Makers of Sustainable Future? Critical Notes on the Responsibilisation of Youth in the Sustainable Development (SD) and climate Change (CC) discourse

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Constructing Social Futures – Sustainability, Responsibility and Power

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ALL-YOUTH – All youth want to rule their world is a multidisciplinary research project which explores the capacities of young people (aged between 16 and 25) and the obstacles that hamper their engagement with society. We also explore the visions of youth regarding sustainable future, growth and well-being. [http://www.allyouthstn.fi/](http://www.allyouthstn.fi/)

The main goal of the project is to create possibilities and to enable young people to participate in making their own communities and the society. Our key ideas for sustainable growth are responsive governance and rule of law, digital innovation and sustainable development interventions such as bioeconomy.

The consortium: Helsinki University & Tampere University & University of Eastern Finland; around 30 researchers involved.

The project is funded by the Strategic Research Council (SRC) which provides funding for long-term and programme based research aimed at finding solutions to the major challenges facing Finnish society.
Young people’s global climate activism has appeared spectacularly on the public agenda since the publication of the IPCC report, it seems to have alarmed the adult world, including political decision-makers.

This activism, and the criticism it has stirred among the adults, can be contrasted interestingly with the prominent role given to youth’s participation in the SD policies already since the Rio Earth Summit in 1992, including the drafting of the Agenda 2030 goals. Here youth participation has not roused strong reactions – or popularity and notable awareness among youth themselves towards SD.
Argument and questions

- In this presentation we approach the institutionalised engagement of youth in the SD policies, especially within the UN framework, as a **Sustainable Development Discourse** and claim that its assumptions around youth participation are based on the model of **affirmative governmentality** (e.g. Bernard 2016; Kwan 2013) which **responsibilises** youth to develop their individual capacities in the service of ‘sustainable growth’

- We are interested in:
  1. What kind of role and agency does the SD discourse bestow upon youth, and what are its consequences (in terms of the model of government produced)?
  2. How do young people themselves conceive their relationship to SD and CC?
  3. How do young people see and experience their opportunities to impact their personal future and the future of society and the world?
Youth development links to sustainable development
(Report of the UN Secretary-General to General Assembly, 21 July 2017)

“From its inception, young people were actively involved in the development of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, including through: (a) the formal inclusion of young people in United Nations negotiations related to sustainable development through the major group system, in particular the children and youth major group; (b) consultations with young people held at the national level by Member States to inform their national positions; and (c) the My World global survey.

Echoing this participation, as well as the growing interest in and increased policy focus on youth issues as they relate to sustainable development, youth are given specific recognition in the preamble of the 2030 Agenda, and both explicit and implicit references to youth are found throughout its 17 Sustainable Development Goals.

The pledges made in the 2030 Agenda to leave no one behind and to reach the furthest behind first, as well as its affirmation to be people-centred, ensure that youth are included in all aspects of the Agenda. .... young people are recognized as agents of change, entrusted with fulfilling their own potential and ensuring a world fit for future generations.”
Youth for Climate Action

The world needs leadership on climate change and young people are stepping up to the challenge! Learn how young people, together with the UN system, are playing a key role both in the intergovernmental climate change negotiations and in their communities – helping all of us change the way we live and do business.

Youth in Action

Young people around the world are taking action on climate change
Pääministeri Sipilä ja ministeri Tiilikainen: Nuoret vauhdittamaan kestäävä kehitystä

Hallitus esittelee tänään keskiviikkona 15. helmikuuta eduskunnalle suunnitelmansa YK:n kestävän kehityksen ohjelman Agenda2030:n toimeenpanemiseksi. Hallitus toteuttaa ohjelmaa yhteistyössä sidobyyn kanssa ja haluaa varsinkin nuoreiden aikojen tiivistäminen mukaan kestävän kehityksen toimintaan.

Pääministeri Juha Sipilän johtaman kansallisen kestävän kehityksen toimikunnan yhteyteen perustetaan uusi nuorten Agenda2030-ryhma, jossa nuoret jäsenet kirittävät hallituksen ja toimikunnan työtä Suomen kestävän kehityksen nuorisoagentteineen. Agentit osallistuvat yhdessä toimikunnan kanssa kestävän kehityksen suunnitteluun, toimeenpanoon, seurantaan ja ideointiin.

"Kestävä kehitys yllättää eri sukupolven rajoja. Nuorilla on paljon annettavaa ja tuoreita ideiota kestävän tulevaisuuden rakentamisessa," pääministeri Sipilä sanoo.

Nuorten Agenda2030-ryhmän tehtävänä on myös viestii kestävän kehityksen haasteista sekä innostaa oman alueen nuoria mukaan kestävän kehityksen työhön. Tavoitteena on osallistaa lapsia ja nuoria siellä missä he liikkuvat: koulussa, harrastuksissa ja nuorille suunnattuissa tilaisuuksissa.


Literature: The discourse

- Agenda 21 (United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, UNCED, 1992) identified youths as key stakeholders that have a unique contribution to make towards sustainable development, dedicating Chapter 25 to the importance of children’s and young people’s participation in decision making to create their own future. (Buttigieg & Pace 2013)

- In the United Nations 2030 Sustainable Development Goals, which offer guidelines and targets for all countries to adopt for the next decade, inclusive participation in decision-making at all levels is taken as a key to improved sustainability for future generations. According to the appeals made by the Global Youth Conference 2012 in Bali (International Conference on Population and Development, ICPD), governments everywhere must acknowledge that young people’s participation is a pre-condition for sustainable development. (Treude et al. 2017)

- The Doha work programme on Article 6, adopted in 2012, targets youth as a major group for effective engagement in the formulation and implementation of decisions on climate change (Narksompong & Limjirakan 2015).

- Empowering today’s youth to alleviate climate change impacts should be an educational priority since youth are the future citizens and decision-makers that must live with the impacts of climate change and take action on implementing solutions. (Op cit.; Henderson & Tudball 2015; Yunita, Soraya & Maryudi 2018)
"The increase of youth participation discourse and the often well-intended youth policies and programs that have ensued, have ushered in a growing trend to include youth in varying degrees in public and non-profit institutional and decision-making spaces.” (Bernard 2016, 116)

Research on youth’s involvement in SD shows that children and youth are still underrepresented in most forms of collaborative deliberation on sustainable development and climate change. Moreover, where such opportunities are provided, youth’s experiences of the efficacy of their participation are often negative. (Yunita, Soraya & Maryudi 2018)

Youth participation discourses represent a form of affirmative governmentality, where control is exercised through positive interventions. In this context, young people, often marginalized racialized youth, participate in institutionalized spaces to legitimize the narratives and policies that seek to obtain their compliance in being governed. (Kwon 2013)

“Youth participation, as constructed within current youth development models, is not associated with increased power for youth. It is constructed to focus on proliferation of positive assets and to yield productive subjects. When embedded in official discourses, participation upholds and corresponds to the affirmative neo-liberal dogma of promoting the self-sufficient individual.” (Bernard 2016, 130)
Research data

- **Main documents:**
  - A. *Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*
  - B. *Government Report on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*

- **Survey by Demi Magazine** 6/2018, in cooperation with ALL-YOUTH
  - 941 respondents (female 94.5 %, male 1.6 %, other/did not want to say 3.9 %), two (open) questions analysed

- **SurveyMonkey questionnaires** by ALL-YOUTH, 2018
  - two questions analysed; Q12 = 125 respondents, Q16 = 172 respondents (female 51 %, male 36 %, other/did not want to say 13 %)

- **Interviews with the members of the Agenda 2030 Youth Group** (part of the Prime Minister’s SD committee) (not reported in this presentation)
Analysis: The documents

- The goal = global development, poverty eradication, empowering girls and women, education, youth employment, environmental sustainability, 'sustainable economic growth', 'resilient citizens'
- The legitimacy = universal approach, 'we the whole world', global participatory drafting process, history of the UN, responsibilities to future generations
- Place and agency of youth = asset-based approach, agents of change, 'immense capacities', productive to sustainable growth, need for education and paid employment, (mostly) institutional participation, youth in need of support/information, youth in relation to women and children, vulnerability, informing peers, entrepreneurship
- Understanding of participation = universal, shared among all 'stake-holders', community centred, 'leave no one behind', institutional, procedural, representative, youth organizations, youth as voters/candidates
Analysis: The documents

Problems and analytical questions:

- ‘Youth are not a homogeneous group’ → Youth are mostly constructed as a unified category even if differences amongst youth are (sometimes) listed; differences not understood as power relations
- Assumption of ‘a unified youth voice’ → Diverse voices and opinions amongst youth might not be heard; political divisions not recognized
- Youth ‘mainstreamed’ into goals that are already set → Silence on the politics of setting the agenda and defining what is good life for the future generations
Analysis: Demi Survey

Q 9: “In your opinion, what is sustainable development like? Please, give examples.” (530 responses analysed)

- Category 1: Taking care of the environment (N = 641)
- Category 3: Think about what you’re doing! (N = 136)
- Category 2: Taking care of well-being and social equity (N = 59)
- Category 4: Need for collective solutions (N = 32)
- Category 5: Saving the planet, living in peace (N = 41)

Q 8: “How do you think people’s way of life will change within the next 20 years?” (392 responses analysed)

- Category 1: Development towards the better (N = 200)
- Category 2: Technologisation advances (N = 162)
- Category 3: Development towards the worse (N = 100)
- Category 4: Awareness increases (N = 47)
- Category 5: People change, problems grow (N = 42)
- Category 6: Development either/or (N = 26)

The respondents seem to look at SD from a detached, knowledge based perspective. There are hardly any personal accounts of what SD means for youth’s life-world.

A narrative emerges:
“We hope for the best, but fear for the worst.”
Analysis: SurveyMonkey questionnaire

Q 12: “What about the future worries you most?” (125 responses analysed)

1. Environmental issues; climate change
2. Own life; place in the world; study place; work
3. Negative development of society; polarization; animosities

Q 16: “I feel that I can influence my own future through personal decisions and acts.” (N = 172)

- 86 % agree completely or almost completely
- It is interesting to note that, on the one hand, young people worry greatly about the future and the direction of development in Finland, the world, and on the planet; yet, on the other hand, they trust their own personal future and possibilities to influence matters concerning their own life
How the Finnish youth experience climate change

”How uncertain or insecure do you feel due to the climate change caused by man?”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>A great deal</th>
<th>Fairly much</th>
<th>Nor much or little</th>
<th>Fairly little</th>
<th>Very little or not at all</th>
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<td>2006</td>
<td>8,8</td>
<td>26,1</td>
<td>27,0</td>
<td>24,6</td>
<td>13,3</td>
</tr>
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<td>2018</td>
<td>24,4</td>
<td>43,2</td>
<td>15,9</td>
<td>10,9</td>
<td>4,3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2018 Youth Barometer
Discussion

- If we accept the SD/CC discourse, its main problem can be identified as the often tokenistic and staged nature of the youth’s participation opportunities. The solution would then be to take their participation more seriously on the decision-making level.

- On the critical side, the discourse frames the value and practices of participation from the viewpoint of the adult world, which may be alienating and meaningless in the experience of youth themselves.

- Policy discourses’ constructions of “sustainable development” may differ from the meanings given to it by youth. Discourses depoliticize the negotiation of “better future” and who gets to define it.

- The discourse also tends to approach youth in homogeneous terms and responsibilises them as “ambassadors of a better future.” Differences are ignored, and the realities of politics are hidden from view when talking about youth participation.

- SD/CC discourses both offer youth positions of agency, yet limit how their agency is understood in the context of sustainable development. Possibility of resistance?

“*Youth need to be empowered to contribute to a sustainable future at all levels, but this requires that their in-depth and interactive perspectives, emotions, values, experiences, and actions are understood both more contextually and more holistically than has been the case so far (Betour El Zoghbi 2013).*”
THANK YOU!

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