018, p. 7). Consequently, criticisms arise regarding ESD as a ‘superficial’ education perspective that neglects the deep-rooted causes of the current social and environmental issues, uncritically perpetuating (neo)colonial relationships between countries and falling short of achieving real transformative effects (Nagata, 2017; Tikly, 2019).

Moreover, the global level’s influence of the conceptualisations of SD and ESD is also reflected in the policies of the European Union (EU) and its member states. As stated in *The new European consensus on development* (EU, 2017), the developmental approach of the 2030 Agenda and SDGs is ‘fully consistent with EU values and principles’ (p. 3) and is to be implemented by the EU and its member states ‘across all internal and external policies in a comprehensive and strategic approach’ (p. 5). The EU, therefore, plans and promotes various SD policies in which adult education is also given an important role (e.g., EU, 2017, 2018; see also Košmerl et al., 2020). However, EU’s influence, along with the influence from the global level, has various implications for different member states (Guimarães & Gontarska, 2020), highlighting how in different spaces – and in spaces within spaces – AESD policy is shaped. Since such transnational policy influences tend to be stronger in smaller countries with relatively young adult education systems (Field, 2018), the national-level analysis in this study is done on the case of Slovenia, which is one of the EU member states where the significant impact of intergovernmental organisations’ ALE policy has already been seen (Mikulec, 2021, 2023; Singh et al., 2023). Slovenia is also a country whose policies could be analysed in this study without

any language barriers. Similar to the EU, Slovenia states that it is ‘fully committed to all 17 goals of the 2030 Agenda’, as well as to the EU’s development policies (Ministry of Cohesion and Regional Development, 2020).

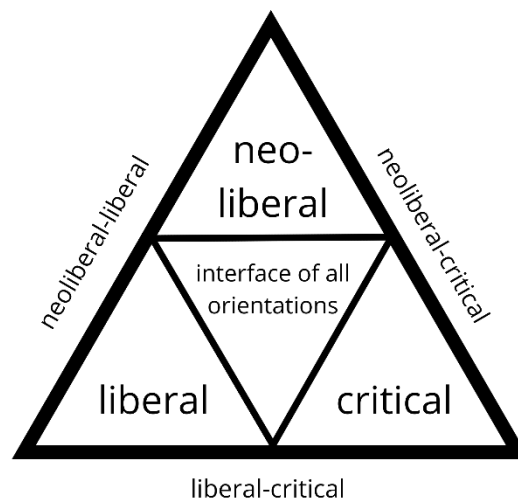
The explicit statements of the policy-making bodies at the three aforementioned levels (global, EU, and national) regarding the pursuit of SDGs do not seem completely true when the discourses they utilise to shape their policies are closely analysed. In contrast to the declarative policy alignment of all three levels, clear differences in their discursive orientations emerge, which this study aims to examine through discourse analysis, social cartography, and the following research questions:

- (1) What are the key global political influences on EU policies in the field of adult ESD (AESD)?
- (2) What are the key transnational political influences on Slovenia’s policies in the field of AESD?

### *Discursive orientations as an analytical framework*

Among the authors who have extensively dealt with discourses in education policies are Andreotti et al. (2016), who developed a heuristic consisting of neoliberal, liberal, and critical discursive orientations and their interfaces (see Figure 1). They define discourse in line with Foucault (1972) as ‘vocabularies, or ways of speaking, generated within the onto-epistemic grammatical matrix of the dominant modern-colonial global imaginary’, with discursive orientations representing distinct discursive configurations (Pashby & Andreotti, 2016, p. 776). Andreotti et al. (2016) developed the heuristic based on higher education policies and have also applied it to ESD policies (Pashby & Andreotti, 2016).

*Figure 1.* Discursive orientations and their interfaces. Source: (Andreotti et al., 2016)



Discursive orientations primarily differ in their overarching goals and conceptualisations of education and knowledge (Andreotti et al., 2016; Pashby & Andreotti, 2016; Pashby et al., 2020). The neoliberal discursive orientation aims to contribute to human capital and economic development and is reflected in educational systems through the weakening of public funding. Hence, educational institutions are primarily accountable to the market and strive to adapt to it as effectively as possible. Further, advertising and competition with other education providers are crucial in this context. Knowledge is perceived as a

commodity and is instrumentally valued primarily within its direct financial worth. Learners are conceptualised as clients engaged in a business relationship with the educator and the educational institution, while the role of the government is to facilitate the functioning and expansion of the market, with its central interest being the enhancement of employability.

Furthermore, the liberal discursive orientation aspires to achieve democracy, equality, the common good, active civil society, inclusion, universal values, individual freedom, mutual respect, the equality of cultures, and a Keynesian economic structure, in which the central force is the unpredictable demand, leading the state to play a crucial role in wealth redistribution and ensuring welfare. Educational institutions are primarily accountable to the state, and education is recognised as a means of participatory democracy and the common good with intrinsic value, helping citizens grow and contribute to social development and progress. Education must, hence, be accessible to all, especially marginalised groups. The liberal discourse aims to harmoniously combine the provision of democratic rights, social welfare, and economic prosperity while maintaining a universal understanding of progress (and governance). However, by doing this, it retains a singular and seemingly universal understanding of development, which obscures the connections between the material and epistemological violence of economic development, helping the Global North remain the ‘first world’ through the unequal global distribution of wealth and labour.

Finally, the critical discursive orientation strives to enhance social justice, challenge the status quo, and interrogate systemic injustices and oppression (e.g., capitalist exploitation, [neo]colonialism, and racism), including their historical roots. It aims to achieve this by disrupting violent patterns of thought and action and the associated systems of power and knowledge that have become socially normalised and perceived as harmless and self-evident. In contrast to the liberal discourse, it emphasises the transformation and pluralisation of these patterns through historical and systemic analyses of oppressive patterns and unjust distributions of power, labour and resources. Education is similarly understood as a common good with inherent value; however, it carries an ethical responsibility to empower marginalised groups and enable a genuine diversity of perspectives. In ESD, it is imperative to encourage the participation of diverse voices, engage with diversity, and explore alternative development approaches while not separating environmental issues from broader problems of cultural, economic, and political inequalities (Andreotti et al., 2016; Pashby & Andreotti, 2016; Pashby et al., 2020).

It is evident from the description of these three discursive orientations that the heuristic gives preference to the critical discursive orientation, which is based on its theoretical foundations and shaped significantly by critiques of neoliberalism, liberalism or the liberal subject, and modernity (Pashby & Andreotti, 2016). Consistent with these critiques, the heuristic incorporates a postcolonial perspective, recognising all three discourses as part of the modern or colonial imaginary that projects the Western or European perspective as universal and normalises capitalist and colonial social relations (Andreotti et al., 2016). Consequently, all alternatives are perceived as incomprehensible or impossible (Pashby et al., 2020). However, as an attempt to transcend the modern imaginary, the authors propose a postcritical orientation, introducing ‘post’ traditions (postmodernism, poststructuralism, and postcolonialism) and intertwining them with the critical orientation to be understood within the dominant imaginary (Pashby & Costa, 2021; Pashby et al., 2020).

In addition to their different orientations and conceptualisations of education and knowledge, discursive orientations differ in their levels of analysis and intervention while

aiming to achieve social change. While the neoliberal and liberal orientations are closest to the methodological level, in which approaches in policy and practice transform while maintaining the same goals – often without critically reflecting these goals (changes in ways of doing) – the critical discourse is closer to the epistemological level, in which individuals’ beliefs transform (changes in ways of thinking) – which then also influence their actions and relationships, often catalysing similar changes in others within their social network (Pashby & Costa, 2021; Pashby et al., 2020). However, all three discursive orientations of the dominant imaginary remain at the same ontological level with the absence of changes in ways of existing, maintaining the separation of humans from nature and the determinism of existence with knowledge under the dominance of one – Cartesian, teleological, logocentric, and allochronic – form of rationality (Pashby & Costa, 2021; Pashby et al., 2020).

As the heuristic has already been successfully applied to the analysis of policies related to ESD in higher education (Pashby & Andreotti, 2016), of conceptualisations of global citizenship education (Pashby et al., 2020), and of different educational concepts that address global interdependencies (Košmerl, 2021), this study assumed the heuristic to be similarly applicable to the analysis of policies in the field of AESD. The main reasons for the selection of the heuristic as an analytical framework for this study were the heuristic’s alignment with various perspectives identified in the AESD literature and policies; avoidance of common ESD criticisms of the superficial and instrumental treatment of education; and neglect of deep-rooted causes of the current social and environmental issues. The heuristic averts these issues by considering various interfaces of discourses and their positioning within a shared capitalist and colonial metanarrative.

## Methodology

The primary research method employed in this policy analysis is discourse analysis, as it ‘looks at patterns of language across texts and considers the relationship between language and the social and cultural contexts in which it is used’ (Paltridge, 2006, p. 2). Specifically, Gill’s (2000) approach to discourse analysis was followed, which eclectically draws on the three main traditions of discourse analysis: critical linguistics, speech-act theory, and poststructuralist tradition. Following this approach, a sceptical (re)reading of all chosen policies was first performed, focusing on their assumptions, nuances, and contradictions. Parts of the policies addressing AESD and exhibiting connections to the chosen analytical framework (discursive orientations) were then selected for open coding, leading to the inductive identification of emerging themes (the main themes are depicted in connection to discursive categories in figures in the results section). Special attention was dedicated to discursive interfaces (interactions of two or more discourses within the same policy goal), as they often highlight important nuances and contradictions within and between different policies and levels. At each level, the policies’ discursive similarities and differences were identified (also depicted in figures in the results section), following which a similar comparison was conducted between different levels (presented in the discussion section). Policy influence was claimed only for cases in which the policy-making bodies themselves explicitly claimed it. To further clarify the emerging discursive patterns and their identified policy aims, social cartography was used at each of the analysed levels.

Defined by Paulston and Liebman (1994) as an effective method of providing postmodern visual dialogue – which is ‘a way of communicating how we see the social changes developing in the world around us’ and a two-dimensional representation of the ‘researcher’s perceived application, allocation, or appropriation of social space by social

groups at a given time and in a given place' (p. 215) – social cartography problematises 'common-sense' imaginaries, highlighting the limitations, contradictions, and conflicts in their discourses and associated conceptual assumptions, creating space for alternative discourses (Andreotti et al., 2016). By 'mapping relations between and within various epistemic communities and discursive and interpretative frameworks', it challenges the positivist imperative for universal perspectives and singular knowledge (Suša & Andreotti, 2019). Further, Paulston (2009, p. 977), who also described social cartography as a form of Deleuzian rhizome and a heuristic metaphor for the debates of a particular field, identifies five steps in its formation, which were followed in this study: (1) selecting an issue or debate (AESD policy); (2) choosing a broad and representative range of texts and translating their characteristics, ideas, and worldviews (main AESD policies on different levels); (3) identifying the range of positions present in these texts (identified discursive orientations and their interfaces); (4) identifying, locating, and interrelating the textual communities that share these positions and worldviews (different policy-making bodies); and (5) testing and adjusting the map (ensuring validity and comparability across different levels).

The policies selected for analysis are identified as central by the policy-making bodies that adopted them. Furthermore, considering the interdisciplinary nature of AESD, the influence of diverse policies on it, and the aim of comparability across different levels, three types of current policies were selected at each level: (1) a key SD policy (which is not solely related to education), (2) a key ESD policy (at all levels, ESD is more at the forefront than solely AESD), and (3) a key AESD policy (main ALE policy that also addresses ESD). This approach formed the following set of policies for analysis (Table 1).

Table 1. Selected policies

	Key SD policy	Key ESD policy	Key AESD policy
Global level	2030 Agenda	ESD for 2030	Marrakech framework for action
EU level	European Green Deal	Council recommendation on learning for the green transition and SD	Council resolution on a new European agenda for adult learning 2021-2030
National level	Slovenian development strategy 2030	Guidelines for ESD from preschool to university education	Resolution on the master plan for adult education 2022-2030

## Results

### *Global level*

The overarching policy at the global level is the 2030 Agenda (UN, 2015), fully titled *Transforming our world: The 2030 agenda for sustainable development*. It identifies 'eradicating poverty in all its forms and dimensions' as a crucial global challenge and a prerequisite for SD (UN, 2015, p. 1). Its fundamental goals are caring for the planet, ensuring prosperity for all people, strengthening peace, expanding freedom, upholding human rights, and achieving gender equality. At the same time, its 'supremely ambitious and transformational vision' encompasses social development, environmental protection,

and the establishment of a world in which every country enjoys sustainable and inclusive economic growth based on sustainable modes of production and consumption, with democracy and the rule of law as key elements of SD (UN, 2015, p. 3). The 2030 Agenda emphasises that its goals are mutually interconnected and inseparable, balancing all three dimensions of SD: economic, social, and environmental. As the overarching global development policy, it calls for collaborative implementation by ‘all countries, all stakeholders, and all people’ (UN, 2015, p. 2). The primary responsibility of monitoring the achievement of SDGs at the national and regional levels lies with member states (creating a potential for desired reporting), while at the global level, UN bodies are entrusted with this task.

The 2030 Agenda characterises its SDGs as a ‘comprehensive, far-reaching, and people-centred set of universal and transformative goals and targets’, which ‘involve the entire world, developed and developing countries alike’ (UN, 2015, p. 3). The universal conception of development, along with advocacy for universal values, such as democracy, equality, and individual freedom, serves as a key indicator of the dominance of the liberal discourse in the 2030 Agenda. It does so while partially extending into the neoliberal discourse, with its direct focus on economic growth. A few aims, which could be classified as critical discourse on a declarative level, such as ‘transforming our world’, increasing social justice, and collectively addressing environmental and social issues, can be seen as a combination of the liberal and critical orientations. This is because the proposed solutions do not presuppose actual social transformation and remain within the framework of existing social systems that are grounded in the interplay of democracy, capitalism, and (neo)colonialism. These discourses are similarly reflected when specifically dealing with education, where the 2030 Agenda’s key commitment is to provide inclusive and equitable quality education at all levels, especially focusing on gender equality. Adult learners – not necessarily adult education participants – are directly referenced only in Targets 4.4 and 4.6, focusing on a substantial increase in literate youth and adults with relevant skills for employment, decent work, and entrepreneurship.

Under the 2030 Agenda, UNESCO (2019, 2020) aims to strengthen ESD through its global framework titled *Education for sustainable development: Towards achieving the SDGs*, which is abbreviated as ESD for 2030 from here on. The framework establishes five priority areas for the establishment of ESD by 2030:

- (1) Advancing policy (systematic strengthening of ESD at all levels)
- (2) Transforming learning and training environments (cooperation of educational organisations with local communities)
- (3) Building the capacities of educators and trainers (provision of relevant learning opportunities)
- (4) Empowering and mobilising youth (provision of opportunities for engagement)
- (5) Accelerating sustainable solutions at the local level (viewing of local environments as the most appropriate space for achieving significant transformations)

In addition to the priority areas, ESD for 2030 summarises that its strategic objective is to ‘promote ESD as a key element of quality education and a key enabler of all 17 Sustainable Development Goals with special attention to (1) individual transformation, (2) social transformation, and (3) technological advances’ (UNESCO, 2020, p. 18). As ESD seeks to contribute to all SDGs, it also seeks to contribute to further economic growth. However, it highlights the tensions between economic growth and SD principles

and advocates a critical examination of this relationship within ESD. Consequently, unlike the 2030 Agenda, ESD for 2030 incorporates a critical discursive orientation, additionally highlighting the problematic nature of ever-increasing production and consumption and the need for systemic changes and a transformation of the status quo. ESD must, hence, address the ‘deep structural causes of unsustainable development’ and ‘encourage learners to explore values which could provide an alternative to consumer societies’ while critically challenging the illusion that technology can solve most SD challenges (UNESCO, 2020, pp. 5-6). Moreover, the dominance of critical discourse becomes even more pronounced in describing ESD practices. Education is recognised as a means of contributing to the implementation of SDGs; however, it is also perceived as a space for questioning existing social and environmental conditions and fostering a critical and contextual understanding of SDGs. Additionally, there is an emphasis on holistically adapting ESD to specific contexts and target groups; empowering learners to take responsible action and make effective decisions; and exploring possibilities for social transformations through individual transformations. There is also a moderate presence of the liberal discourse in the framework, mainly from pursuing the 2030 Agenda and advocating for the integration of all SDGs into educational practices and policies. While striving for a balanced provision of democratic rights, social sustainability, and economic prosperity, it also strives to maintain a universal understanding of progress. The inclusion of ‘local and Indigenous knowledge’ is also mentioned, which can be interpreted as an attempt to introduce a postcritical discourse.

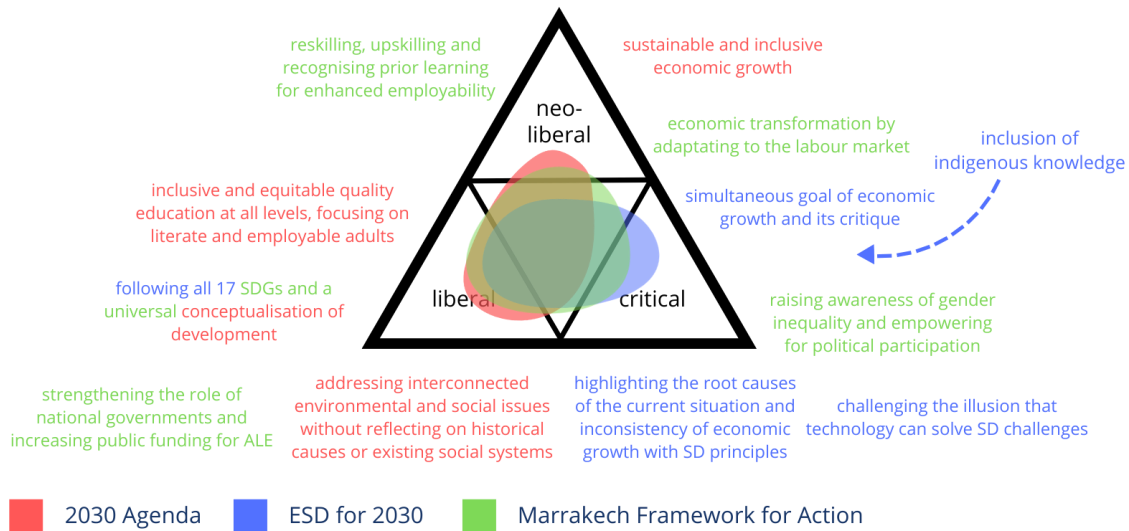
Both the 2030 Agenda and ESD for 2030 devote little attention to ALE. However, the *Marrakech framework for action: Harnessing the transformational power of ALE* (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning [UIL], 2022) is dedicated to this field. It emphasises its commitment to the 2030 Agenda and, similar to ESD for 2030, advocates for the achievement of all SDGs. The framework encompasses six areas of action for the systemic improvement of ALE: establishing frameworks and governance arrangements, redesigning systems for ALE, ensuring the quality of learning, increasing funding, promoting inclusion, and expanding learning domains. In addition, it sets specific goals for ESD, aiming for greater climate change awareness, a better understanding of SD challenges, citizen empowerment, the adaptation of consumer and lifestyle habits, and environmental political participation. It aspires to contribute to adults becoming ‘change agents’ at local, national, and global levels and thus role models for younger generations. Simultaneously, ALE organisations could serve as examples in their environments by ‘greening their curricula, facilities, and management’ (UIL, 2022, p. 8).

The *Marrakech framework for action* exhibits a considerable dispersion of discourses. The liberal orientation is predominant, emphasising education as a common good and a fundamental right for all. There is a focus on increasing public funding, strengthening the role of national governments, ensuring democratic processes and equal access, and preparing older individuals for a meaningful post-retirement life and their ongoing social contribution. The neoliberal discourse is also evident, highlighting the transformation of the economy and the labour market due to demographic changes, industrial progress, globalisation, and climate change. This necessitates providing diverse opportunities for knowledge acquisition and learning support for employment, decent work, career development, and entrepreneurship, including recognising prior learning. The framework also emphasises the ‘need to build strategies for reskilling and upskilling, which are necessary to meet the changing needs of societies and the world of work brought about especially by the green and digital transitions’ (UIL, 2022, p. 2). In an interface of critical and neoliberal discourses, the urgency of ensuring reskilling and upskilling is also advocated while pursuing economic transformation to achieve carbon



neutrality and environmental conservation. Moreover, critical discourse can be found in this framework, with an emphasis on gender inequality, the digital divide (calling to address online power relations and nurture critical thinking), and the empowerment of adults for political participation as a significant goal of ALE.

Figure 2. Discursive orientations at the global level



As evidenced by Figure 2, the 2030 Agenda exhibits the most liberal and neoliberal orientation, while ESD for 2030 aligns the most with the critical orientation (and displays the potential presence of postcritical discourse). Additionally, the *Marrakech framework for action* represents the greatest balance of discourses, encompassing all three orientations. There are, hence, substantial discursive differences between the policies, despite their shared commitment to the 2030 Agenda and the full implementation of the SDGs. At the same time, all three policies demonstrate an awareness of diverse environmental and social issues and universally conceptualise current development, with ESD for 2030 allowing the most room for criticism, including examining the historical causes of this development. It also provides space for critical evaluation in addressing economic growth, highlighting its inconsistency with SD principles, despite aligning, at least at a declarative level, with the 2030 Agenda and its illusion of ‘sustainable, inclusive, and sustained economic growth’. The Marrakech framework, in the meantime, does not explicitly address or define this aspect.

## EU level

The EU is committed to the ‘full implementation’ of the 2030 Agenda and is positioning itself as its ‘leading advocate’ (Directorate-General for Communication of the European Commission, 2022; European Commission [EC], 2020). The current key SD policy of the EU is the European Green Deal (EC, 2019), which places SDGs at ‘the heart of the EU’s policymaking and action’ (p. 3). Its central objective of achieving a fair transition to EU climate neutrality by 2050 is primarily aimed at addressing climate change and reducing environmental degradation while maintaining economic growth. It envisions extensive changes involving the prioritisation of clean and affordable energy supply, circular economy, energy-efficient construction, zero pollution, biodiversity preservation, environmentally friendly food systems, and sustainable mobility. Consequently, it

represents a ‘new growth strategy that aims to *transform the EU into a fair and prosperous society, with a modern, resource-efficient competitive economy [...] where economic growth is decoupled from resource use*’ (EC, 2019, p. 2, emphasis in the original). Education and training are two of the identified supportive areas for implementing the deal, with the aim of intensifying discussions in educational institutions with the participants and the broader local community about the changes needed for the green transition. They also include funding for the construction of a more sustainable school infrastructure and retraining and upskilling the workforce in growing economic sectors.

Critical discourse in the European Green Deal is present only in conjunction with the other two discourses. There is a (critical) awareness of the interconnectedness of environmental and social issues, advocating to ‘*transform the economy with the aim of climate neutrality*’ (EC, 2019, p. 4, emphasis in the original). However, this is (neoliberally) perceived as ‘*an opportunity to expand sustainable and job-intensive economic activity*’, strengthening economic competitiveness and fostering economic growth (EC, 2019, p. 7, emphasis in the original). Additionally, the crucial role of private investments, the market, and empowered consumers is emphasised for achieving the green transition, as well as for resolving the environmental crisis through further economic and technological progress, including the necessity of enhancing ‘*employability in the green economy*’ (EC, 2019, p. 19). Education is (liberally) seen as a means of involving the public in the planned green transition, emphasising a just and inclusive transition, concern for the most vulnerable, alignment with the SDGs, and the ‘EU as a global leader’ in future development.

The *Council recommendation of 16 June 2022 on learning for the green transition and sustainable development* (Council of the European Union, 2022) provides a clearer picture of the EU’s conceptualisation of ESD, as it is a ‘key policy statement highlighting the crucial role of education and training in working towards the goals of the European Green Deal’, setting guidelines for member states’ ‘systemic shift in education’ (EC, 2022). The guidelines are summarised in three points:

- (1) Strengthen support for education and training systems in contributing to the green transition and SD.
- (2) Establish learning for the green transition and SD as one of the priority areas in education and training policies and programmes, and implement or further develop comprehensive and collaborative teaching and learning approaches for the green transition and SD.
- (3) Provide diverse learning opportunities in formal, nonformal, and informal settings.

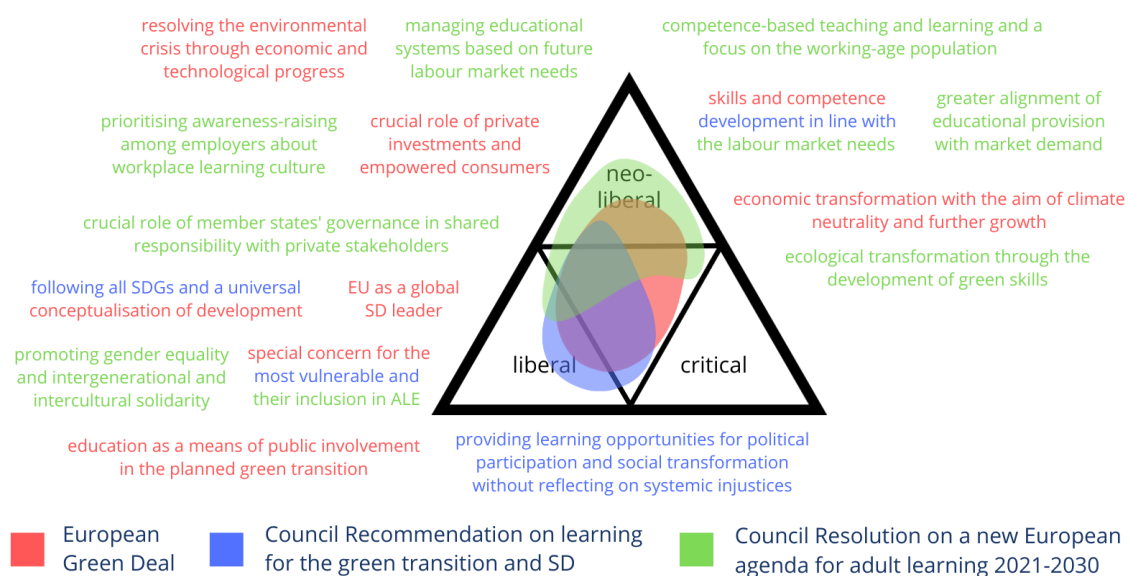
Learning for the green transition and SD is described as a form of support in ‘acquiring the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to live more sustainably, in [the] changing patterns of consumption and production, in embracing healthier lifestyles, and in contributing – both individually and collectively – to a more sustainable economy and society’ (Council of the European Union, 2022, p. 2). This includes building ‘skills and competences increasingly needed in the labour market’ and promoting an ‘understanding of the interconnected global challenges’ (Council of the European Union, 2022, p. 2). Without critical reflection on systemic social injustices or their historical causes, critical discourse is again present only at the interface of discourses, despite emphasising decision-making and action to achieve a sustainable economy and a just society; this

action includes youth's voices and the development of critical thinking. Additionally, promoting justice and inclusivity, individually and collectively contributing to social transformation, and learning to reflect and act to create a more sustainable world and economy fall into the interface of critical and liberal discourses. In the liberal orientation, advocacy for human rights, gender equality, a culture of peace, global citizenship, cultural diversity, and the inclusion of marginalised individuals in learning processes are highlighted, while in the neoliberal orientation, developing learners' skills and competences for the needs of the labour market is emphasised.

The last analysed policy at the EU level is the *Council resolution on a new European agenda for adult learning 2021-2030* (Council of the European Union, 2021), representing a 'vision of how adult learning should develop in Europe by 2030' (EC, 2021). Its central objective is to 'increase and improve the provision, promotion, and take-up of formal, nonformal, and informal learning opportunities for all', including providing 'all the necessary knowledge, skills, and competences to create an inclusive, sustainable, socially just, and more resilient Europe' (Council of the European Union, 2021, p. 9, 11). The resolution aims to raise the EU's learning participation of adults aged 25-64 years to 60% by 2030, establishing five priority areas: governance; the supply and take-up of lifelong learning opportunities; accessibility and flexibility; quality, equity, inclusion, and success in adult learning; and green and digital transitions. These priority areas, hence, align with the *Marrakech framework for action*, with an important difference indicating a weaker focus on increasing funding and a greater focus on green and digital transitions.

A strong neoliberal orientation prevails among the resolution's discursive orientations, which is reflected in its efforts to align educational provision with market demand, manage educational systems based on anticipated future labour market needs and required skills, increase permeability in formal and nonformal adult education for the purpose of reskilling and upskilling, promote competence-based teaching and learning, raise awareness among employers about the importance of fostering a workplace learning culture, and 'provide short learning experiences to acquire or update targeted competences' (Council of the European Union, 2021, p. 17). Furthermore, a focus on the working-age population is evident in the participation target, which is set only for individuals aged 25-64 years. Additionally, neoliberal discourse is intertwined with both critical and liberal discursive orientations. In its interface with critical discourse, neoliberal discourse strives for an 'ecological transformation' through the development of green skills, whereas in its interface with liberal discourse, it emphasises the crucial role of member states' governance and the 'shared responsibility of public and private stakeholders' while supplementing sustainable public funding with other funding for 'all types, forms, and levels of adult learning' (Council of the European Union, 2021, p. 12, 15). The liberal discourse also highlights the role of adult learning in social inclusion and advocates gender equality and intergenerational and intercultural solidarity, with special attention devoted to vulnerable groups.

Figure 3. Discursive orientations at the EU level.



In Figure 3, a prevalent dispersion at the EU level between the liberal and neoliberal orientations can be identified, with minor interweaving also with critical discourse. The *Council recommendation of 16 June 2022 on learning for the green transition and sustainable development* is closest to critical discourse and is the only analysed EU policy with a prevailing liberal orientation, while the other two EU policies predominantly exhibit neoliberal discourse. Despite the European Green Deal and the council recommendation advocating the pursuit of SDGs and the council resolution calling for closer collaboration with the UN and UNESCO, a greater neoliberal orientation and a greater discursive homogeneity are present in Europe compared to the global level. Nevertheless, a notable similarity found at the global and EU levels is their joint emphasis on the necessity of economic growth, which is coupled with the expansion of green sectors and the development of green skills as significant forces in addressing the environmental crisis.

### *National level*

Slovenia regularly aligns its policies with the ‘development documents of the European Union and international organisations’ and is ‘fully committed to all 17 goals of the 2030 Agenda’ (Ministry of Cohesion and Regional Development, 2020). Its current key SD policy is the *Slovenian development strategy 2030* (Slovenian Government, 2017), which establishes five strategic orientations and 12 development goals. Each of these goals is related to one or more SDGs. One of the strategic orientations is also ‘learning for and through life’, which appears in addition to creating an inclusive, healthy, safe, and responsible society, a highly productive economy, a well-preserved natural environment, and a high level of cooperation, competence, and governance efficiency. In addition to highlighting the key challenges in the field of ‘learning for and through life’, the document emphasises ‘numerous discrepancies between supply and demand for knowledge and skills on the labour market’, low investments in digital skills development, and the inclusion of older individuals in education to increase their workforce participation (Slovenian Government, 2017, p. 11). Furthermore, it strives to

break ‘the link between economic growth and growth in [the] consumption of resources and GHG [greenhouse gas] emissions’, which can be achieved ‘through education and [by] including various stakeholders in the transition to a circular economy’ (Slovenian Government, 2017, p. 39). This makes the document the most ambitious policy regarding the role of education in achieving SD, among those analysed.

Given the outlined aims of the Slovenian development strategy, it is unsurprising that the prevailing discursive orientation is neoliberal. This is reflected in its focus on increasing workforce participation, the more efficient allocation of the workforce with greater alignment of its knowledge and skills with the labour market needs, and the development of ‘practical and technical knowledge and skills in order to improve employability’ (Slovenian Government, 2017, p. 26). In the neoliberal-liberal interface, an additional emphasis exists on ensuring the wellbeing of all citizens through inclusive and green economic growth and high economic competitiveness. In the neoliberal-critical interface, an emphasis is seen on learning and training to strengthen innovativeness, critical thinking, responsibility, and entrepreneurship and searching for ‘new development paradigms which take our planet’s capacities into account’ in conjunction with continued economic growth (Slovenian Government, 2017, p. 5). The liberal discourse’s focus is on learning to reduce social exclusion and ensure a high quality of life for all, addressing the learning needs of lower-educated and other disadvantaged groups, and strengthening the rule of law to protect ‘citizens’ rights and economic development and welfare’ (Slovenian Government, 2017, p. 42). Finally, poverty and inequality reduction are emphasised in the liberal-critical discursive interface.

In addition, Slovenia’s key ESD policy is the oldest analysed policy, with the *Guidelines for education for sustainable development from preschool to university education* being adopted in 2007. Despite the title suggesting otherwise, the guidelines are not framed solely within the context of preschool and the formal education of children and youth. Instead, their broader goal is to emphasise ‘education for sustainable development and to show possibilities for realising sustainable development in formal, nonformal, and informal learning’. They also highlight lifelong learning for SD (Ministry of Education, 2007, pp. 1-2). Furthermore, the guidelines establish five objectives:

- (1) Provide normative foundations supporting ESD.
- (2) Train educators in ESD.
- (3) Ensure appropriate teaching materials for ESD implementation.
- (4) Expedite ESD research and development.
- (5) Strengthen the cooperation of all stakeholders in the field of ESD.

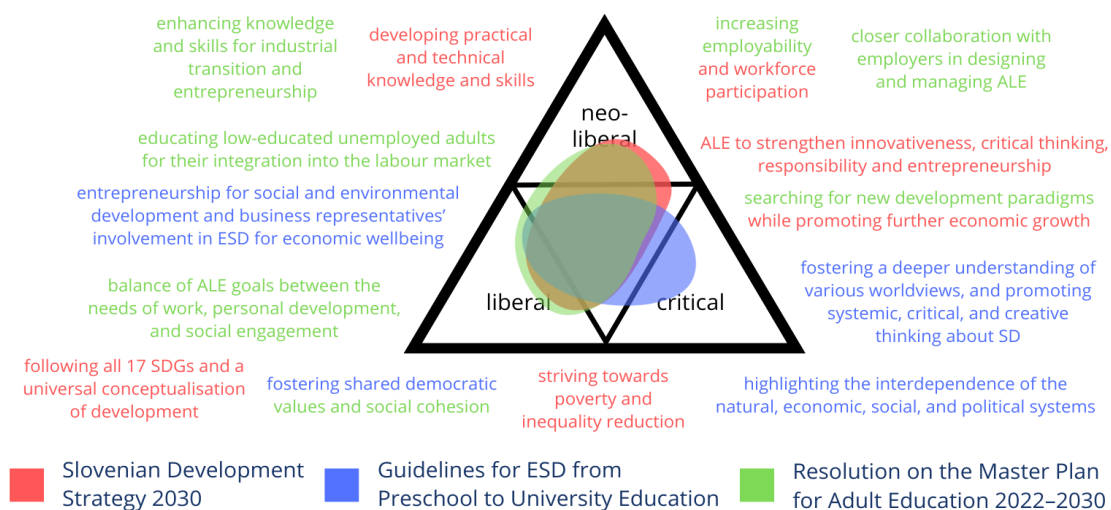
The guidelines predominantly adopt a critical discursive orientation, which is reflected in defining justice as a key SD area; connecting environmental, economic, and social issues; highlighting the interdependence of the natural, economic, social, and political systems; fostering a deeper understanding of various worldviews; and promoting systemic, critical, and creative thinking about SD across local, regional, national, and global levels. In the critical-liberal interface, there is also an emphasis on increasing equality and participation in decision-making processes, including influencing social and economic development. In the critical-neoliberal interface, economic development is highlighted with consideration of its environmental issues. Further, the neoliberal discursive orientation is present only in its interface with the liberal discourse, particularly while emphasising entrepreneurship development to contribute to social and environmental development and economic wellbeing by involving business representatives to shape ESD. Additionally, the liberal orientation is evident in fostering shared democratic values and social

cohesion, ensuring citizens’ ‘physical, mental, social, cultural, and economic wellbeing’ (Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 1).

Similar to the global and EU levels, there is currently no specific policy for AESD in Slovenia. Instead, an important role is assigned to it in the key ALE policy. The current Slovenian policy is the *Resolution on the master plan for adult education 2022–2030* (2022), which defines public interest in adult education, ‘guiding adult education policy on the national level and contributing to the systematic regulation of the field’ (p. 2980). With the vision to provide opportunities and incentives for quality ALE to all, the resolution establishes six goals: increase adults’ participation in lifelong learning, enhance their basic skills and general knowledge, raise their educational level, increase the population’s skills in line with labour market needs, strengthen the development and research of adult education, and improve supporting activities for raising adult education participation and quality. Under each of these goals, the vital role of ESD is underlined.

The resolution is mainly influenced by neoliberal discourse, reflected in its emphasis on increasing the employability and flexibility of the workforce, encouraging collaboration with employers in ALE, refining knowledge and skills for industrial transition and entrepreneurship, increasing labour activity, pursuing sustainable and inclusive economic growth, and ‘regulating the adult education and training policy so that it meets the needs of the labour market’ (Resolution, 2022, p. 2984). Furthermore, the neoliberal discourse intertwines with the liberal discourse in its focus on educating low-educated, unemployed adults to support labour market integration, increasing economic competitiveness and productivity to ensure the population’s wellbeing and enhancing the role of state and local governments in human resource development. The liberal discourse is also strongly represented, particularly emphasising its concern for vulnerable groups and respect for diversity and balancing adult education goals among work, personal development, and social engagement. In contrast, the critical discourse is present only in interfaces with the other two discourses. It intertwines with the liberal discourse by emphasising the development of critical thinking, democratic active citizenship, and socially responsible behaviour; it also intertwines with the neoliberal discourse by warning that ‘without a break from past practices of economic development and a shift to a circular, green, and sustainably oriented economy [...] we will face unprecedented consequences’ (Resolution, 2022, p. 3007).

Figure 4. Discursive orientations at the national level.



As evidenced by Figure 4, the *Slovenian development strategy* and the *Resolution on the master plan for adult education* exhibit a primarily neoliberal discursive orientation. Of all the analysed policies, they are also mutually the most aligned. Although the development strategy is slightly more neoliberal and less liberal, with additional minor differences in discursive interfaces, the resolution closely follows its discursive orientation. Overall, both neoliberal and liberal discourses are represented in similar measures at the national level, despite the liberal discourse not being the predominant discourse of any individual Slovenian policy. The neoliberal discourse is also less pronounced in Slovenia than at the EU level (but more pronounced than at the global level). Similar to the EU level, no (potential) postcritical discourse was identified in Slovenian policies. However, the guidelines for ESD are noticeable due to their predominant critical discursive orientation, rendering them the only policy at the EU or national level with such an orientation. A commonality between Slovenian policies and higher policy levels is their commitment to sustainable and green economic growth, with the key ESD policy displaying the least neoliberal discursive orientation at each level.

## Discussion

A significant influence from higher-level policies is evident in the Slovenian AESD policies – initially from the global level with the SDGs but even more so from the EU level, which also provides a vital part of the funding for adult education in Slovenia. The overarching AESD directions are, hence, formulated at the global level but are concretised at the national level primarily through the EU’s strategic frameworks and financial mechanisms. While the UN declaratively has a considerable influence on the EU in this field, as the SDGs are ‘fully consistent with EU values and principles’ (EU, 2017, p. 2), this study identified substantial differences in discourses and political priorities between the two intergovernmental organisations. While a predominant liberal discursive orientation is identified at the global level, the EU level is primarily neoliberal and discursively more homogeneous. Moreover, Elfert’s (2019) claim that the global education agendas under the SDGs reproduce existing social conditions and prioritise economic over humanistic objectives, thus, applies even more to the EU. This is because it more extensively exploits the SDGs to legitimise and promote the neoliberal objectives of its ALE policy.

While the EU exerts a predominant transnational influence on the analysed Slovenian policies, a notable difference exists between policies from the last decade and from 2007. The older policy, *Guidelines for education for sustainable development from preschool to university education*, solely references the European Social Fund within the EU and draws on diverse UN policies. In contrast, the two recent policies identify the EU as their primary international influence, aligning closely with its discursive orientation. Additionally, the more recent policies assign significance to another intergovernmental organisation: the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD).

In line with the influence of the EU, the more recent Slovenian policies exhibit a prevailing neoliberal discursive orientation (albeit to a lesser extent than the EU policies), contrasting with the primarily critical orientation of the older policy. The neoliberal influence is, in part, derived from the global level, as all three analysed levels converge on a commitment to sustainable economic growth, emphasising education as a pivotal factor in attaining this objective. However, (direct) influence from the global level is relatively limited and exemplified by the Slovenian *Resolution on the master plan for adult education*, which is the only analysed policy from the era of the 2030 Agenda that does not address the SDGs. As in the broader global context, UNESCO’s decreasing

influence on education policy is, thus, evident (Elfert & Ydesen, 2023). One of the main reasons for this decline in the Slovenian context is – as noted also in the resolution (2022) – that ‘adult education is largely co-financed with funds from the European Cohesion Policy and other European funds, as well as international programmes’ (p. 2980), of which the UN is not a part.

The mentioned influences from the UN and the EU are reflected in the relatively equal presence of neoliberal and liberal discursive orientations in Slovenian policies, with critical discourse having a minor presence. Consequently, the national level represents a synthesis of both higher policy levels and reflects the overall discursive landscape across all three levels. Such a distribution of discursive orientations in ESD policies appears to be common. In fact, Pashby and Andreotti (2016) similarly identify a prevalent interplay between neoliberal and liberal discourses, with critical discourse showing a minor presence in their analysis of higher ESD policies. They also emphasise that this representation of discursive orientations falls short of genuine transformation; instead, it perpetuates modern metanarratives and tendencies, thereby sustaining the existing power dynamics in global society.

## **Conclusion**

This study shows that in the case of Slovenian AESD policies, there is not only a policy influence of *liberalism all the way down* but also of *neoliberalism all the way down*, strengthening itself on its path from the global to the national level via the strategic frameworks of the EU. The liberal discursive orientation – prevailing at the global level (with the 2030 Agenda being both most liberal and neoliberal, ESD for 2030 being the most critical, and the Marrakech framework being the most well-balanced) – and neoliberal orientation – prevailing at the EU level – are both well-reflected at the national level in Slovenian AESD policies. These policies themselves claim the important impact of these higher policy levels and closely resemble their discursive synthesis. At the same time, the critical orientation, which has moderate representation at the global level, is also partially retained in the Slovenian AESD policy. However, it is not reinforced at the EU level, contributing to the critical orientation becoming narrower in more recent national policies. As the neoliberal discursive orientation gains prominence, there is a noticeable change in the primary influence on transnational policies within the Slovenian AESD policy, shifting from the UN to the EU. This shift also signifies a step away from following the ambition of ‘transforming our world’ (as is the aspiration of the 2030 Agenda), instead perpetuating the current dominant economic and social systems that lead the world to existing unsustainable ways of living. Although the AESD only plays a supportive role in this process, it can still be an important catalyst in shaping a sustainable future by challenging the dominant top-down policy perspectives on SD and fostering (post)critical thinking of pressing environmental and social issues, contributing to contrary bottom-up influences.

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