

JustEd: Education as and for Environmental, Epistemic and Transitional Justice to enable Sustainable Development

Evidence brief 1

Key findings

JustEd: ‘Education as and for Environmental, Epistemic and Transitional Justice to enable Sustainable Development’ is a research project that ran from 2020-2023, funded by the UKRI Global Challenges Research Fund, led by researchers from the University of Bath (UK), Group for the Analysis of Development (Peru), Gulu University (Uganda), Tribhuvan University (Nepal) and the University of Bristol (UK). Our mixed-methods research design included analysis of policy, secondary school curricula, pedagogy, young people’s experiences and their intended actions related to the SDGs in Peru, Nepal and Uganda.

We have identified the complex trajectories between secondary education and sustainable development and based on our analysis, we argue for far more attention to be paid to the role of education as

justice to enable education’s expected contribution to sustainable development. By this we mean, the ways that schooling environments and educational experiences are just, and how far secondary curriculum and pedagogy respond to, and support young people to understand and eventually change, the multiple injustices that they experience in their daily lives. We have developed three evidence briefs to share key aspects of the project’s outcomes.

- **Evidence brief 1: Key findings**
- Evidence brief 2: The importance of a justice-based approach to secondary school curriculum and pedagogy
- Evidence brief 3: Education as justice across the system

Introduction to JustEd

Beyond “ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education” (SDG 4), education is expected to play a key role in relation to the goals of promoting climate action (SDG13), peace, justice and strong institutions (SDG16) and reduced inequalities (SDG10). That education can drive the achievement of these SDGs often assumes linear trajectories, for example, that including content about sustainability in curricula or textbooks will lead to learners’ positive climate action. It also places great responsibility on education systems to be drivers of change in relation to developing learners’ knowledge, attitudes and skills. We see this explicitly in SDG target 4.7, which expects that all learners will acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including education for a culture of peace and non-violence. The JustEd research project has explored these assumptions and considered more robust ways that education can support a range of national and global development priorities.

JustEd was a large mixed methods comparative study of secondary education in Nepal, Peru and Uganda which combined policy analysis, curriculum content analysis, arts-based interviews with young people aged between 14 and 17, interviews with teachers, classroom observations and a learner survey. We have taken an explicit justice approach, and looked across social, environmental, epistemic and transitional justice, including the important linkages between them, to interrogate how:

- Notions of justice are embedded in policy, curriculum and pedagogy;
- Schools engage learners in the consumption and production of knowledge related to preventing violent conflict (SDG16), fostering transformative climate action (SDG13) and reducing inequalities (SDG10); and
- Learners’ understandings and experiences of justice, within and outside of school, interact and produce action related to SDG16,13 and 10.

Why Nepal, Peru and Uganda?

Nepal, Peru and Uganda are distant and distinct countries which nonetheless share some important characteristics that made them each uniquely interesting as research sites for this study both as individual studies and in comparison. Nepal, Peru and Uganda are all prominently affected by the global climate crisis and environmental degradation, in both ecological terms and the impacts on human development and inequalities. In northern Nepal, for example, many communities experience regular landslides that have devastating impacts on homes and ecologies and floods in the southern part, whereas in Uganda, many rural and disadvantaged communities rely on burning trees for charcoal despite widespread recognition of the erosion and other negative impacts this has on the natural environment. There is also widespread wetland reclamation for subsistence agriculture. In Peru, the Amazonian rainforest, a key resource in global climate regulation, is being harmed through both legal and illegal logging, mining and agriculture; glaciers are rapidly melting, affecting the country’s water supply; air, water and land pollution are rife, affecting the population’s health; and climate change is increasing the recurrence of the El Niño phenomenon, leading to both rains and droughts that affect people’s livelihoods and the country’s food supply.

Nepal, Peru and Uganda all have relatively recent histories of conflict that have inflicted immense human, cultural and political losses. The Internal Armed Conflict in Peru, from 1980 to 2000, resulted in thousands of disappearances of people as well as documented deaths. Twenty years of war in northern Uganda between the government and the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) forced people to evacuate some areas, and many farmers are still fighting to reclaim lands. From 1996 to 2006, Nepalese people experienced Maoist conflict between the Communist Party (Maoists) and the Nepal government. In all three countries, there is a need for affected communities, families and children to reflect and learn about these large-scale conflicts in reparative and helpful ways, but currently education does not prioritise learning of this nature.

All three countries also have rich cultural, linguistic and social diversity, which has been embedded in and is inextricable from legacies of discrimination, hierarchy, class and identity. These diversities are in turn closely connected to traditions and current practices around knowledge consumption and production.

Key terms

Our starting point for understanding justice in education is from a social justice approach. Here, we define **social justice in education** in terms of redistribution of material resources and opportunities, recognition of difference, and challenging associated discrimination, and representation of all to enable parity of participation within and beyond schooling.¹ Through our analysis and the development of the just education framework, we have seen the three justices that we focused on in our study (environmental, epistemic and transitional) as intersecting and overlapping elements of these core concepts of social justice – redistribution, recognition and representation. We believe that bringing a focus on these justices into these existing concepts enriches our understanding of (in)justice in education and can be a useful tool to analyse the ways that education can enable more just futures.

We understand the role of these justices within education in the following ways:

- **Environmental justice in education** responds to the environmental and social impact of climate change. It considers to the extent to which education is or can contribute to the survival and flourishing of the natural environment alongside considerations of equality and fairness in how humans experience, benefit from and are held accountable for the natural environment. This might include whether education is contributing to the collective behaviour changes and political action

that are needed to shift towards a low-emission economy which will bring both environmental and human benefits.²

- **Epistemic justice in education** considers how schools enable learners to acquire the epistemic resources to engage with and contribute knowledge that helps them to understand themselves and others, their position in the spaces in which they live and their potential contributions to change. This relates to how different kinds of knowledge, experiences and perspectives – for example Western, Indigenous, local and children's knowledge – are included, taught and assessed in schools. A key consideration is the extent to which schools foster equality and non-discrimination in the production, recognition and consumption of knowledge, appreciating that educational experiences of epistemic justice contribute to democratic participation.³
- **Transitional justice in education** focuses on the material and policy changes as well as the pedagogic and learning processes that are needed to recognise the dignity of individuals and groups, acknowledge past violations and injustices, and repair and redress the causes, effects and legacies of past violations. It also considers the multiple and complex ways that education contributes to past, current and future (in)justices.⁴

Methodological overview

The study involved data generation and analysis across policy, curriculum, pedagogy, learners' experiences and intended actions in secondary education. We first analysed relevant policies and documents, such as educational policies and other policies related to SDGs 10, 13 and 16, in which education might have been seen to have a role. We also analysed educational documents such as curricula, textbooks, learning materials and

1 Fraser, N. (2009). *Scales of justice: Reimagining political space in a globalizing world* (Vol. 31). Columbia University Press.

2 We note that there are different definitions of environmental and climate justice and tensions highlighted in the aspiration for both ecological and social/ anthropocentric justice. See: Nuwategeka, E., Monge, C., Shields, R., & Singh, A. (2021). *Exploring environmental justice in educational research*. <https://zenodo.org/record/5517300>

3 See: Balarin, M., Paudel, M., Sarmiento, P., Singh, G. B., & Wilder, R. (2021). *Exploring epistemic justice in educational research*. <https://zenodo.org/record/5502143>

4 Paulson, J., Espinal, S. M., Karki, M., Komakech, D., Kurawa, G., & Ranabhat, S. (2021). *Exploring transitional justice in educational research*. Available at: <https://zenodo.org/record/5533918#.ZA9DV3bP2UI>

examinations. We then generated qualitative data through a series of encounters with a select group of young people, including individual and small group participatory and arts-based activities and discussions focused on young people's experiences with environmental, epistemic and transitional justice, alongside interviews with teachers and head teachers. Across the three countries, the young people ranged from 14 to 17 years old (although the particular number of their academic year ranged in each country, based on the educational system).

Due to the differential impact of school closures related to the Covid-19 pandemic, the qualitative phase was carried out in different ways across the three country contexts. In Nepal where schools were mainly open during our data generation period, we worked in four community schools in Rasuwa (one school), Lalitpur (one school) and Mahottari districts (two schools) that represents the Mountain, Hill and Terai regions as well as urban and rural locations of the country. Across these schools, we undertook classroom observations of 67 grade 9 and 10 lessons, successive interviews and focus groups with 24 young people using objects, community mapping and the river of life and interviews with 15 teachers and four headteachers. In Peru, where schools were mainly closed, we undertook successive interviews and group discussions (mostly in person, but some online), using participatory and arts-based methods, with 24 young people in the 4th and 5th grades of secondary school, alongside interviews with 18 teachers and 12 school managers and key actors. These took place in four public schools located in Lima (two schools), Ucayali and Ayacucho. In Northern Uganda, where schools were partially open, we undertook interviews in and outside of four schools in the districts of Kitgum, Amuru and Gulu. Individual interviews using arts-based methods were conducted with a total of 98 secondary learners, across the first three years of secondary schooling, 32 of whom also participated in focus group discussions (one per school comprising 8 learners), alongside interviews with 20 teachers and 4 headteachers. The qualitative data was analysed first by country, using NVivo to identify initial codes related to each of the justices. We then looked thematically at country level, and across the whole dataset, to identify

core concepts that cut across the justices.

Initial analysis of qualitative data was used to create a questionnaire that was administered to learners on tablet computers. The questionnaire measured learners' curriculum knowledge relating to environmental, epistemic and transitional justice and SDG 13 and 16; their experiences of justice at school; their attitudes towards justice expressed through responses to scenarios presented in short videos and images, and their intended actions in relation to SDG 13 and 16. The questionnaire used an innovative, graphic scenario-based methodology that was tailored to each country to make questions on each justice contextually relevant. The questionnaire was administered at 30 schools per country, in the same districts/regions as the qualitative work. In total, 4142 young people's responses were included in the dataset. This data was analysed by country and comparatively. The data analysis included structural equation modelling for the estimation of latent constructs and multilevel linear regressions to measure the effects of attitudes, experiences, and knowledges on learners' intended actions in relation to environmental, epistemic and transitional justices.

Key findings

Policy and curriculum include some content related to education's role in broader sustainable development challenges

In our analysis of policy and curriculum documents, we identified multiple references to the role of education as a driver for wider development challenges. For example, in Nepal, the education policy highlights the role of education to promote environment protection and to mitigate effects of climate change. Similarly, in Peru and Uganda, education is charged with enabling 'environmentally responsible' citizens, although the ways in which this will be achieved are not clearly outlined. There is also distinct curriculum content in all three countries which relates to gender equality and promoting human/children's rights. We see this particularly within Peru where diversity, intercultural dialogue and gender are all included as topics across the curriculum.

Curricular content about justice issues tends to be superficial and normative

Analysis of curricular content showed that justice areas tend to be approached in normative and often superficial ways. Curriculum often provides simplistic readings of complex social problems at the expense of broader and deeper understandings of the root causes and power dynamics that could underpin transformative action. Where relations between environmental issues, historical processes and contemporary economic and social structures are presented, almost exclusively just in the Peruvian case, there is not a consistent approach that could enable young people to analyse and critique these processes, their structural dimensions or the inequalities associated with them. Issues that are considered complex, political and/or relate to systemic inequalities tend to be approached in a manner that depoliticises them. For example, we see diversity as something that is celebrated without recognition of the ongoing systemic discrimination of particular groups. A direct implication of the simplification and depoliticisation of teaching about complex justice issues, is that curricular content focuses on individual responsibility and action without mentioning societal or institutional change. For example, in Peru and Nepal, we see a lot of curricular content dedicated to dealing with inter-personal conflict resolution. Young people were aware of their need to take individual, and relatively easy, actions, such as not littering; although they were not consistent in doing these actions. Across the survey and interview data, it was evident that young people across the countries are not supported to understand and reflect on the urgency and complexity of large-scale challenges. Young people had limited capacity to discuss the systemic nature of the challenges, or to link causes and consequences of individual and collective actions.

Learning about recent conflict is absent and/or incomplete

The topic that we found to be the most controversial and difficult to talk to participants about was transitional justice and histories of recent conflict.

In Nepal, this reflects the distinct absence of these issues in the school curriculum. In Uganda, the new curriculum includes a deliberate attempt to trace the causes of the conflict but is presented as a singular narrative. In Peru policies do not mention the conflict, its presence in school materials is minimal and, in some cases, questionable and most of all, teachers do not touch upon such content in their classes due to a lack of training and fear of repercussions. This led to knowledge about recent conflicts differing by region, and across the countries. For example, in Peru, young people in Ayacucho, the epicentre of events, had greater, though mostly informal, understanding of the Internal Armed Conflict, while there was a complete lack of knowledge in Lima, and a knowledge that could be described as distorted in Ucayali. Learners had some information, but it was incomplete and sometimes incorrect (e.g. regarding the historical moment, the actors involved, etc.), and they did not have a minimally consistent narrative about it. This is one example of a complex issue that we found which was avoided or depoliticized meaning that any contradictions with young people's understanding of conflict from outside of school are left undiscussed.

Teaching is decontextualised from young people's everyday experiences and the place where they live

Across the three countries and urban and rural settings, curricular content or formal school knowledge is consistently seen to be disconnected and in contradiction with young people's everyday experiences of injustice. In interviews, young people spoke at length about these experiences – for example, of environmental degradation and gender-based violence – and with narratives that highlight the precarity and insecurity of their lives – in economic, social and environmental terms. However, it was clear that for many of the young people, these were the first times that they were sharing their experiences, particularly in a schooling context.

Supported by teacher interview data (in all three countries) and classroom observation data (in Nepal), we saw that there are very limited opportunities for

young people to share their experiences or previous knowledges that could support their understanding of complex issues. For example, during a lesson on air pollution in a school in Kathmandu, the teacher made no reference to young people's daily experiences of living with high levels of air pollution, including the fact that their school had recently been closed due to the severity of air pollution. The survey results showed that learners' attitude to and experience of different aspects of justice were particularly strong and consistent predictors of their behaviour when controlling for learner and school characteristics across all three countries, and rather than school-based knowledge.

Classroom practice is limited in supporting young people to understand complexities and contradictions related to (in)justice

Young people articulated multiple contradictions between what they learnt in school and their lived experiences or understanding of key issues from outside of school. However, there is very limited support available in their schooling to work through these contradictions, which in turn could strengthen their capacity for positive actions. One clear example of this in Northern Uganda was the clear contestation between young people's reliance on charcoal production as a source of (albeit precarious) income with the consistent messaging in school of the importance of protecting and planting trees for the environment. While this example came up repeatedly across schools, it was clear that space was not made to support young people to understand or articulate such contestations. Similarly, in Peru and Nepal, we saw clear contradictions between the idea of valuing and celebrating cultural, ethnic and racial diversity and the widespread evidence of how that diversity is associated with many of the social injustices (e.g. poverty, marginalisation) that learners identify and often experience in their daily lives.

The inconsistencies in young people's understanding of complex and contested issues were also identified in the survey. For example, in the Peru data, we see that when young people were faced with the abstract scenario between an economic activity may harm the

environment and other species, 90% of the learners chose to stop the economic activity. However, when confronted with more down to earth challenges (mining with compensation, loss of jobs and incomes if mining is stopped), then a third of respondents chose compensation and/or jobs and incomes over the environment and other species. This example demonstrates contradictions within young people's understanding and suggests the importance of an education system that can support them to work through such inconsistencies through critical thinking and reflexivity.

Broader policy and curriculum issues limit the potential implementation of alternative approaches

Particularly in Nepal and Uganda, there are significant issues that impact on the ways that justice-related issues can be taught. Classroom observations and interviews with teachers and learners suggest that class size, curriculum overload, language policy and preference to teacher-dominated pedagogy have significant impact on time and space for children to talk in the classroom, and for which children are given opportunities to talk. While the Nepal curriculum recommends different pedagogies for teaching about environmental issues – including a focus on critical thinking – classroom observations revealed a strong tendency for teacher-dominated pedagogy and relaying key content from the textbook. In Uganda, overloaded school curriculum and the limited time available in each lesson, mean that teachers only call on a small number of learners to talk. There is an interesting comparison with the findings in Peru. The shift towards a competencies-based curriculum, that provides little by way of the content that teachers ought to teach, has meant that many teachers struggle with the challenge of translating broad curriculum guidelines into their lessons. They thus tend to limit themselves to cover what is included in textbooks, and often avoid complex issues due to the lack of pedagogical tools.

In Nepal and Uganda, dominant languages of learning and teaching also clearly impoverish classroom talk, particularly for minoritised learners and those who are less confident in the language of learning and

teaching. Tamang learners in Nepal spoke about their fear of being laughed at if they speak in class; Acholi learners in Uganda reflected on school policies where speaking in their own language during the teaching and learning process as well as outside the classroom but within school premises brought physical punishment and temporary suspension from school for perpetual “offenders”.

The complex trajectories and limitations of education’s role in enabling other sustainable development goals

There are complex trajectories – from policy and curriculum design through to classroom practice to assessment and outcomes – that shape the ways that education can enable young people’s actions. These are also clearly influenced by young people’s unequal access to learning opportunities, experiences of (in)

justice and broader social, economic and cultural processes. Our findings show the importance of looking beyond curricular content as a ‘magic bullet’ for enabling positive actions and recognising the contribution of diverse actors and processes. We also have a significant qualitative evidence base of children talking about their lived experiences of injustices, within and outside of school, from nine areas across the three countries. It is clear from this evidence that there are a wide range of intersecting injustices that many of these young people encounter in their daily lives related to familial financial insecurity, real and feared environmental devastation, bodily violence and social discrimination. These are issues that education alone cannot solve. However, it is clear that there is a vital role that education can play in supporting young people to make sense of, and respond to, their experiences of injustice.

<p>Key findings about transitional justice in education</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The ‘incomplete puzzle’ of learning about past conflicts • The distinct lack of teaching and learning in reparative ways • How schools and teachers find it difficult to deal with content that is inherently political • Reductivist/simplistic narratives of conflict in curriculum. • Impact of everyday manifestations of violence on young people’s experiences of schooling
<p>Key findings about epistemic justice in education</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The absence of deep pedagogies that foster critical thinking (analysing and contrasting ideas, supporting claims with evidence and reason, openness to different and contradictory ideas and their different impact on different groups) • Disconnections with children’s existing knowledge(s) • The ways pedagogy and educational policies, such as language of instruction policies, enable or hinder learners’ contributions.
<p>Key findings about environmental justice in education</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Environmental education mainly taught in science and physical geography; • Emphasis put on individual action, such as recycling • Limited support for learners to understand the systemic causes of environmental degradation, the role of institutional responses or the contradictions between the formal school knowledge and experiences of environmental injustice.

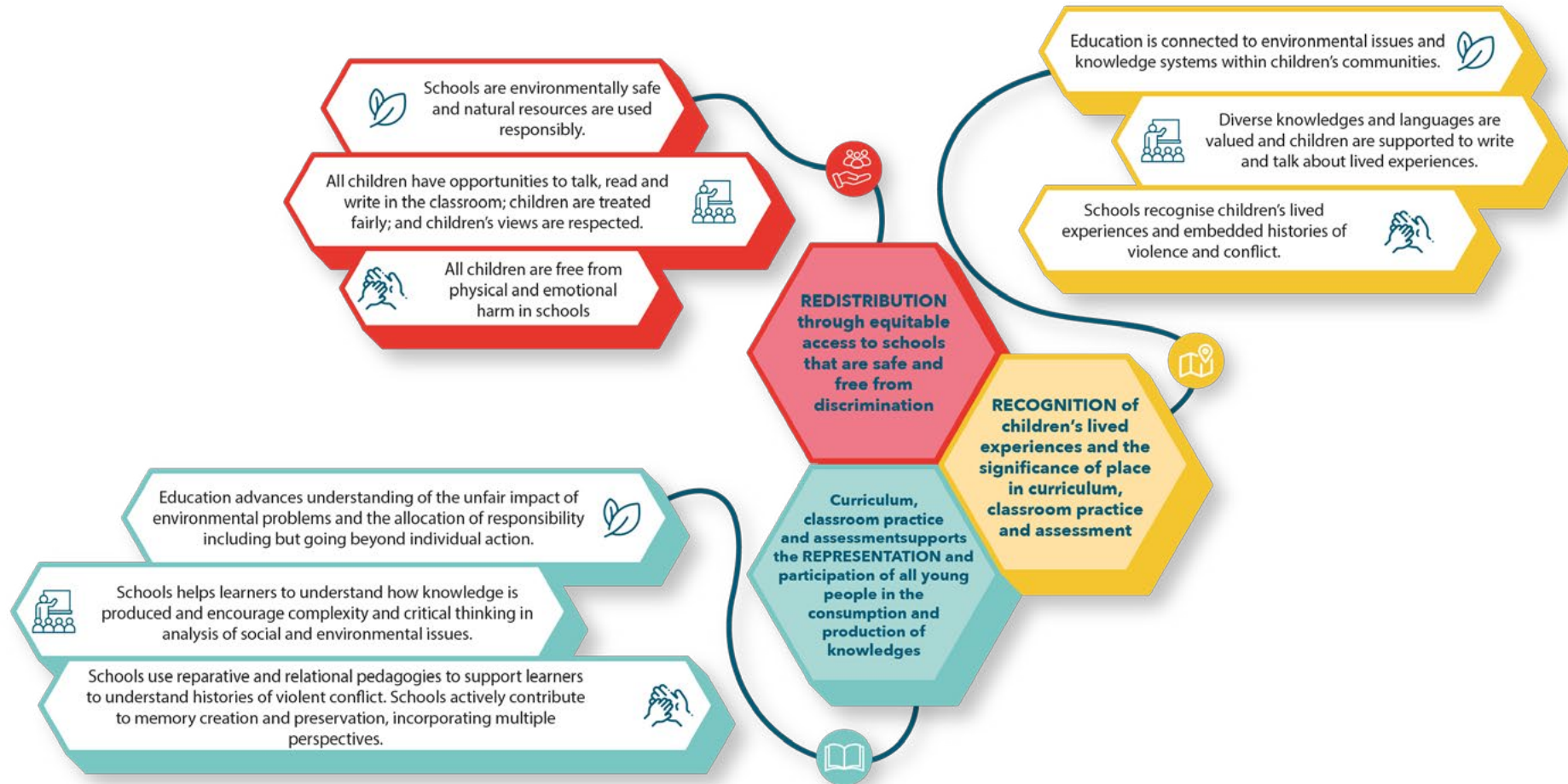
A multiple justices approach for exploring education as (in)justice

Based on our findings, we view a just education, based on the central tenets of redistribution, recognition and representation, as one that:

- (1) is for all, environmentally and physically safe, and free from discrimination
- (2) recognizes and responds to children's lived experiences and is situated in the place where children live – including the histories of conflict and inequalities and contemporary experiences of violence, climate change and environmental degradation – and

- (3) enables all young people to participate fully in the consumption and production of knowledge(s) needed to help prevent violent conflict, foster transformative climate action and reduce inequalities.

These are areas that can be interrogated to explore the ways that education as (in)justice can enable just outcomes from education, for example, in relation to climate action.



References

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Documents analysed within the project

Policy	Environmental	Epistemic	Transitional
Nepal	Environment Management Strategy (connected to the SSDP) (2016)	School Sector Development Plan (SSDP) (2016/17 - 2022/23) National Curriculum Framework of School Education (NCF) 2076 (2019)	School Sector Development Plan (SSDP) (2016/17 - 2022/23) National Curriculum Framework of School Education (NCF) 2076 (2019) [in lieu of any transitional justice policy documentation]
Peru	National Environmental Education Policy (2012) National Plan for Environmental Education (2016)	Intercultural Education and Intercultural Bilingual Education Sector Policy (2016) National Policy on Gender Equality (2016)	Recommendations chapter of the Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2003) specifically the sub-chapter Institutional Reforms. Multiannual Plan for Reparations in Education for Victims of Violence in Peru “REPAEDUCA 2016-2021” (2016)
Uganda	The National Environment Act (2019) National Forestry and Tree Planting Act (2003)	The Alternative Basic Education for Karamoja policy (1998) The Education Act (2008)	The Amnesty Act (2000) The National Transitional Justice Policy (2019)

Curriculum	Environmental	Epistemic	Transitional
Nepal (Grade 9 & 10)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Science • Social Studies • Health, Population and Environment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social Studies • Health, Population and Environment 	
Peru (Grade 3, 4 and 5)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • History, Geography and Economics • Science, Technology and Environment • Personal Development, Citizenship and Civics • School materials and textbooks, and material prepared for the distance education strategy “Aprendo en Casa” (Learning from Home) that the Ministry of Education launched in 2020 in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. 		
Uganda (Old and New curriculum, Senior 1 - 3)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Agriculture • Biology • Geography 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • History and Political Education • Christian Religious 	

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