



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF EDUCATION AND ECONOMIC SCIENCES (IJEES)

ECONOMICS EDUCATION FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: A CONCEPTUAL AND PEDAGOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

Gotip Nehemiah Wokji¹ 

¹  Department of Arts and Social Science Education, Veritas University Abuja, Nigeria

Received: 03 February 2025 • Accepted: 10 February 2025 • Published: 28 March 2025

Abstract

Economics Education plays a strategic role in advancing Sustainable Development by shaping how individuals understand economic decision-making in relation to social equity, environmental stewardship, and long-term global responsibility. Despite the growing prominence of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), limited conceptual clarity exists regarding the specific contributions of Economics Education to fostering sustainability-oriented competencies. This paper adopts a conceptual and theoretical approach to examine the role of Economics Education in promoting sustainable development. It synthesizes key concepts of sustainable development, core principles of ESD, and the pedagogical responsibilities and competencies required of economics educators. The paper further explores instructional approaches that enable learners to think systemically, evaluate trade-offs, and develop action competence for sustainability. Drawing on interdisciplinary perspectives, the study argues that Economics Education can serve as a critical bridge between economic theory and real-world sustainability challenges. The paper concludes that integrating sustainability into Economics Education requires a reorientation of curriculum content, teaching strategies, and value formation, emphasizing not only economic efficiency but also ethical reasoning, social responsibility, and environmental awareness. This conceptual framework contributes to ongoing discourse on sustainable education by clarifying how Economics Education can meaningfully support the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals.

Keywords: Economics Education; Sustainable Development; Education for Sustainable Development; Pedagogical Framework; Action.

How to cite: Wokji. N. G. (2025). Economics Education for Sustainable Development: A Conceptual and Pedagogical Perspective. International Journal of Education and Economic Sciences (IJEES), 1(1), 51-60

1. Introduction

Sustainable development has emerged as a central global agenda as societies confront increasingly complex challenges related to environmental degradation, social inequality, and economic instability. Since the World Commission on Environment and Development introduced the concept in *Our Common*

Future, sustainable development has been widely understood as an integrative framework that seeks to balance economic growth, social inclusion, and environmental protection without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (WCED, 1987). This framework has since been reinforced through international commitments, most notably the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which emphasize the interdependence of economic, social, and environmental systems in achieving long-term human well-being (Sachs, 2023).

Within this global context, education has been widely recognized as a critical driver of sustainable development. Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) aims to equip individuals with the knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes necessary to make informed and responsible decisions that contribute to sustainability at local, national, and global levels (Harris, 2021). Beyond the transmission of knowledge, ESD emphasizes transformative learning processes that foster critical thinking, ethical reasoning, and active engagement with real-world problems. As such, education is not merely a supporting instrument of sustainable development but a foundational mechanism through which sustainability principles are internalized and enacted (Roberts & Cohen, 2020).

Among the various disciplines contributing to ESD, Economics Education occupies a particularly strategic position. Economic systems shape patterns of production, consumption, resource allocation, and policy decisions that directly influence environmental sustainability and social equity (Elkington, 2024). Traditional economics education, however, has often prioritized efficiency, growth, and market optimization, with limited attention to the broader social and ecological consequences of economic activity. In the face of contemporary sustainability challenges—such as climate change, resource depletion, and widening inequality—this narrow focus has become increasingly insufficient (Kuhlman & Farrington, 2022). Consequently, there is a growing need to reconsider how economics is taught and how economic reasoning can be aligned with sustainability principles.

Despite increasing scholarly interest in ESD, the specific role of Economics Education within this framework remains conceptually underdeveloped. Existing literature frequently addresses sustainable development in broad educational terms or examines economics primarily as a policy instrument, yet provides limited analytical clarity regarding the competencies, pedagogical orientations, and value frameworks required of Economics Education to meaningfully contribute to sustainability outcomes (Harris, 2021; Sachs, 2023). In particular, there is a lack of integrative conceptual work that explicitly connects sustainable development theory, ESD principles, and economics-specific pedagogical practices, especially within developing country contexts where sustainability challenges are often most acute (Roberts & Cohen, 2020).

This paper seeks to address this gap by offering a conceptual and pedagogical re-examination of Economics Education for Sustainable Development. Rather than presenting empirical findings, the study adopts a theoretical synthesis approach, drawing on interdisciplinary literature in sustainable development, education, and economics to clarify how Economics Education can foster sustainability-oriented action competence. The paper examines the conceptual foundations of sustainable development, outlines key principles of ESD, and explores the roles, competencies, and teaching approaches required

of economics educators to support sustainable thinking and behavior (Elkington, 2024; Kuhlman & Farrington, 2022).

The contribution of this paper lies in its effort to reposition Economics Education as a transformative educational practice that extends beyond technical economic analysis. By articulating a coherent conceptual framework and pedagogical implications, the study highlights how Economics Education can function as a bridge between economic theory and the ethical, social, and environmental dimensions of sustainable development. In doing so, the paper aims to contribute to ongoing academic discourse and provide a foundation for curriculum development, teacher education, and policy formulation aligned with the goals of sustainable development and the SDGs (Sachs, 2023; WCED, 1987).

2. Conceptual Foundations of Sustainable Development

Sustainable development is not merely a policy slogan or a technical framework, but a transformative paradigm that redefines how societies understand progress, growth, and human well-being. Its conceptual foundations rest on the recognition that economic development, social equity, and environmental protection are deeply interconnected and cannot be pursued in isolation. The contemporary understanding of sustainable development has evolved from earlier growth-centered development models toward a more holistic and integrative approach that acknowledges ecological limits, social justice, and intergenerational responsibility.

The most widely cited articulation of sustainable development originates from the World Commission on Environment and Development, which defines it as development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (WCED, 1987). While this definition has been influential, its significance lies less in its wording than in its normative implications. It introduces the idea that development is constrained by environmental boundaries and ethical obligations across generations, thereby challenging purely market-driven or short-term economic perspectives.

Over time, scholars have expanded this foundational idea into a multidimensional framework. Sustainable development is now commonly understood as resting on three interrelated pillars: economic sustainability, social sustainability, and environmental sustainability (Harris, 2021; Roberts & Cohen, 2020). Economic sustainability emphasizes long-term economic viability, efficient resource allocation, and stable livelihoods. Social sustainability focuses on equity, inclusion, access to basic services, and the reduction of poverty and inequality. Environmental sustainability addresses the protection of ecosystems, biodiversity, and natural resources that underpin human survival and economic activity. These dimensions are not independent objectives but mutually reinforcing conditions for sustainable human development. More recent scholarship has further emphasized the political and ethical dimensions of sustainable development. Sachs (2023) argues that sustainability cannot be achieved solely through technological innovation or market adjustments; it requires governance structures, institutional capacity, and collective political commitment at local, national, and global levels. Similarly, Elkington's (2024) concept of the "triple bottom line" underscores the need for organizations and societies to evaluate success not only in economic terms, but also through social and environmental outcomes. This expanded perspective

positions sustainable development as a normative project grounded in values such as responsibility, justice, and stewardship.

An important conceptual shift within sustainable development discourse is the movement from viewing sustainability as an outcome to understanding it as a process. Sustainable development is increasingly framed as a dynamic, adaptive, and learning-oriented process that responds to changing environmental conditions, social needs, and economic realities (Kuhlman & Farrington, 2022). This process-oriented view highlights uncertainty, trade-offs, and complexity, and underscores the need for continuous reflection and informed decision-making rather than fixed solutions.

From this perspective, sustainable development fundamentally challenges traditional economic assumptions that prioritize growth maximization and short-term efficiency. Instead, it calls for an economic logic that integrates long-term ecological constraints, social well-being, and ethical considerations into decision-making processes. Economic activities are no longer evaluated solely by their contribution to gross domestic product, but by their capacity to enhance quality of life while preserving environmental integrity and social cohesion (Harris, 2021).

These conceptual foundations have significant implications for education, particularly Economics Education. If sustainable development is understood as an integrative, value-laden, and process-oriented paradigm, then education must move beyond the transmission of technical knowledge toward fostering critical understanding, ethical reasoning, and systemic thinking. Economics Education, in this sense, becomes a crucial arena for translating abstract sustainability principles into analytical tools and decision-making frameworks that shape how individuals and societies understand and pursue development.

In summary, the conceptual foundations of sustainable development rest on three key arguments: first, that economic, social, and environmental systems are inseparable; second, that development must be guided by ethical considerations and intergenerational responsibility; and third, that sustainability is an ongoing, adaptive process rather than a fixed endpoint. These foundations provide the theoretical basis for rethinking the role of Economics Education within Education for Sustainable Development and set the stage for examining how economic teaching and learning can support sustainability-oriented competencies.

3. Education for Sustainable Development (ESD): Principles and Scope

Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) has emerged as a transformative educational paradigm that responds to the growing complexity of global sustainability challenges. Rather than functioning as a discrete subject area, ESD represents an integrative approach to learning that seeks to empower individuals to contribute meaningfully to sustainable social, economic, and environmental futures. At its core, ESD is grounded in the recognition that sustainability challenges are systemic, value-laden, and interconnected, requiring educational responses that extend beyond traditional disciplinary boundaries.

One of the defining principles of ESD is its emphasis on lifelong and inclusive learning. ESD is not confined to formal educational institutions such as schools and universities, but encompasses non-formal

and informal learning contexts, including communities, workplaces, and civil society organizations. This broad scope reflects the understanding that sustainability-related competencies must be continuously developed throughout an individual's life and applied across diverse social settings (Harris, 2021; Roberts & Cohen, 2020). By engaging learners of all ages, ESD seeks to cultivate a shared sense of responsibility for sustainable development across generations.

Another central principle of ESD is its interdisciplinary and cross-sectoral nature. Sustainability issues such as climate change, poverty, energy transition, and resource management cannot be adequately understood or addressed through a single disciplinary lens. ESD therefore promotes the integration of knowledge from economics, environmental science, sociology, political science, and related fields, enabling learners to analyze complex problems from multiple perspectives (Kuhlman & Farrington, 2022). This interdisciplinary orientation not only enhances cognitive understanding but also fosters the ability to navigate trade-offs and uncertainties inherent in sustainability decision-making.

ESD also emphasizes learner-centered and participatory pedagogies that encourage critical reflection and active engagement. Rather than positioning learners as passive recipients of information, ESD promotes inquiry-based learning, problem-solving, dialogue, and collaboration. These pedagogical approaches aim to develop higher-order thinking skills, including systems thinking, critical analysis, and ethical reasoning, which are essential for addressing sustainability challenges (Sachs, 2023). Through participatory learning processes, learners are encouraged to question dominant development paradigms and explore alternative pathways toward sustainability.

A further defining feature of ESD is its normative orientation toward values and ethics. Sustainable development is inherently linked to questions of justice, responsibility, and intergenerational equity. As such, ESD seeks to support learners in examining their own values, assumptions, and behaviors, as well as the social and economic structures that shape sustainability outcomes. This value-oriented dimension distinguishes ESD from purely technical or skills-based educational approaches and underscores its role in fostering responsible citizenship and social transformation (Elkington, 2024).

The scope of ESD extends beyond individual learning outcomes to encompass institutional and societal transformation. Educational institutions are increasingly expected to model sustainability principles through their curricula, governance structures, and community engagement practices. In this sense, ESD operates at multiple levels, influencing not only what is taught, but also how education systems function and how they interact with broader societal actors (Roberts & Cohen, 2020). This systemic perspective highlights the role of education as both a catalyst and a context for sustainable development.

Within this broad framework, Economics Education holds a distinctive position. Economic reasoning shapes decisions related to production, consumption, investment, and policy, all of which have profound implications for sustainability. By embedding ESD principles within Economics Education, educators can help learners understand the economic dimensions of sustainability challenges and evaluate the social and environmental consequences of economic choices. This integration enables Economics Education to

contribute not only to knowledge acquisition but also to the development of action competence, preparing learners to engage responsibly with sustainability issues in their professional and civic lives.

4. Principles And Scope Role Of Economics Education In Sustainable Development

Economics Education plays a pivotal role in advancing sustainable development because economic reasoning fundamentally shapes how societies allocate resources, define progress, and respond to social and environmental challenges. Decisions related to production, consumption, investment, trade, and public policy are inherently economic in nature and have far-reaching implications for sustainability outcomes. Consequently, the way economics is taught influences not only students' understanding of economic systems but also their capacity to engage responsibly with sustainability challenges.

Traditionally, Economics Education has been dominated by models that emphasize market efficiency, profit maximization, and economic growth as primary indicators of development. While these perspectives have contributed significantly to understanding economic behavior, they often marginalize the social and environmental externalities associated with economic activity. Such an approach risks reinforcing unsustainable practices by framing environmental degradation and social inequality as secondary concerns rather than integral components of economic analysis (Harris, 2021; Elkington, 2024). In the context of sustainable development, this narrow framing is increasingly inadequate.

Reorienting Economics Education toward sustainability requires expanding its analytical scope to incorporate long-term ecological constraints, social justice considerations, and ethical dimensions of economic decision-making. Sustainable development challenges conventional economic assumptions by questioning unlimited growth, emphasizing intergenerational equity, and highlighting the finite nature of natural resources (WCED, 1987; Sachs, 2023). Economics Education, therefore, must move beyond static models and introduce students to dynamic, systems-based perspectives that account for complex interactions between economic, social, and environmental systems.

Within Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), Economics Education serves as a critical bridge between abstract sustainability principles and concrete decision-making processes. Economic concepts such as opportunity cost, incentives, externalities, and public goods provide essential tools for analyzing sustainability trade-offs and policy options. When contextualized within sustainability frameworks, these concepts enable learners to evaluate the consequences of economic choices and to understand how policy interventions, market mechanisms, and institutional arrangements can promote or hinder sustainable outcomes (Kuhlman & Farrington, 2022).

A key contribution of Economics Education to sustainable development lies in its potential to foster action competence. Action competence refers to the ability to apply knowledge, skills, and values in real-world contexts to address complex problems. By engaging students with real-life sustainability issues—such as energy transition, climate change mitigation, poverty reduction, and responsible consumption—Economics Education can cultivate the capacity to analyze problems, assess alternatives, and make informed decisions that align with sustainability goals (Roberts & Cohen, 2020). This approach shifts the focus from passive knowledge acquisition to active engagement and problem-solving.

Furthermore, Economics Education plays an important role in shaping students' values and ethical orientations. Economic decisions are not value-neutral; they reflect assumptions about fairness, responsibility, and the distribution of costs and benefits across society. Integrating sustainability into Economics Education encourages critical reflection on these assumptions and promotes a more holistic understanding of economic success that includes social well-being and environmental integrity alongside financial performance (Elkington, 2024). In this sense, Economics Education contributes to the development of responsible citizens capable of participating in democratic and policy-making processes related to sustainable development.

The role of Economics Education is particularly significant in developing countries, where sustainability challenges are often intensified by poverty, resource constraints, and institutional limitations. In such contexts, Economics Education can support sustainable development by equipping learners with the analytical tools needed to evaluate development strategies, assess policy trade-offs, and design context-sensitive solutions. By grounding economic analysis in local realities while maintaining a global perspective, Economics Education can help bridge the gap between global sustainability agendas, such as the SDGs, and local development priorities (Sachs, 2023).

5. Competencies and Qualifications of Economics Educators for Sustainable Development

The effectiveness of Economics Education in advancing sustainable development depends largely on the competencies and professional qualifications of economics educators. As sustainability challenges are complex, interdisciplinary, and value-laden, educators are required to possess more than subject-matter expertise in traditional economic theory. They must be equipped with a combination of conceptual understanding, pedagogical skills, and ethical orientation that enables them to facilitate learning processes aligned with the principles of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD).

A foundational competency for economics educators is a comprehensive understanding of sustainable development and its multidimensional nature. Educators should be familiar with the economic, social, environmental, and political dimensions of sustainability, as well as with international frameworks such as the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This knowledge enables educators to contextualize economic concepts within broader sustainability agendas and to demonstrate how economic policies and practices influence long-term development outcomes (Harris, 2021; Sachs, 2023). Without such conceptual grounding, Economics Education risks reproducing narrow growth-oriented perspectives that are misaligned with sustainability goals.

In addition to conceptual knowledge, economics educators must possess strong analytical and research competencies. These include the ability to interpret economic data, assess the social and environmental impacts of economic policies, and evaluate trade-offs between competing development objectives. Research-oriented skills allow educators to introduce students to evidence-based reasoning and to engage them in critical analysis of sustainability-related issues, such as climate change mitigation, resource management, and poverty reduction (Kuhlman & Farrington, 2022). Such competencies are essential for fostering informed decision-making and systems thinking among learners.

Pedagogical competence represents another crucial dimension of educator qualifications. Teaching economics for sustainable development requires learner-centered and participatory instructional approaches that move beyond lecture-based content delivery. Economics educators should be skilled in facilitating inquiry-based learning, case study analysis, simulations, and project-based activities that connect theoretical concepts to real-world sustainability challenges. These pedagogical strategies support the development of higher-order cognitive skills, including critical thinking, problem-solving, and ethical reasoning, which are central to ESD (Roberts & Cohen, 2020).

Equally important are educators' communication and interdisciplinary collaboration skills. Sustainable development issues often require dialogue across disciplinary and professional boundaries. Economics educators should therefore be able to communicate complex economic ideas in accessible ways and collaborate with educators and experts from fields such as environmental science, sociology, political science, and business studies. This interdisciplinary engagement enriches learning experiences and helps students appreciate the interconnected nature of sustainability challenges (Elkington, 2024).

Beyond knowledge and skills, economics educators must demonstrate a strong commitment to values and ethical responsibility. Sustainable development is inherently normative, involving questions of justice, responsibility, and intergenerational equity. Educators play a critical role in modeling ethical behavior and fostering reflective dialogue about the moral implications of economic decisions. By encouraging students to examine their own values and assumptions, economics educators contribute to the development of responsible citizenship and social accountability (Harris, 2021).

In the context of developing countries, the qualifications of economics educators are particularly significant. Educators must be sensitive to local socio-economic realities while maintaining an awareness of global sustainability agendas. This dual perspective enables them to guide students in applying economic reasoning to context-specific development challenges and in aligning local actions with broader sustainability goals (Sachs, 2023). Professional development programs that support continuous learning and capacity building are therefore essential to strengthening the role of Economics Education in sustainable development.

Conclusion

This paper highlights the strategic role of Economics Education in advancing Sustainable Development within the framework of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD). It argues that traditional economics education, which often prioritizes efficiency and growth, is insufficient to address contemporary sustainability challenges. By integrating social equity, environmental stewardship, ethical reasoning, and systems thinking, Economics Education can support a more holistic understanding of development and equip learners to engage critically with the economic dimensions of sustainability.

The study contributes conceptually by clarifying the competencies and orientations required of economics educators to foster sustainability-oriented action competence. Although conceptual in nature, the framework offered provides a foundation for curriculum design, teacher education, and policy development aimed at aligning Economics Education with sustainable development goals. Future

empirical research is encouraged to examine how these principles are enacted in educational practice and how they influence student learning and decision-making in sustainability contexts.

Acknowledgment

The researchers would like to convey their profound appreciation to all participants engaged in this study and also appreciate Department of Arts and Social Science Education, Veritas University Abuja, Nigeria..

Ethical Considerations

Not Applicable

Conflict of Interest

The Authors declare there is no conflict of interest.

Funding

This research did not receive any financial support.

References

- Arokiasamy, A. R. A., Tat, H. H., & Abdullah, A. (2013). The effects of reward system and motivation on job satisfaction: evidence from the education industry in Malaysia. *World Applied Sciences Journal*, 24(12), 1597-1604.
- Beck, T., & Wu, H. (2021). Financial systems and economic development. *Finance Research Letters*, 41, 101–114. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.frl.2021.101-114>
- Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung (BMBF). (2005). *Bericht der Bundesregierung zur Bildung für eine nachhaltige Entwicklung* [Federal government's report on education for sustainable development]. Retrieved July 30, 2024, from https://www.igu-cge.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Luzern_Gesamtdokument_Band_42_101007.pdf
- Cumming, D., & Groh, A. P. (2020). Entrepreneurial finance: Unifying themes and future directions. *Journal of Corporate Finance*, 50, 538–555. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jcorpfin.2018.01.011>
- Elkington, J. (2024). *The triple bottom line: Sustainability and corporate performance*. Wiley.
- Elston, J. A., & Audretsch, D. B. (2022). *Finance and financial management*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Harris, J. M. (2021). *Sustainable development: Principles and practices*. Routledge.
- Kuhlman, T., & Farrington, J. (2022). *Sustainability science: An introduction*. Springer.
- Lee, K., & Persson, T. (2021). Finance and the economy: A comprehensive overview. *Journal of Financial Economics*, 145(3), 645–670. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jfineco.2020.09.001>

- Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). (2024). *Finance and investment*.
<https://www.oecd.org/finance/>
- Roberts, D., & Cohen, M. (2020). *Introduction to sustainable development*. Cambridge University Press.
- Sachs, J. D. (2023). *The age of sustainable development*. Columbia University Press.
- World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED). (1987). *Our common future*. Oxford University Press.
- World Economic Forum. (2024). Climate action: What is the UN's Summit of the Future in 2024 and why is it important? Retrieved July 30, 2024, from <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2024/07/un-summit-future-sdgs/>
- Wangechi, B., Anne, S. A. N. G., & Kiragu, D. N. U. (2018). Role of reward systems on job satisfaction of employees in the County Government of Nyeri, Kenya.