

## Europe's Youth: A Generation of Dreamers, Seekers and Believers

*A reflection by Ananya Jain, Amsterdam University College*

For my research, I initiated discussions with two Europe-centered youth activist groups called The Great Imagining and RE-PEAT. Both these collectives work in what may be considered 'niche' areas. The Great Imagining has been developing a two-week plug in to national curriculum where traditional school hierarchies are transcended to create a student-driven educational process that culminates in individual projects. During these two weeks, the school environment is converted into an immersive exhibition that combines diverse areas of expertise from game mechanics to promenade theatre, and encourages skills like problem-solving, critical thinking, empathy, and self-expression. On the other hand, RE-PEAT has been working for a peatland paradigm shift – the recognition of peatlands as valuable ecological resources in our fight against climate change, as opposed to 'wastelands' – through a process of collaboration, education and reimagining. Like The Great Imagining, their conception of education involves a restructuring of traditional views, except in terms of the natural spaces around us. This brief introduction to both collectives already expresses recurrent themes between their discourses. They both emphasize re-education: questioning the 'norm' – of educational structures, of peatlands – and reshaping them.

As my conversations with these groups developed, I began to understand their ideas as a microcosm for the larger changes they wished to enact in society. Returning to their discourse on education, for instance, both The Great Imagining and RE-PEAT viewed it as a tool to counter flawed narratives and introduce multiplicity. This notion is quite universal in its scope, given the era of misinformation we live in. The rise of technology has exacerbated our inability to access alternative viewpoints, and increased polarization between different segments. This is something that becomes painstakingly visible in the current rise of authoritarian regimes across the world along with increasing intolerance for those who are different. Misinformation, therefore, has become one of the most sweeping challenges we face today.

The above concept of misinformation can be broadened to a general ignorance (and apathy born from such ignorance) that perpetuates the different societal challenges we face today: decolonialization, the environmental crisis, patriarchy, etc. Therefore, when addressing their niches, these collectives inevitably also draw connections to these larger issues. Several members of The Great Imagining had personally encountered instances of racism as early on as at school but could not access adequate sources to counter or mitigate it. In their curriculum,

they want to change this. They want students to actively converse with each other about the pertinent issues we face today and their impact on individual experiences. They aim to introduce a greater diversity of methods and content which further molds young minds to be encouraging of differences. When talking about peatlands, RE-PEAT also picks up on this idea. It explores the colonial-styled narrative of labelling something as a space of ‘nothingness’ which is ‘up-for-grabs.’ It looks to change single-minded, capitalist exploitation of resources and introduce a respectful, loving and healing approach to natural spaces and the local communities that they support. These concerns touch upon my own response which emphasized the limitations of integrated global action in an environment of misinformation and considerable disparity between the global north and south. These groups, however, embody a more nuanced bottom-up approach which recognizes microscopic issues that have macroscopic ramifications.

This is exactly the kind of thinking that makes me hopeful about the future. In my response, I focused on activism by the current generation as a driver for change. After talking with these collectives, I felt my faith in this solidify. These groups, and the people that are involved in their activities, are highly dedicated to creating change in contemporary discourse and society. They are modern, dynamic, confident, and persistent: all of which are necessary qualities in any societal movement. Their resilience is quite visible in the way they adapted to the pandemic, despite being young organizations. RE-PEAT, for instance, saw a growth in its membership and geographical area of operation as it was able to connect virtually with people from across borders. The demography of such groups no doubt plays a role in this. I talked earlier about re-education as a tenet of these collectives. Their dissemination of information combines traditional elements like conferences and articles with contemporary social media approaches that are attention-grabbing and multi-modal. Like many others, I was initially drawn to both organizations by their aesthetic: their Instagram feeds, introductory videos, art, etc., were stunning even as they conveyed something meaningful.

It is worthwhile to reflect upon the multiplicity present in the beliefs and activities of such collectives. Most of the individuals I talked to did not have a Liberal Arts and Sciences background. However, they still had a strong desire to explore the myriad links between issues and develop holistic solutions. I believe this is due, in large part, to their varied composition and working structures. To elaborate, the earlier-outlined goal of re-education motivates these collectives to invite people with diverse viewpoints and adopt collaborative decision-making

processes that consider everyone's concerns (rather than strict hierarchies.) This greater individualization is supported by their working structures. Flexibility in schedules is emphasized and individual initiative in terms of work style, projects undertaken, etc. is the primary mode of operation. This has an interesting effect. While it is usual for organizations to invite a spectrum of skill sets, the lack of rigid roles and presence of collaborative decision-making tools within such collectives catalyzes continuous interaction between these skills. Slowly, roles become increasingly multi-dimensional as do the activities of the collective. This, once again, reinforces the need to adopt diversity.

Going forward, I think the ability of our generation to combine skill sets, viewpoints, and modes of action, is our strongest suit. An interesting by-result is the formulation of robust connections with other collectives working in different fields, allowing for an ever-growing network of small, niche groups that sustains the youth vision.

Unfortunately, many members talked about being dismissed due to their age. The Great Imagining outlines the beginning of this process from school itself, where strict lines of hierarchy are imposed, and children are detachedly instructed rather than engaged or heard. The ideas of the youth are labelled as 'naïve' or 'uneducated' which is a detrimental trend given the vivaciousness of their activities and its potential to spearhead change amongst the present-day and future generations. In terms of organization, this also becomes a significant hurdle when trying to avail funding. Lack of funding can be quite restricting to the scope of activities feasible for these organizations, thereby limiting outreach and visibility. Eased access to funding, is therefore, a fundamental step in the amplification of youth voices. However, beyond that, traditional decision-making bodies (like municipalities, think tanks, etc.) must be adapted to include youth representation, at local and national levels.

Over the course of my conversations, I have come to the conclusion that my generation is characterized by collaborative dreamers, seekers of knowledge, and steadfast believers in change. Given the rise of technology, we also have the unique ability to shape opinions and innovate at an unprecedented level. However, any realistic change is possible only when generations collaborate with each other. In the future, I hope to see greater involvement of youth collectives in traditional political and policy formulation institutions, just as I hope to see boomers and Gen X using zoom reactions and sharing anecdotes with me at a meeting.