



POLICY PAPER ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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Explanatory note

Sustainable development in the European Youth Forum

As the voice of young people and the platform of youth organisations in Europe, the European Youth Forum represents not only the interests of young people here and now, but also the interests of future generations of young people on the European continent and beyond. “Safeguarding the needs of future generations, by applying sustainable development as a driving principle behind a fair use of the available resources” has been included in the European Youth Forum’s Strategic Priorities 2013-2019.¹ Further, sustainable development has been established as one of five work clusters in the European Youth Forum’s Work Plan 2017-2019.²

The European Youth Forum has a long-standing history of working on the topic of sustainable development and has been promoting youth participation in sustainable development processes for many years, including in the run up to the adoption of the 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development in 2015. Yet, a comprehensive position of European Youth Forum on the topic of Sustainable Development was last outlined 12 years ago in the 2006 Policy Paper on Sustainable Development. This Policy Paper seeks to fill this gap.

A Board position paper on comprehensive implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in Europe has been adopted, as foreseen in the Implementation Plan 2017, as a necessary and more urgent step, responding to the needs of EU and other institutional processes regarding the 2030 Agenda. The more technical position paper is being used in advocacy for comprehensive implementation of the 2030 Agenda in the EU, including through participation in the European Commission’s Multi-Stakeholder Platform on the Implementation of the SDGs in the EU, before this policy paper is finalised and adopted by Member Organisations.

Development of the policy paper

This policy paper is the result of discussions with Member Organisations³ of the European Youth Forum. Initial exchanges on the scope of the policy paper on Sustainable Development were convened through the European Youth Forum’s Sustainable Development Network face-to-face meeting on 27-28 September 2017 and a Policy Commission on the topic during COMEM on 23-25 November 2017. Member Organisations were also invited to comment on an initial draft in February 2018 and comments have been incorporated in the final draft.

¹ European Youth Forum (2012). Strategic Priorities 2013-2019. Available at: <http://www.youthforum.org/sites/default/files/publication-pdfs/Strategicpriorities2013-2019.pdf>

² European Youth Forum (2016). Work Plan 2017-2019. Available at: http://www.youthforum.org/sites/default/files/page-pdfs/WorkPlan_2017-2019_FINAL-1.pdf

³ Member organisations that responded to the consultation include Alliance of European Voluntary Service Organisations, International Young Naturefriends, Federation of Young European Greens, World Organization of the Scout Movement, Finnish Youth Co-operation – Allianssi, Romanian Youth Council, National Youth Council of Malta, ATD Quart Monde and the National Youth Forum Bulgaria

Aims and scope of the policy paper

This policy paper sets out the background, position and recommendations of the European Youth Forum on sustainable development. The policy paper, however, is not intended as a comprehensive blueprint for advocacy on sustainable development. Sustainable development is a complex topic and there are no easy answers. The work on sustainable development requires continuous exploration and jumping into deep waters.

This policy paper outlines the European Youth Forum's position on sustainable development broadly, exploring concepts, principles and approaches. The paper establishes a vision for sustainable development based on common principles. Subsequently, the paper suggests approaches and lenses that youth organisations and governments can explore to develop more effective strategies and become stronger change agents towards tackling the global sustainability crisis. Finally, by applying these approaches, the paper outlines broad areas for change that seem promising in achieving sustainable development.

This policy paper has the ambition to stimulate debate among the European Youth Forum, its member organisations and other stakeholders that will eventually allow the European Youth Forum to establish both more concrete policy recommendations and practical ways forward for youth organisations that are outlined in summary-fashion in the policy paper. The paper should be seen as a commitment of the European Youth Forum to be part of a conversation around alternatives that can help us to build a sustainable future.

Executive summary

This policy paper sets the framework of the European Youth Forum's understanding of sustainable development and what is required to promote a transition to a sustainable future. Sustainable development is as an organising principle for the interrelated domains of society, economy and environment, supporting a vision for society in which the needs and rights of all, including future generations, are met within the means of the planet.

Young people and youth organisations have several roles in the move towards a more sustainable future: youth as rights holders; youth as agents for change; youth organisations as catalysts for young people's efforts; youth as vulnerable and marginalised group; and youth as stewards of future generations rights and needs. Sustainable development also provides a framework through which policy areas relevant to youth organisations can be linked to work more effectively.

Built upon a rights-based and values-led approach, the paper defines the driving principles behind sustainable development as social justice, conservation of natural resources and participation. Today's economic, social and political systems are at odds with these principles and do not work for our planet or for people, especially young people.

Sustainable development is viewed through the lens of systems thinking, from which the necessity of systemic change and a cultural shift emerge as preconditions for sustainable development. Crises such as climate change, inequality or loss of social cohesion are intertwined and cannot be adequately addressed with a focus on single-issue solutions.

We are already witnessing the emergence of alternative models that strive towards human and planetary wellbeing. The paper identifies five areas – economic models, distribution of resources and opportunities, production and consumption, democratic participation, and measures of progress – where alternative approaches, which should be fostered, have the potential to result in great progress towards a sustainable future.

The paper gives the following recommendations for youth organisations and governments to break with current structures and nurture sustainable alternatives:

New economy

Role of youth organisations

- Challenge misconceptions that stand in the way of new economic models
- Support education and information provision on the new economy and help in the set up of cooperative structures, and initiate pilot projects
- Contribute to building a mainstream conversation for the role of the new economy in sustainable development

Role of governments

- Set the right policy conditions for alternative economic models
- Encourage and support education and information provision
- Place restrictions on unsustainable practices that overexploit, for example, natural resources

A more equal society

Role of youth organisations

- Fight inequality directly through their actions for example, through youth work and non-formal education
- Highlight the problems with extreme inequality through facts and figures
- Raise awareness about inequality and young people in order to bring the problem to the spotlight and influence the public
- Empower young people facing inequality to be actors of change in their own communities and advocate for an equal society

Role of governments

- Design a fairer economy through policies regulating quality jobs and the promotion of workers' organisations
- Ensure a sustainable and socially just allocation of profits
- Adopt regulations to prevent political capture
- Invest new returns in policies that benefit young people, and in particular vulnerable and marginalised groups

Sustainable production and consumption

Role of youth organisations

- Motivate and support young people to participate in new models of consumption and production
- Lead by example with environmentally friendly practices and promote practices already being implemented by citizens, especially young people
- Raise awareness and bring people from all walks of life together to share their know-how and techniques they are experimenting with
- Communicate in ways that motivate people to protect and enjoy nature by appealing to its intrinsic value
- Promote the use of environmentally friendly means of transportation

Role of governments

- Implement and increase ambition on circular economy strategies
- Place restrictions on unsustainable practices such as through a ban on coal and phasing out of fossil fuels, and putting in place more efficient sanctioning systems for environmental and human rights violations
- Foster and support innovation, as well as ensure access to sustainable practices such as renewable energy and environmentally friendly means of transportation

- Ensure a just transition through education, relocation and retirement options
- Recognise the limits of market solutions for environmental problems

Democratic participation

Role of youth organisations

- Ensure young people's access and participation in democratic and decision-making processes
- Facilitate dialogue between all stakeholders on fundamental questions concerning sustainable development
- Advocate for stronger youth participation in existing institutional processes
- Translate political activism for democratic reform into political institutions and advocate for governments and institutions to put in place more inclusive, participatory and deliberative mechanisms
- Support young people in direct action and popular mobilisation
- Include marginalised youth into democratic participation and institutional processes
- Provide citizenship education and education for sustainable development

Role of governments

- Promote dialogue between all stakeholders on fundamental questions concerning sustainable development
- Ensure the presence of a diverse group of young people in key political bodies such as parliaments at all levels, as well as in processes for sustainable development, and improve current forms of participation
- Recognise alternative forms of political participation beyond voting as legitimate and respond accordingly
- Create new participatory and deliberative mechanisms and structures to strengthen democracy across Europe
- Invest in quality education, both formal and non-formal, for sustainable development

Genuine measures progress

Role of youth organisations

- Challenge misconceptions that support the use of GDP and articulate a positive vision of an economy structured towards the achievement of wellbeing
- Help to build such a new vision bottom-up, by collecting data on the wellbeing of young people to inform policy choices

Role of governments

- Initiate a fundamental debate on what progress means and how society can be structured towards the achievement of collective wellbeing
- Adopt alternative measures of progress based on sustainable development and the real wellbeing of people and planet

1. Introduction

This policy paper sets the framework of the European Youth Forum's understanding of sustainable development and what is required to promote a transition to a sustainable future. It also highlights the role of youth, as rights-holders and agents for positive change, in the process.

The paper builds upon existing positions of the European Youth Forum, including the work on youth rights, youth participation and social and economic inclusion. It also draws on the European Youth Forum's long-standing history of working on sustainable development and is intended to update the European Youth Forum's position last outlined in the 2006 Policy Paper on Sustainable Development⁴, recognising that new global challenges, as well as global responses, including the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, have emerged in the years since 2006.

Built upon a rights-based and values-led approach, the paper defines the driving principles behind sustainable development as social justice, participation and the conservation of natural resources. Today's economic, social and political systems are at odds with these principles and do not work for our planet or for people, especially young people.

This policy paper views sustainable development through the lens of systems thinking from which the necessity of systemic change and a cultural shift emerge as a preconditions for sustainable development. The European Youth Forum commits to direct its efforts towards systemic change for sustainable development by creating political spaces within which demands for sustainable alternatives can be meaningfully articulated.

We are already witnessing the emergence a multitude of alternative models that strive towards human and planetary wellbeing. The paper identifies five areas – economic models, distribution of resources and opportunities, production and consumption, democratic participation, and measures of progress – where alternative approaches have the potential to result in great progress towards sustainable development. The European Youth Forum commits to focusing its advocacy efforts on these areas.

1.1. What is Sustainable Development?

Sustainable development is an organising principle for the interrelated domains of society, environment and economy. It posits a vision for society in which the needs and rights of all are met within the means of the planet. In other words, sustainable development means that everyone, including future generations, is able to fulfil their needs and realise their rights, while ensuring that this does not overshoot Earth's

⁴ European Youth Forum (2006). *Policy Paper on Sustainable Development*. Available at: https://www.jugendpolitikeneuropa.de/downloads/4-20-2281/EYF_sust_Develop.pdf

natural resources and fundamental life-supporting systems such as a stable climate and fertile soils.

Sustainable development requires us to ask fundamental questions about the economic and social models we have created and how they interact with each other and with the Earth's natural systems. Questions such as: how do we organise our society – the way we live together? How do we organise our economy – the flow of materials and energy towards productive ends? What is our relationship with nature? And above all, can we find organising models that harmonise and balance these dimensions to meet “the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”⁵.

Current development models are not fit for that purpose and need to change in order to guarantee a sustainable future. While we live in a time of unprecedented material wealth, most indicators measuring the health of the planet show a negative trend: climate change, biodiversity loss, acidification of the oceans and shrinking freshwater resources are all serious threats to life on earth. Trust and social cohesion in society is deteriorating. Local cultures and languages are disappearing at an alarming rate. Situations of extreme poverty have augmented in Europe over the last two decades. At the same time, discrimination and stigma against poor people have increased. While inequality has been on the rise for decades globally, Europe has not been spared either. The current model for development has “inflicted a global system of extraction, exploitation, oppression of people and their rights, and mass consumption [...] this needs to change, if we are to create the future people need”⁶.

Today's crises are increasingly systemic and intertwined. Issues such as economic development, inequality, chronic poverty, populism, climate, security, finance and migration have become highly interdependent and mutually reinforcing, and cannot be adequately addressed with a focus on single issue solutions. It will not be sufficient to focus on technical solutions or additional financing. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development acknowledges that “bold and transformative steps [...] are urgently needed to shift the world on to a sustainable and resilient path”⁷. Sustainable development is a political agenda with the redistribution of power and resources at its heart that requires breaking policy silos and finding and nurturing new models that are coherent with the overarching goal of sustainable development.

⁵ Brundtland (1987). *Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development: Our Common Future*. Available at: <http://www.un-documents.net/our-common-future.pdf>

⁶ Major Group for Children and Youth (2014). *Closing statement the final session of the Open Working Group on Sustainable Development Goals*. Available at: <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/10923children.pdf>

⁷ UN General Assembly (2015). *Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*. Available at: <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/21252030%20Agenda%20for%20Sustainable%20Development%20web.pdf>

1.2. Sustainable Development, Youth and Future Generations of Young People

Sustainable development concerns everyone, but young people and youth organisations play several unique and important roles in the move towards a more sustainable future, both as agents for change and as rights-holders in the change process:

First, young people have the right to participate in the decisions shaping their own future. Young people have the right to information and participation in all dimensions of the development process. The right to participate is anchored in the 2030 Agenda, which acknowledges youth as “critical agents of change”⁸.

Second, young people possess the energy, creativity and motivation to challenge current unsustainable models. Social change led by young people extends beyond generational, cultural and geographical boundaries. Less bound by ideological and institutional structures, young people have demonstrated the ability to think outside the box and develop innovative solutions for society as a whole. It is no surprise that youth was at the forefront of movements demanding social change from Wall Street to Tahrir Square.

Third, youth organisations are central actors in the work for sustainable development, channelling young people’s efforts to make a substantial contribution to a more sustainable future. Youth organisations can play multiple roles.⁹ Youth work and non-formal education have a positive impact on sustainable development, as its purpose is to build empowered young individuals that actively contribute to our society. Youth organisations can also help to amplify youth voices to collectively push for sustainable development at the local, national, regional and global level and to hold governments and institutions to account on their commitments.

Fourth, young people are at the frontline of the impacts of unsustainable models due to their marginalisation and higher vulnerability today and greater stake in the future compared to older generations. Young people must grapple with serious economic, social, cultural, political and environmental problems inherited from previous generations. Young people are disproportionately affected by economic crises and subsequent austerity measures. The most disadvantaged among the youth experience precariousness and prolonged poverty. They face additional obstacles, such as difficult living conditions and barriers to jobs opportunities, due to their socio-economic background, sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression, ethnicity or race, migratory status, disability and/or other status. As such, they have additional reasons to worry about their future. Youth unemployment rates

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ European Youth Forum (2014). *Policy Paper: Youth work in the European Youth Forum and Youth Organisations*. Available at: <http://www.youthforum.org/sites/default/files/publication-pdfs/PP-Youth-Work.pdf>

in the European Union are more than double than unemployment rates for all ages.¹⁰ Globally, the situation for young people is even worse, not least because climate change is an imminent threat to young people's livelihoods and futures.

Fifth, the European Youth Forum must also represent the interests of future generations of young people and their capacity to achieve the full enjoyment of fundamental rights and freedoms. One of the main challenges of sustainable development is to achieve solidarity between generations, including the generations to come. Youth organisations, hence the European Youth Forum and its Member Organisations, can champion intergenerational solidarity for other organisations to follow suit.

Finally, sustainable development is key to achievements in policy areas and issues the European Youth Forum and its Member Organisations are working on and vice versa. Strong youth organisations¹¹ and youth participation¹² are key preconditions for sustainable development. In turn, social and economic inclusion is inherent within sustainable development¹³. Human rights¹⁴ are both means and ends to sustainable development. As an organising principle, sustainable development provides a framework through which interconnections between policy areas as well as the long-term impacts of actions can be explored to work more effectively towards multiple ends.

¹⁰ Eurostat (2017). *Unemployment statistics (Data up to December 2017)*. Available at: http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Unemployment_statistics#Youth_unemployment_trends

¹¹ For more information on the European Youth Forum's work on a stronger youth civil society see: <http://www.youthforum.org/stronger-youth-organisations>

¹² For more information on the European Youth Forum's work on a youth participation see: <http://www.youthforum.org/participation>

¹³ For more information on the European Youth Forum's position on social and economic inclusion see: European Youth Forum (2016). *Excluding Youth: A Threat to the Future*. Available at: <http://www.youthforum.org/sites/default/files/publication-pdfs/Excluding-youth-a-threat-to-our-future.pdf>

¹⁴ For more information on the European Youth Forum's work on youth rights see: <http://www.youthforum.org/youth-rights>

2. Core principles

There is no one model for a sustainable world. Sustainable development is not a blueprint, but a conceptual framework based on fundamental principles and values. The purpose and goal of sustainable development is to organise our economy and society in such a way as to serve people and the planet. To achieve this goal, we need a rights-based and values-led approach with solidarity, justice, sustainability, equality, non-discrimination, autonomy and collaboration at its centre. The following pillars are central to sustainable development:

2.1.Social justice

Mass youth unemployment and a lack of social protection persisting in several countries reflects the problems faced by some population groups in accessing a rapidly changing labour market and governments' failure to close gaps in welfare systems. Precariousness and uncertain times have been an open door to jobs of poor quality, denying young people, particularly those facing discrimination, including on the grounds of poverty, access to meaningful, motivational, and worthwhile work that respects their rights and provides them with the means to live a life of dignity and reach their full potential. Falling purchasing power and weak growth in certain developed countries pose questions about what the aims of our economic model should be. In social terms, widening inequalities raise questions about the fair distribution and sharing of resources, both economic and natural.

In light of these problems, as established through the European Youth Forum's work on social and economic inclusion and youth rights, sustainable development can only be achieved through a rights-based approach that incorporates solidarity, including among young people, intergenerational solidarity, respect for human dignity and a fair distribution of resources as core principles. There needs to be a focus on vulnerable people, including people living in poverty. This also implies a cultural and institutional shift towards more equality by tackling multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination.¹⁵ We need a paradigm shift – the wellbeing of people and planet should be the ultimate goal of economic and social systems.

2.2.Conservation of natural resources

The linearity of our current production and consumption systems is leading to over-exploitation of natural resources and loss of biodiversity. The pollution emitted by our economic activities has effects on the environment and on people's and other living beings' health and wellbeing. Climate change gives reason to question the dependence of our current model on fuels with high greenhouse gas emissions.

¹⁵ European Youth Forum (2016). *Policy Paper on Equality and Non-Discrimination*. Available at: http://www.youthforum.org/sites/default/files/publication-pdfs/0099-16_Policy_Paper_Equality_Non-discrimination_FINAL2.pdf

Sustainable development requires a re-evaluation of our relationship with nature. New institutions and models have to be designed to ensure that human activities operate within ecological limits. Separating prosperity from resource use and internalizing negative environmental externalities are preconditions for sustainable development that can only be achieved by applying the principle of sufficiency.¹⁶

2.3.Participatory decision-making

The exclusion of whole sections of society from the benefits of progress and limited forms of participation in representative democracies in Europe and the world have contributed to poor decision-making, populism and social unrest in recent years. Young people in particular are trapped in a vicious circle in which it is increasingly difficult for them to participate, as they face more social and economic barriers and are more and more disengaged from a political system that does not take into account their voices, needs and rights. This presents a reason for re-evaluating our modes of governance and decision-making.

As established through the European Youth Forum's work on youth participation, sustainable development requires the altering of our political models to be more inclusive, participatory and deliberative. New models should encourage and reward participation by citizens, in particular youth and youth organisations, at all stages and all levels of decision-making in line with a rights-based approach and supported through citizenship education. In this way, the political system can foster social innovation and democratic deliberation to create viable alternatives to current unsustainable models.

¹⁶ See section 4.3

3. Approaches for sustainable development

Trying to solve problems issue by issue is an ill-suited strategy to promote sustainable development given the systemic and complex nature of today's problems. Likewise, focusing on rational arguments is insufficient as cultural change is necessary for sustainable development. Strategies to promote sustainable development require changing mindsets of and creating an on-going momentum with young people for a sustainable transformation. Systems thinking and campaigning to change narratives have emerged as promising approaches to complement traditional advocacy in the field.

3.1. Systems thinking

As today's challenges are complex and interconnected, responses need to reflect this complexity. Sustainable development requires a much deeper rethinking of the way the economy, the political system and society works. Climate change, biodiversity loss, poverty, inequality and other social issues are all interconnected problems, which often share common heritages. Unless we can see, understand and read the whole system, we misunderstand the forces at play and the elements that bind all those parts together. Within this dialogue, the bringing together of young people from different backgrounds to build on their varied experiences and knowledge is necessary.

Strategies dealing with complex problems that lack a systems perspective often fall short of their objectives, have a negative effect in the long-term or cause problems in other parts of the system. This is increasingly recognised by international institutions and governments. The European Commission's in-house think tank stressed the need for systems thinking in view of delivering sustainable policies as its overarching objective.¹⁷ In the context of discussion at the UN, experts view systems thinking as critical to sustainable development planning and strategy formulation.¹⁸

Systems thinking is a perspective that comprises a common language and a set of tools that emphasise inter-connections and context in order to counter short-sighted decision-making. Identifying positive and negative feedback loops between different parts of the system can inform policy choices and help avoid unintended negative impacts elsewhere in the system. Systems thinking can also support policy makers and stakeholders in analysing and understanding root causes of sustainability problems in order to focus on leverage points for intervention, where small changes can produce big changes in the system as a whole.¹⁹

¹⁷ EPSC (2016). *Sustainability Now! A European Vision for Sustainability*. Available at: http://ec.europa.eu/epsc/publications/strategic-notes/sustainability-now_en

¹⁸ UN (2015). *Report of the Capacity Building Workshop and Expert Group Meeting on Integrated Approaches to Sustainable Development Planning and Implementation*. Available at: <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/8506IASD%20Workshop%20Report%2020150703.pdf>

¹⁹ Meadows, D. (1999). *Leverage points: Places to Intervene in a System*. Available at: http://donellameadows.org/wp-content/userfiles/Leverage_Points.pdf

Popular solutions are often focused on quick fixes and fail to address root causes. Looking beneath the surface of events by asking questions about underlying patterns, explanations for these events and patterns based on system structures and the deeply held beliefs or assumptions which sustain these structures is necessary in order to design approaches that work towards sustainable development. Using a systems thinking approach would lead policy makers and other stakeholders to understand that changing the goal of our economic system to strive for sustainable development or human wellbeing would be a more powerful intervention than merely implementing a new policy.²⁰ By revealing system patterns, structures and unconscious assumptions, systems thinking can help all stakeholders to design holistic solutions based on the characteristics of the system as a whole.

3.2.Changing narratives

Public demand for change is vital for sustainable development. Public engagement, from all spheres of society, is important because our collective choices about the way in which we live have important impacts on many sustainable development challenges. Further, public opinion often sets the pace with which public institutions respond to these challenges. Engaging the wider public in a serious dialogue about what is really needed to deal with the biggest challenges of our times is therefore crucial.

Research has shown that facts play a limited role in people's choices about societal concerns or global issues.²¹ Instead, decisions are often unconscious and driven by emotional factors, among which cultural values play an important role. For example, people regularly reject factual information that does not support their values in order to protect their identity. Through appealing to people on an emotional level, storytelling can help to shift mind-sets and reshape narratives and thereby change the rules of debate and the logical context in which decision are made.

Narratives can be understood as frameworks for people to make sense of the world. To date the dominant narrative of sustainable development is still framed around incremental change in technical terms and relies on the old model of industrial growth. In this project, ever-increasing levels of extraction, production, and consumption are seen as the remedy for the bulk of sustainable development challenges. This narrative has gripped the public imagination and paved the way for regressive economic, social and environmental policies. Within this narrative, there is little space for youth, who are often, overtly or subconsciously, depicted as passive recipients too 'naïve' or 'inexperienced' to contribute. The current narrative does not sufficiently encourage learning from others or appreciate the ways in which different people can and do contribute, independently of their age, social and economic

²⁰ See section 4.5

²¹ see, e.g., Lakoff, G. (2008) *The Political Mind: A cognitive Scientist's Guide to our Brain and its Politics*. Penguin Books

status.

To change mindsets and create an on-going momentum, this narrative needs to be challenged and replaced by a new narrative for sustainable development that is inspiring, positive, engaging and non-technical. Such a narrative needs to embrace the systemic nature of sustainability problems and offer a positive long-term societal vision based on equality and wellbeing, and access to human rights. A new narrative about sustainable development also needs to be inclusive and depict youth as 'motivated', 'capable' and 'legitimate' agents for sustainable development. In turn, such a narrative can help to shift values and strengthen frames that are helpful in addressing the sustainability crisis, thereby having a real effect. Not only the narratives but also the narrators of the sustainable development discourse need to change. There is a need to engage more young people and to reach out to them as receivers of the narratives as well. The whole framework and targets of the narrative needs to change since everyone can currently and has the further potential to champion progress and change.

Values play a central role in social change for sustainable development. Addressing the systemic challenges we are facing will require much deeper behavioural changes, which are unlikely to be achieved within the current set of dominant cultural values. There is a common set of values that can motivate people to tackle a range of global issues such as poverty or climate change. Stories that appeal to intrinsic values relating to caring, community or solidarity are more likely to cause lasting behaviour change than those appealing to extrinsic or materialistic values such as achievement, status, power and wealth.²² A transition to sustainable development requires a cultural shift towards sufficiency, wellbeing and solidarity. Ways of communicating need to be adjusted to support this cultural shift.

Framing is a crucial tool to support communication strategies. Frames are mental structures that allow human beings to understand reality – and sometimes to create what we take to be reality.²³ Words activate particular frames. For instance, whether we talk about 'needs' or 'rights' of people evokes different frames, one that defines people as passive recipients and one that defines people as legitimate stakeholders.

Finding the right frames is crucial for a transition to sustainable development. In practice, this means breaking with the old framing of development as a project that constructs development problems as knowledge problems, isolated from each other, that can be solved by technical fixes or through charity aimed at the most impoverished. Instead, there is a need to explore ways to frame and communicate sustainable development as a systemic issue and a common project that seeks to bring as much resilience as possible to the global system. This approach sees development problems as power problems that require collective political action to

²² Oxfam et al. (2010). *Common Cause: The case for working with our cultural values*. Available at: <https://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/common-cause-the-case-for-working-with-our-cultural-values-112367>

²³ Bond et al. (2011). *Finding Frames: New ways to engage the UK public in global poverty*. Available at: <http://www.framingmymessage.nl/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/Finding-Frames-New-ways-to-engage-the-UK-public-in-global-poverty-Bond-2011.pdf>

address power imbalances by moving to a wholly new set of alternative models.

Sustainable development will only be possible by making profound changes to our lives and our political, social and economic systems. Strategies to promote sustainable development need to reflect this. Current unsustainable models are rooted in people's deep-seated political worldviews expressed through narratives. These narratives define the boundaries of political agendas that are deemed mainstream or radical, politically feasible or utopian. Approaches to sustainable development must aim to move the boundary of the politically feasible to create spaces for ambitious policy reform and alternative models to flourish.

4. Alternatives to current unsustainable models

To successfully deal with today's systemic crises, we need to put into practice alternatives to the current unsustainable paradigm. Since there is no blueprint for sustainable development, there is a need to experiment with and combine a variety of ideas, approaches and policies. The areas outlined below are promising leverage points for introducing alternatives to our economic, political and social systems. Alternatives to our economic models, measures of progress, systems for wealth distribution, models for production and consumption and structures for democratic participation of young people all have the potential to result in a considerable shift towards sustainable development, provided that governments set the right policy conditions and support youth organisations and other stakeholders in nurturing alternative models.

4.1. New Economy

Current situation

Our current economic system based on private ownership, largely unregulated competition in a free market, and the pursuit of short-term profit maximisation has led to a huge increase in economic, environmental and social challenges. A major reason for the highly unequal distribution of wealth is the way our economic system prioritises returns to shareholders over everything else. The pressure to create short-term profits has led corporations to pursue activities regardless of severe adverse consequences for our environment. The commodification of almost every aspect of social life in a pursuit of efficiency raises moral questions. For instance, where money determines access to basic necessities such as healthcare, education, housing or food. Many feel they have lost control over their lives and are now being left behind by changes in the economy.

The current system is based on myths derived from broken traditional economic models. Two of these myths are that wealth will trickle down and pollution will eventually be reduced as economies mature. Both these stories are flawed as inequality is rising in modern economies and emissions are merely outsourced to developing countries.²⁴ Our current economic thinking needs to be replaced by “new models for cooperation that are not based on narrow interests but on the destiny of humanity as a whole”.²⁵

²⁴ Raworth, K. (2017). *Doughnut Economics: Seven Ways to Think Like a 21st-Century Economist*. New York: Random House Business.

²⁵ World Economic Forum (2017). *World Economic Forum 2018 to Call for Strengthening Cooperation in a Fractured World*. Available at: <https://www.weforum.org/press/2017/09/world-economic-forum-2018-to-call-for-strengthening-cooperation-in-a-fractured-world/>

Alternative

Within the traditional market economy, there is a rise of alternative forms of organisation that are not based on individualism, competition, materialism and the maximisation of profits. Generally referred to as the “new economy” they are more aligned with values of human and planetary wellbeing. The new economy comprises a multitude of different ways of organising the economy, transforming the relationship between producers and consumers. Prominent examples include the solidarity economy and the collaborative economy. The solidarity economy is based on democracy, solidarity and ecological sustainability. It seeks to increase community wellbeing through not-for-profit endeavours. The collaborative economy is based on cooperation rather than competition. It includes sharing, collaborative production and is organised in horizontally networked communities.

There are several forms of organisations that are putting the new economy into practice. The development of the new economy offers a chance for the reevaluation of traditional concepts such as wage labour. It is closely linked to the cooperative movement as one way to organise in a more equal and democratic social order.²⁶ Other forms of organisations include community land trusts, a non-profit corporation that develops and stewards affordable housing by taking the land out of the market, or community ownership of essential services such as electricity or water. Democratic structures in which people have a stronger ownership of public goods, communities, and their working lives contrasts these new forms with old models that have led people to feel they have lost control over their lives. Transforming the economic model to foster innovation should be an opportunity to reflect on the respective contributions of differently skilled forms of labour to our society.

Leverage for sustainable development

The new economy can have leverage on several areas, in particular for young people. The involvement of young people in cooperatives can be considered as a valuable opportunity for employment, empowerment and engagement in the transition to full economic, social and civic participation.²⁷ Cooperatives have also been found to be a viable tool for youth organisations to partly fund their own activities without depending on external support.²⁸ Changing the logic of organisation at the local level to one based on democracy and empowerment can be a real game

²⁶ A cooperative is an organisation where people come together to meet common needs through a democratic enterprise. Rather than maximising profit, i.e. shareholder returns, cooperatives seek to satisfy the needs of their members and often also the wider community. They are based on democratic decision-making according to the principle “one member – one vote”. Besides workers cooperatives (owned by the people who work there) there are other forms of cooperatives, such as housing cooperatives (owned by the people who live there) or consumer cooperatives (owned by the people who use the services).

²⁷ European Youth Forum (2014). *Money Grows on Trees: Youth Organisations setting up Cooperatives*. Available at: http://www.youthforum.org/sites/default/files/publication-pdfs/YFJ_MoneyGrowsOnTreesweb.pdf

²⁸ European Youth Forum (2014). *Op cit.*

changer and eventually be scaled up and transform our economy to one that works for everyone, and that can sustain our life on this planet for many generations to come.²⁹

The role of youth organisations

Youth organisations have a crucial role to play in catalysing transformative social and economic change through:

- Challenging misconceptions that are standing in the way of new economic models
- Supporting education, training and information provision on the new economy and help in the set up of cooperative structure, initiate or support pilot projects to demonstrate that everyone can be useful to society and to the community
- Contributing to building a mainstream conversation for the role of the new economy in sustainable development, by framing and communicating the new economy vision, aiming at achieving social justice

The role of governments

The European Union and regional and national governments in Europe have the potential to become a leader in innovative economic models that make the idea of economic prosperity inseparable from sustainability through:

- Supporting the movement by setting the right policy conditions for alternative economic models, for instance, through research, financing and establishing a supportive legal environment for alternative forms of organisations
- Encouraging and supporting education, training and information provision to improve understanding among all stakeholders of new sustainable economic models to achieve social justice and equity
- Placing restrictions on unsustainable practices that overexploit, for example, natural resources

4.2.A more equal society

Current situation

Economic inequality is very high by historical standards and there is no sign that extreme inequality is abating. Research estimated that in 2016, 8 men owned the

²⁹ Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (2003). *The Cooperative Movement as a Model of Ecological Equilibrium*. Available at: <http://www.fao.org/docrep/ARTICLE/WFC/XII/MS22-E.HTM>

same wealth as the bottom half of the global population, 3.6 billion people.³⁰ Overall, 82% of wealth created between September 2016 and September 2017 was accrued by the 1% richest people, while 0% went to the world's poorest 50%.³¹

Inequality also has a social dimension. Different groups such as youth and women are affected disproportionately by inequality and the impacts of climate change. Nine out of ten billionaires are men.³² According to the World Economic Forum, at current rates, it would take until the year 2234 to close the global gender pay gap.³³ In 2014, young people became the group at greatest risk of poverty in the OECD.³⁴ A stunning 43% of the global youth labour force is either unemployed or working but living in poverty.³⁵

Inequality has many causes or drivers. Social exclusion based on age, gender, ethnicity, class, caste, disability and other categories is one of them. Other factors such as globalisation, public policy and technology can also act as drivers of inequality if they are harnessed incorrectly. They can however also have the potential to exert massive positive influence combating unsustainable practices and poverty, if they are handled correctly.

However, there is evidence that inequality is built into our economic system and preserved over generations due to the inheritance of wealth.³⁶ As wealth is an important source of power and the other way around, economic inequality is both a cause and consequence of political inequality. Political capture of the decision-making process can lead to a perpetuation of economic inequality. Privileged groups use their access to decision-makers to reinforce their own advantage, through sweetheart taxes or privatisation deals, for example. Conversely, these groups will use their economic power to increase their political influence in many ways, from lobbying to campaign finance, from funding research to owning media (capture of ideas), and from nepotism to revolving doors between civil service

³⁰ Oxfam (2017). *An Economy for the 99%*. Available at: <https://www.oxfam.org/en/research/economy-99>

³¹ Oxfam (2018). *Reward Work, not Wealth*. Available at: <https://www.oxfam.org/en/research/reward-work-not-wealth>; based on data from: <https://www.credit-suisse.com/corporate/en/research/research-institute/publications.html>

³² Forbes (2017). *The World's Billionaires. 2017 Ranking*. Available at: <https://www.forbes.com/billionaires/list>

³³ World Economic Forum (2017). *The Global Gender Gap Report 2017*. Available at: http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2017.pdf

³⁴ OECD (2014). *Rising inequality: youth and poor fall further behind*. Available at: <https://www.oecd.org/social/OECD2014-Income-Inequality-Update.pdf>

³⁵ ILO (2015). *Global Employment Trends for Youth 2015: Scaling up investments in decent jobs for youth*. Available at: http://www.ilo.org/global/research/globalreports/youth/2015/WCMS_412015/lang-en/index.htm

³⁶ In the current system, the return to capital has been stable over centuries at around 5%. When the return to capital is greater than economic growth over the long term, the ratio of wealth to income, and therefore inequality, increases. This has been the norm throughout history, while the decline of inequality in the twentieth century was an anomaly driven by two world wars and a great depression. - The Guardian (2014). *Thomas Piketty's Capital: everything you need to know about the surprise bestseller*. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/apr/28/thomas-piketty-capital-surprise-bestseller>. Summary of: Piketty, T. (2013). *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*. Harvard University Press.

and industry (regulatory capture). None of these factors is natural or beyond human control. Inequality is created and perpetuated through our economic system and policies.

Leverage for sustainable development

While extreme inequality is unethical in its own respect, it is also a profound destabiliser of our global economic and social systems. Societies with higher inequality generally experience higher insecurity, lower health and happiness levels. They are less resilient and able to cope with challenges such as climate change. High inequality also leads to a loss of trust and cohesion in society.³⁷ Increasingly, rich and poor people are living separate lives: living and shopping in different places and sending their children to different schools. Conversely, reducing inequality is a powerful leverage point to increase systemic resilience and address the social ills listed above for a more sustainable society as well as the most direct way to poverty reduction.

The role of youth organisations

Youth organisations can contribute to a more equal society through:

- Fighting inequality directly through their actions, for example, through youth work and non-formal education
- Highlighting the problems with extreme inequality, in particular for young people, through facts and figures
- Raising awareness about inequality and young people in order to bring the problem to the spotlight and influence the public discourse, opening spaces for ambitious structural and policy reform
- Empowering young people facing inequality to be actors of change in their own communities and advocate for an equal society

The role of governments

Governments and international institutions need to recognise that the current economic system and policies are not working for the majority of the world's population, and apply different measures able to reduce inequality, including:

- Designing a fairer economy from the start through policies regulating quality jobs with decent wages and working conditions, and the promotion of workers' organisations to increase their bargaining power vis-à-vis employers

³⁷ Wilkinson, R. & Pickett, K. (2009). *The Spirit Level: Why More Equal Societies Almost Always Do Better*. Allen Lane.

- Implementing measures that ensure a sustainable and socially just allocation of profits
- Adopt regulations to prevent political capture
- Reforming tax to clamp down on tax avoidance and tax evasion
- Investing new returns in policies that benefit young people, and in particular vulnerable and marginalised groups

4.3. Sustainable production and consumption

Current situation

Environmental problems have been accelerating over the past decades. Climate change already causes 400,000 deaths annually mainly due to hunger and communicable diseases.³⁸ A recent article in *Nature* found that we only have a 5% chance to stay below the 2°C set in the Paris Agreement.³⁹ At least 10,000 species become extinct every year, which is estimated to be 1,000 to 10,000 times higher than without the impacts of human activity.⁴⁰ Around 8 million metric tonnes of plastic waste enters the oceans each year.⁴¹ Air pollution accounts for 400,000 premature deaths in Europe alone.⁴²

From a systems thinking perspective, all these ecological problems are linked to one core problem: ecological overshoot. We are simply consuming too much and living far beyond the Earth's carrying capacity. Today, humanity uses on average 1.6 planet Earths to provide resources and absorb our waste.⁴³ Our current consumer culture is making it difficult for everyone to live sustainable lifestyles. This is especially true for vulnerable groups that cannot afford consumption of ethical and environmentally friendly goods and services that can be more expensive.

To deal with the urgency and systemic nature of today's environmental problems, technical fixes are grossly inadequate. While energy efficiency and renewable energy are, without doubt, important, they are not the whole solution. Finding a solution requires looking at the root causes of the problem, i.e. our current levels and linear models of consumption and production that follow the logic 'extract, produce, own, discard'.

³⁸ Climate Vulnerable Forum (2016). *Climate Vulnerability Monitor, 2nd edition, 2016*. Available at: <https://daraint.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/CVM2-Low.pdf>

³⁹ Raftery, A.E. et al. (2017). *Less than 2 °C warming by 2100 unlikely*. *Nature Climate Change* volume7, pages 637–641

⁴⁰ WWF (n.a.). *How many Species are we losing?* Available at: http://wwf.panda.org/about_our_earth/biodiversity/biodiversity/

⁴¹ Jambeck et al. (2015). *Plastic waste inputs from land into the ocean*. Available at: <http://science.sciencemag.org/content/347/6223/768>

⁴² European Environment Agency (2017). *Air Quality in Europe 2017*. Available at: <https://www.eea.europa.eu/publications/air-quality-in-europe-2017>

⁴³ Global Footprint Network (n.a.). *Ecological Footprint*. Available at: <https://www.footprintnetwork.org/our-work/ecological-footprint/>

Alternative

The circular economy has emerged as a promising alternative to contrast linear models. The aim of the circular economy is to create a closed loop of the production cycle from “cradle-to-cradle” while maximising the recycling and re-use of products and minimising the production of waste and energy. The European Commission has proposed a Circular Economy Action Plan that will be implemented across the European Union.⁴⁴ Other countries, such as China, have introduced measures following the European Union’s example.⁴⁵

The circular economy idea has the potential to transform the way we produce and consume, but it cannot solve the problem of climate change, resource depletion, and waste by itself. One study has found that circular economy activities can increase overall production, which can partially or fully offset their benefits.⁴⁶ Therefore, the circular economy needs to be embedded in a larger shift to a critique of extractivism and a culture of sufficiency.

Further, the transition to a low-carbon, circular economy needs to be a just one: respecting the rights of workers and creating opportunities for communities moving away from fossil-fuel intensive industries. This is in particular relevant for geographical regions that are highly dependent on the fossil fuel industry and elderly, less skilled people who have been working in those industries for a long time. A just transition should bring together workers, communities, employers, young people and government in dialogue to drive the concrete plans, policies and investments needed for a fast and fair transformation.

Leverage for sustainable development

A new model of production based both on the sufficiency and efficiency principle could have a transformative effect beyond environmental challenges. For instance, each step of the circular economy can provide quality jobs for young people. It can also give rise to a new culture that does not equate wellbeing with consumption but promotes environmental consciousness.

The role of youth organisations

Youth organisations have an important role to play in facilitating learning exchange to promote a culture of environmental consciousness and sufficiency through:

⁴⁴ European Commission (2018). *Circular Economy*. Available at: http://ec.europa.eu/environment/circular-economy/index_en.htm

⁴⁵ World Bank Group (2017). *China Circular Economy Promotion Law*. Available at: <https://ppp.worldbank.org/public-private-partnership/library/china-circular-economy-promotion-law>

⁴⁶ Zink, T. & Geyer, R. (2017). *Circular Economy Rebound*. Available at: <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/jiec.12545/abstract>

- Motivating and supporting young people to participate in new models of consumption and production
- Leading by example with environmentally friendly practices and promoting practices already being implemented by citizens, especially young people
- Raising awareness and bringing people from all walks of life together to share their know-how and techniques they are experimenting with, to foster and strengthen the sense of living together and being part of the community
- Communicating in ways that motivate people to protect and enjoy nature by appealing to its intrinsic value
- Promoting the use of environmentally friendly means of transportation

The role of governments

European governments must set the policy context for a transformation to sustainable models of production and consumption through:

- Implementing and increasing the ambition on circular economy strategies and design policies across the board, applying the principles of reduce, reuse, repair, recycle, in that order, involving those with practical experience
- Placing restrictions on unsustainable practices such as through a ban on coal and phasing out of fossil fuels, and putting in place more efficient sanctioning systems for environmental and human rights violations
- Fostering and supporting innovation, as well as ensuring access to sustainable practices such as renewable energy and environmentally friendly means of transportation
- Ensuring a just transition through education, relocation and retirement options for those most affected by a transformation to a low-carbon, circular economy, and securing the funding of those measures
- Recognising the limits of market solutions for environmental problems as our natural resources cannot be separated out and valued like financial assets due to their intrinsic value that cannot be substituted once they are gone

4.4. Democratic participation

Current situation

Sustainable development cannot be a top-down project decided by small groups of privileged people and will require effective democratic governance systems and the active and meaningful participation of young people and civil society to create a new pathway.

Political participation is a guiding principle of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights⁴⁷, yet that right is not equally respected, protected and fulfilled across different groups in society. Young people are commonly misperceived as having a disengaged relationship with politics. Low turnout in elections is often put forward to support this hypothesis. Contrary to perceived wisdom, a study by the European Youth Forum found a strong interest in politics among youth. However, young people prefer to engage in the politics of organising, mobilising and contesting power from the outside.⁴⁸

Low participation of youth in current political structures can therefore not be blamed on “apolitical” young people. Conversely, there is a loss of trust in current political institutions that must be explained by current forms of representative democracy themselves. Paternalistic and oligarchic systems are unwilling to share power and respond to aspirations of youth for democratic renewal. Today, many democracies in Europe debate about technical issues instead of values like justice, human dignity or the common good that are at the heart of the sustainable development concept. Young people’s interests appear to be less and less of a priority for political institutions, creating a vicious circle further alienating young people from the formal political sphere.

Formal participation of young people in political processes has been increasing but has remained largely tokenistic, elitist, often depoliticised and confined to narrow spaces deemed “youth issues”, such as education. Young people from disadvantaged backgrounds face greater difficulties in accessing political processes and participation and, as a result, are represented by others who do not share the same understanding or ways of expressing their situation. While young people may have a seat at the table, political space for civil society, including youth, to organise, to operate, to protest and to dissent is shrinking.⁴⁹

Alternative

In order to attract more young people from diverse backgrounds to participate in the fundamental debates of our times, there is a need for structural change towards a democracy where young people have a real say. The EU’s Structured Dialogue⁵⁰ and the co-management system of the Council of Europe⁵¹ make a good start, but need to be improved, as well as complemented by new mechanisms for deliberation and

⁴⁷ UNGA (1984). *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. Available at: http://www.ohchr.org/EN/UDHR/Documents/UDHR_Translations/eng.pdf

⁴⁸ European Youth Forum (2015). *Young People and Democratic Life in Europe: What next after the 2014 European Elections?*. Available at: https://www.youthup.eu/app/uploads/2015/11/YFJ_YoungPeopleAndDemocraticLifeInEurope_B1_web-9e4bd8be22.pdf

⁴⁹ Transnational Institute (2017). *On “Shrinking Space”: A Framing Paper*. Available at: https://www.tni.org/files/publication-downloads/on_shrinking_space_2.pdf

⁵⁰ For more information on the European Youth Forum’s work on the Structure Dialogue see: <http://www.youthforum.org/StructuredDialogue>

⁵¹ For more information on Co-Management see: <https://www.coe.int/en/web/youth/co-management-and-decision-making>

participation, especially for the poorest. Participatory budgeting schemes allowing citizens to decide where public funds should be spent have proven to be a powerful tool to successfully engage young people in policy making, for example.⁵²

Youth activism and mobilisation needs to be recognised as a legitimate form of political participation, not contested. Young people are often critical towards political systems and procedures, and they are able to highlight undemocratic methods in various forms.⁵³ There is a need to look to the voices and experiences of young people on the margins of the political discourse whose political space is being obviously and radically restricted. Grassroots activism and marginalised causes at the core of sustainable development (such as human rights, systemic critique or the protection of whistleblowers) are often neglected in favour of less politicised or less controversial issues. There is a need to look to the voices and experiences of young people on the margins of the political discourse whose political space is being obviously and radically restricted.

Technological solutions, political regulation or financial instruments alone cannot achieve sustainable development. We need to change the way we think and act. This requires quality education and learning for sustainable development at all levels and in all social contexts. Education, both formal and non-formal, plays an important role in supporting new and emerging forms of democratic structures. Citizenship education serves many functions that are essential for the creation of a more sustainable and just society, such as mobilising young people for this cause, empowering young people to engage in political life, and developing citizens' common sense of belonging to a broader community and common humanity.⁵⁴ New democratic models cannot flourish without the right educational structures in place.

Leverage for sustainable development

Democratic participation of young people is a crucial leverage point for sustainable development. The current alienation of young people deprives society of their energy and optimism. If supported through quality education for sustainable development, both formal and non-formal, deliberative and participatory models for the democratic participation of young people have the potential to lead to a long-term perspective, an equitable intergenerational distribution of resources, and the impetus for change needed for sustainable development.

⁵² European Youth Forum (2015). *Op cit.*

⁵³ Finnish Youth Research Network (2014). *Youth Participation Good Practices in Different Forms of Regional and Local Democracy*. Available at: http://www.nuorisotutkimusseura.fi/images/julkaisuja/youthparticipation_goodpractices.pdf

⁵⁴ European Youth Forum (2016). *Inspiring! Youth Organisations contributing to Citizenship Education*. Available at: <http://www.youthforum.org/sites/default/files/publication-pdfs/Youth-organisations-contribution-to-citizenship-education.pdf>

The role of youth organisations

Youth organisations play an important role towards improving representative and participatory democracy and strengthening it through new forms that allow for genuine debate about sustainable development, including through:

- Ensuring young people's access and participation in democratic processes and decision-making processes
- Facilitating dialogue between all stakeholders around the fundamental questions concerning sustainable development
- Advocating for stronger youth participation in existing institutional processes
- Translating political activism for democratic reform into political institutions and advocating for European governments and international institutions to put in place mechanisms that are more inclusive, participatory and deliberative
- Supporting young people in direct action and popular mobilisation in the case where public institutions are incapable of creating spaces
- Including marginalised youth into democratic participation and institutional processes, acknowledging them as fundamental stakeholders in this dialogue
- Providing citizenship education and education for sustainable development

The role of governments

Governments and international institutions need to recognise and understand the plurality of youth political participation and respond with genuine reform of the democratic system through:

- Promoting dialogue, at every level of governance, between all stakeholders around the fundamental questions concerning sustainable development
- Ensuring the presence of a diverse group of young people in key political bodies such as parliaments at all levels, as well as in processes for sustainable development, and improving current forms of participation, for instance, by lowering the voting age to 16 and seeking the opinions and voices of the young people who are furthest behind
- Recognising alternative forms of political participation beyond voting as legitimate and responding accordingly
- Creating new participatory and deliberative mechanisms and structures to strengthen democracy across Europe
- Investing in quality education, both formal and non-formal, for sustainable development

4.5. Genuine measures of progress

Current situation

Our social and economic systems are built on the assumption that an increase in economic growth, measured through Gross Domestic Product (GDP), produces benefits for all and improvements in quality of life. High growth rates have become to be seen as a mark of success in their own right, rather than as a means to an end. Governments all over the world have been willing to sacrifice everything from public service to equality of opportunity to clean air for a few percentage points in GDP growth.

GDP does not, and is not intended to, measure wellbeing.⁵⁵ It measures the sum total of everything we produce over a given period, without valuing what is produced against ethical standards or sustainability. GDP is growing and hence the economy is said to be doing 'well' when environmental pollution creates new production such as medicine to treat the adverse health effects caused by air pollution. GDP, as an aggregate number, also completely ignores how the fruits of that growth are invested or shared.

The real problem with GDP as a metric, however, is its effects on policy making. What gets measured gets managed. In search for economic growth, governments have adopted a set of resource-intensive measures greatly contributing to climate change. The elusive quest for GDP-driven growth has fostered a consumerist culture across the world for those who can afford to participate in it, whereby people are reduced to 'consumers' and societies to 'markets'. Socially, it has led to the concentration of wealth and power in the hands of fewer and fewer individuals. In and of itself, economic growth will not reduce poverty or inequality, as has been proven in many regions.⁵⁶ A reliance on GDP measures makes us complacent because they hide the true cost of growth for people and planet.

Alternative

The current fixation on GDP as national and societal success indicator is a social construction that can be changed. We need to recognise that there is no value in maximising consumption. An important window of opportunity is opening up. The idea that GDP is ill-suited to measure progress and the need for political alignment with

⁵⁵ Simon Kuznets (1934) *National Income, 1929-1932*. 73rd US Congress, 2nd session, Senate document no 124. Available at: <http://www.nber.org/chapters/c2258.pdf>

⁵⁶ In Nigeria, GDP growth has been at 5% over the past 20 years. Despite this, the percentage of extremely poor has increased from 22% in 2004 to almost 39% in 2010. See: The Economist (2013). *Generation Jobless*. Available at: <https://www.economist.com/news/international/21576657-around-world-almost-300m-15-24-year-olds-are-not-working-what-has-caused>

alternative measures of progress has seen growing recognition.⁵⁷ Civil society organisations have for a long time pointed out the limitation of indicators that are exclusively monetary, as well as that multidimensional indicators are required to measure poverty and wellbeing. SDG Target 17.19 requires all UN Member States to “build on existing initiatives to develop measurements of progress on sustainable development that complement gross domestic product”⁵⁸. A myriad of alternative indicators already exist measuring ‘wellbeing’ or ‘welfare’ such as the European Commission’s ‘quality of life’ indicators.⁵⁹ Yet such indicators are seldom used in policy making.

Leverage for sustainable development

A lack of political will, fuelled by misconceptions about the benefits of using GDP, stand in the way of using alternative measures of progress in policy making. Current perceived wisdom by the majority of countries is that economic growth based on production and consumption is their ultimate objective and thus GDP, as the indicator, is still the common shorthand for global progress and human welfare. Replacing GDP as the dominant indicator of progress can put a halt to the pursuit of unsustainable economic growth and pave the way for more sustainable models of progress.

The role of youth organisations

Youth organisations can play an important role in building a new vision of progress through:

- Challenging the misconceptions that support the use of GDP and articulating a positive vision of an economy structured towards the achievement of wellbeing
- Helping to build such a new vision bottom-up, by collecting data on the real wellbeing of young people that can eventually feed into progress indicators informing policy choices.

The role of governments

Economic growth should no longer be seen as an end in itself, but as one possible means of supporting the wellbeing of people, as long as it does not cause adverse

⁵⁷ In countries such as Austria, Belgium, Italy, the UK, the Netherlands and Germany, governments now often openly acknowledge that the sole focus on GDP growth is often not benefitting society and might lead to negative impacts on the environment.

⁵⁸ UN General Assembly (2015). *Op cit.*

⁵⁹ Eurostat (2015). *Quality of Life Indicators*. Available at: http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Quality_of_life_indicators

environmental impacts. Governments and international institutions must contribute to change by:

- Initiating a fundamental debate on what progress means and how society can be structured towards the achievement of collective wellbeing
- Adopting alternative measures of progress based on sustainable development and the real wellbeing of people and planet

5. Conclusion

The idea of challenging unsustainable models and introducing new sustainable models in the political, economic and social sphere might seem like a herculean task. However, our current systems and models are not immutable. They are man-made – in most cases literally constructed by a few men. Creating a just and sustainable future is possible, but only with a bold vision based on systemic change and sustainable alternative models.

The European Youth Forum is not trying to reinvent the world. Instead, a new zeitgeist is unfolding in front of our eyes and we need to do our best to channel it toward the world we want to see. As the voice of young people and the platform of youth organisations in Europe, the European Youth Forum is uniquely positioned to nurture sustainable alternatives all over Europe and steer the new political debate towards productive ends.

The European Youth Forum commits to initiating dialogue and challenging misconceptions on which unsustainable models are based. By developing and communicating a positive narrative on youth involvement in viable alternative models, the European Youth Forum aims to create spaces in which demands for structural reform can be meaningfully articulated. This also includes supporting its Member Organisations in communicating about alternatives and putting alternative models into practice. The European Youth Forum will advocate for policy change towards a policy environment in which sustainable alternatives can flourish. Finally, the European Youth Forum seeks to connect with like-minded civil society organisations and other stakeholders and build a network with the goal to scale up sustainable alternatives to become mainstream.

Whether sustainable development is feasible depends on the energy and dynamism of young people who are entering public life for the first time with new ideas, with no prejudice and less bound by institutional and ideological structures. We should never underestimate the power of a young generation to change the rules. Young people possess the creativity and passion to create a new pathway for a sustainable Europe. The European Youth Forum seeks to empower young people in this endeavour – as agents of their own, sustainable future.

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