

Chapter 4

Envisioning a sustainable future

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We stress the importance of the active participation of young people in decision-making processes, as the issues we are addressing have a deep impact on present and future generations and as the contribution of children and youth is vital to the achievement of sustainable development. We also recognize the need to promote intergenerational dialogue and solidarity by recognizing their views. (United Nations General Assembly 2012)

Sustainable development means a development paradigm that ensures the lasting well-being of all humans. It “is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” (WCED 1987). When presenting future scenarios that result from unlimited growth the sustainable development paradigm focuses on the misery of future generations to create moral pressure on current generations. Thus, the concept of intergenerational justice lies at the very heart of the idea of sustainable development and young people play a crucial part, being the main stakeholders and therefore the prospective change agents for a brighter future.

YOUTH AS THE KEY STAKEHOLDER IN A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE

Why sustainable development is in the best interests of young people

It is widely acknowledged that excessive exploitation of natural resources and increasing pollution of the environment pose a threat to the existence and well-being of current generations. But how much they also deplete the resources that future generations will have to survive on seems to receive less attention. Lack of representation of these yet-to-come generations in the policy-making process is seen as a problem for sustainable development – this lack of representation is not only contributing to a short-term (one generation) perspective on strategies for economic and social growth, but also points to a flaw in democratic processes where decisions are made without the consent of those they are most likely to affect. How can these future generations be brought to the debate if they do not yet exist? Today’s young people would seem to be the most available representatives, since they are the ones that will spend the biggest share of their lifespan in conditions created by decisions made now. Some disturbing tendencies that can be observed now will already be problems that need handling by the generations still alive in 20, 30 or 50 years.

Climate change is one of problems future generations will be forced to deal with – “Addressing and adjusting to the challenge of climate change is certain to be a defining feature of the future of today’s youth”, the World Youth Report 2010 affirms (DESA 2010). This conviction is based on the prediction that the negative effects that accompany climate change will increase in volume and number in the forthcoming years and on the estimation that the regions that will be most severely affected by the climate change are those that have a large young population. Climate change, along with human activity, is also expected to cause biodiversity loss and the downsizing of ecosystem service provision. Today’s youth will be the ones bearing the costs of replacing the benefits provided by nature. The ecosystem services provided by pollinators, which may reduce because of a colony collapse disorder, is just one example of services that may have to be replaced through the use of new technologies, along with the extra funds that accompany them. Water scarcity, caused not only by climate change but also by growing demand and water contamination, is likely to decrease the quality of life in emerging-market countries and may also cause conflicts in other parts of the world. And last but not least, economic disparities – and the attendant social and psychological consequences that are already affecting young people in many regions around the world, including Europe – are likely to make solving the environmental problems discussed above even more difficult.

Intergenerational justice – how far can it be taken?

One way of looking at this question is through the lenses of two concepts introduced first by Constanza and Daly (1992) and thoroughly analysed by Neumayer (2003) – weak and strong sustainability. Although these notions focus on the environmental dimension of sustainable development (natural capital) they can serve as illustrative examples on how intergenerational justice may be understood:

Weak sustainability is based on the belief that what matters for future generations is only the total aggregate stock of “man-made” and “natural” capital (and possibly other forms of capital as well) but not natural capital as such. Loosely speaking, according to WS [weak sustainability – comment mine] it does not matter whether the current generation uses up natural capital, such as non-renewable resources or pollutes the environment, as long as enough machineries, roads and ports as well as schools and universities are built in compensation. ... Because natural capital is regarded as being essentially substitutable in the production of consumption goods and as a direct provider of utility, I call WS the “substitutability paradigm”. In opposition to WS stands strong sustainability. (henceforth SS) ... The essence of SS is that natural capital is fundamentally non-substitutable through other forms of capital. I therefore call SS the “non-substitutability paradigm”. (Neumayer 2003: 1, 24)

Strong sustainability implies that the environment should be left as intact as possible, because most of its natural capital is non-renewable – this precautionary attitude originates from the uncertainty of possible outcomes of today’s actions. To ensure intergenerational justice under the strong sustainability paradigm no non-renewable resources should ever be exploited. Weak sustainability is not as rigid but it also leaves the question of adequate compensation up to a subjective decision by the current generation, running the risk that modern estimations of what this depleted capital is worth may be biased and inadequate. In practice strong sustainability implies a conservational

approach, minimising losses by keeping the status quo, while weak sustainability justifies extraction of capital with the expected benefits for future generations.

What characterises the concepts of weak and strong sustainability is that neither actually examines what future generations would expect the current generations to do – we may imagine a situation where certain natural capital depletion may be seen as neutral from the perspective of future generations (for example, oil) whereas other natural capital depletion is clearly non-substitutable under any circumstances (for example, water). The problem of representativeness of future generations, similar to the problem of representativeness of animals for example, has no clear-cut solution. It is addressed by including the youngest living generations in the debate, assuming that they are best placed to speak on behalf of the generations yet to come and are able to anticipate their concerns. It is also assumed that since it is in the best interests of the current generation of young people to ensure a better future, the decisions they make will not be determined by short-term gains that may lead to long-term losses.

How the sustainable development paradigm empowers youth as an important social actor

The interests of future generations also allow room for debate over young people's role in determining what shape development policy should take, what actions should be taken to enforce it and what long-term objectives a desirable development policy should set. In other words, with intergenerational justice as one of the fundamental concepts that the sustainable development paradigm rests upon, sustainability recognises youth as an important stakeholder in the debate over the current and future state of the world and offers it space to air its concerns and expectations. It holds that the decision makers and politicians of today should be held accountable for their long-term decisions, even if their effect is only speculative, and that young people have the right to demand that accountability.

The ideal of intergenerational justice may offer empowering potential for young people yet it may also seem blurred and open to a variety of interpretations. How can one make sure that certain actions will not lead to depletion of the resources that future generations find useful? Is it possible to assess the measures taken to ensure a sustainable future and indicate beyond any doubt that the future they provide will be better than the present? Is there a way to formulate a set of rules that would guide actions for a sustainable future? And maybe most importantly, how can the concept of intergenerational justice actually strengthen the voice of young people and include them in the debate over strategic long-term goals? On the one hand, intergenerational justice brings back moral values to the debate. It is no longer a case of unlucky economic circumstances and their periodic cycles independent of human influence as it is in the discussion about young people's unemployment. Intergenerational justice serves as a reminder that strategic decisions bear fruit and cause delayed negative outcomes, and therefore former decision makers may and should be held accountable for current crises. On the other hand, ecological crises, as opposed to social crises, are perceived as posing threats to the whole human population not just selected social (for example, age) groups. Therefore, it should be easier to be heard when talking about an issue of universal value to everyone rather than a problem faced just by some.

A question remains, however: how do we make young people care about a sustainable future if they seem to be preoccupied with the urgent and pressing problems of today? Envisioning future scenarios is one way of achieving this goal – it not only makes the future less abstract and therefore strengthens the motivation to care about it, but it also creates a space for debate for other social groups and actors.

ENVISIONING THE FUTURE

One way of including young people as stakeholders in the debate on sustainability is by creating space and conditions for young people to present and discuss their expectations and fears for the future. But encouraging young people to discuss different future scenarios and determine criteria for their assessment is not just a way of identifying the needs and interests of future generations; nor is it just a way of developing a common vision of development based on a consensus of diverse stakeholders. Asking young people to envision the future also has a long-term impact on the way they think and is therefore one of the main competencies that education for a sustainable development tries to develop. But seeing young people's vision of the future as merely an educational activity seems to diminish its importance as a voice in the debate over development and to question its power to influence decision making. One could claim it is like saying that the primary objective of voting in elections is to educate citizens on democratic values and procedures and only secondly to enable them to participate in government. Yet what is distinctive about sustainable development is that it does not seek to form a definite common vision of the future, as it is aware of the uncertainty of all estimations and mere probability of future predictions. Envisioning a sustainable future triggers discussions and raises questions, helps to avoid unsustainable solutions by raising justified doubts about them, rather than providing a ready-made set of guidelines on how to solve any emerging future problem. In other words, envisioning the future is seen as a public debate and not a ballot.

The central role envisioning the future plays in education for sustainable development was highlighted by the 2011 UN campaign promoting the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development in Rio de Janeiro, Rio+20. The campaign *The Future We Want* aimed to “engage people around the world in an exercise to envision how societies in all parts of the world can build a future that promotes prosperity, equity and improves people's quality of life while respecting our planet's limited resources.” The results of this global exercise served as the basis for the document “The future we want: our common vision”, which was adopted as the outcome document of the Rio+20 Summit.

Developing the skill for envisioning the future is one of the key competencies that education for sustainable development is trying to develop. Others include systems thinking, critical thinking, responsibility and leadership for transformation, collaboration and partnership building (Tilbury and Wortman 2004; UNECE 2011). It is argued that guided reflection on the future may help to:

- ▶ raise questions about the current state of the world, recognise and identify problems and areas that need improvement;

- ▶ create drivers for change and strengthen existing motivation;
- ▶ identify and set tangible goals that are stepping stones on the path to achieving a state that would be optimal;
- ▶ induce discussion over different visions of the future and identify underlying assumptions that cause fundamental differences between them;
- ▶ evaluate the consequences of possible actions and decisions (both on the individual and global scale).

ENVISIONING SUSTAINABLE FUTURES – PITFALLS OF SUSTAINABLE UTOPIAS AND DYSTOPIAS

With all the educational benefits that discussing different future scenarios may bring, it is easy to overlook the possible pitfalls. Critics of the sustainable development paradigm point out excessively optimistic or pessimistic predictions, blurred and intangible goals, a quietist attitude to some urgent social problems, or the absence of any coherent programme of action. Clearly, there are some tendencies that may be identified in discussions on sustainable futures that may lead to some simplified visions that become subjected to such a critique.

1. Eschatological vision

A vision which sees development as a unilinear process that will end either with ultimate happiness (or another state of optimal well-being) or catastrophe. Alternatively, a state of absolute sustainability as a goal is to be reached. This simplified vision of the future leaves out the complexity of the world.

2. Sophisticated hedonism

A vision where improvement in the quality of life of human beings is the ultimate objective and an end in itself. The environment is protected because of the impact it has on human well-being – providing beautiful sites, an uninterrupted flow of food and resources and healthy habitats that guarantee longevity. If human beings do adjust their behaviour it is because change offers additional improvements to their well-being (for example, riding bicycles is not only green, but also healthy and fashionable). The tension between a quality of life and planetary boundaries is seen as a problem that can be overcome.

3. Crisis-free zone

A vision that rests on the assumption that social and ecological crises are the result of some wrong decisions (insufficient information) or actions motivated by morally reprehensible motives (greed, personal gain, etc.). Therefore, by correcting the mistakes made in the past people can avoid crises in the future. This vision of the future is based on negatives – it focuses on things that are no longer there, such

as specific problems like unemployment – to depict a state of perfect security. It is often not so much a vision of the future but a rather a presentation of a specific solution for a given problem.

4. Naive sentimentalism

A vision that romanticises nature, creating a sharp distinction between nature (associated with everything that is good and healthy) and civilisation (associated with everything that is corrupt and harmful). Adherents of this vision overlook conflicts that are inherent in nature. They also do not acknowledge that the distinction between nature and culture is a human construct.

5. Harmonious coexistence

A vision that is a version of naive sentimentalism, but which romanticises human nature – seeing human beings as equally interested in exactly the same values (such as happiness) and being able to attain these values if they overcome excessively individualistic tendencies. The idea of inner (authenticity) and outer (peaceful coexistence of all people) harmony is also projected on the relations between the individual and nature. The concept of balance often plays an important role in this particular vision of future – reaching a balance between different elements (for example, dimensions of sustainable development) or coming to a compromise (seen as a balance between two side's interests) solves any problem that may emerge.

6. Silver bullet

A vision that acknowledges problems may keep emerging in the future, but believes that there is always a way to solve them. The silver bullet may be technology (“technological advancements will help us solve the problem of hunger”), education (“raising awareness will reduce crime rates”) or policy regulations (“new laws will stop land degradation”). Solutions that are proposed to different problems are not necessarily wrong – quite the opposite, they are usually effective. But what is typical for this kind of vision of the future is that it overestimates the role of a single factor in solving complex problems. Alternatively, this version of the future states that there is a single change agent (a particular social group) that can change the paradigm of development and determine the shape it will take. Such a specific group could, for example, be young people, and this is discussed below.

YOUTH AS THE CHANGE AGENT FOR A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE

Identifying young people as key stakeholders in a sustainable future may create the impression that they are also bound to be its principal change agent. This conviction could be listed among the misleading tendencies discussed in the previous section, as it fits into a certain simplified future scenario pattern. It does not mean that young people will not become change agents for sustainable development, but it does

mean that one has to be careful before accepting excessively optimistic visions in which no other conditions have to be met before young people take up that role.

Before targeting young people as the principal social actors in social change that we would like to see, it may be important to reconsider the following questions.

1. How do societies change? Rarely, if ever, can one see a significant social change induced by a single factor. Although a certain group may trigger a conflict or verbalise the tensions that have been latent, its role should neither be overestimated nor underestimated nor shown without proper context. Favourable conditions would usually include the attitude of the other groups (both opposing and sympathetic) and the environment of the group (economic, political, social, physical).

2. Who belongs to the category we call “young people”? One thing to consider is how we distinguish between individuals that can be called young people and those who cannot: What age do we choose? How do we adjust to historical and geographical variations in lifestyle? But what is even more important is how young people define themselves. Do they see themselves as a distinct social group? Can young people form a social movement?

3. Is a sustainable future really in young people’s interests? When we speak of young people we talk of members of different social classes, representing different nations, traditions and lifestyles, but most importantly having different priorities. Sustainable development, and what it implies for natural capital management and social security, can actually impair some groups’ chances for economic advancement. On an individual level, provided everyone does the same, taking actions based on personal gain may be an effective winning strategy.

4. Are young people willing to take up the role of change agent for sustainable development? In this time of crisis young people may actually refrain from taking on additional responsibilities and wait for the situation to improve. Situations of distress (unemployment, lack of security) do not necessarily produce social and political activism. Neither do they necessarily prompt thinking from a long-term perspective. In other words, even if a sustainable future is in the best interests of today’s young people they may not be willing to take up the role of leading the change.

5. In the current circumstances, can young people really influence the future? Do policy makers hear out their postulates and take young people’s opinions into account? What political tools do young people have to influence existing policies and business practices? It seems that the current circumstances are particularly unfavourable for young people. Arguably, the crisis has disempowered young people in comparison to the situation in the last century.

These closing remarks on young people’s ability to influence change were not meant to discredit the belief in the transformative power of envisioning alternative futures. Rather, they were meant to point to the complexity of the interrelations between young people and sustainability and the need to take a sober look at the prospects for engaging youth in the creation of a sustainable future. Young people may be key stakeholders in a sustainable future, they may be willing to contribute with their visions of the future, but their active engagement may require building a more favourable environment for intergenerational dialogue on the topic of sustainability.

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