Report: Europe's Youth, its Hopes and Discontents
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Introduction

The Hans Adriaansens Student Awards 2021 on the theme 'Europe's Youth, its Hopes and Discontents' was a good occasion to reflect on young people's concerns regarding the future and prospects of change. As a follow-up of the Awards, I have conducted a discussion with youth of the Netherlands to delve into their perspectives and attitudes on the subject. The present report synthetizes the findings of the discussion.

Four questions guided this research:
1. Which challenges that today's European youth will need to confront concern you the most?
2. Apart from these challenges, there is also optimism about some of the ways we might overcome them. What current developments make you most hopeful about the future?
3. Which abilities that you and your generation of students possess do you think will be valuable in confronting the challenges we face?
4. Do you feel that your potential to contribute to society is overlooked, or even dismissed? Is the potential of your generation not used enough? How do you think this can be overcome?

Methodology

I organized a focus group on Sunday 16 May, at 13:00. It lasted 80 minutes, and in the context of COVID-19, was held on Zoom. The discussion was semi-structured: I had prepared a list of guiding questions, but some were abandoned and others added along the way. With the consent of everyone present, I recorded the session.

The focus group had six participants, not including myself. These participants were aged 18 to 24 and were located in the Netherlands. Four of them were students (two Bachelor's and two Master's). The last two were not students, but were working as interns in a startup and a company. For confidentiality purposes, the participants are anonymized in this report.

The focus group was structured in two parts. The first half delved into the global issues that participants felt concerned about and the possibilities of solving them. The second half was dedicated to discussing Generation Z's potential, and the extent to which it is perceived by policymakers.

In the following week, I transcribed the content of the session and proceeded to the analysis of the results. I first sorted the insights according to the four research questions and then synthetized and reflected on the findings to produce an assessment of the discussion.

Youth Perspectives on Global Challenges

Using the transcript of the first half of the session, I took note of the global issues that were mentioned the most in the discussion. Most spoken words were 'inequality' (18 mentions), 'climate change' (16), 'sustainability' (12), 'accountability' (4), 'refugee crisis' (4), 'apathy' (3), 'violence' (3), 'discrimination' (3). This reveals the prominence of certain concerns in the six participants. Using an extended number of related keywords (see Table 1) helped to produce a more comprehensive overview[1].

Theme	Keywords	Total
Environmental degradation and sustainability	'Climate change' (16), 'sustainability' (12), 'planet' (4), 'forest' (1), 'emission' (1)	34
Inequality	'Inequality' (18), 'wealth' (2), 'social safety' (1), 'climate justice' (1)	22
Collective action	'Coordinated' (1), 'mismatch' (2), 'working together' (1), 'apathy' (3), 'conservative' (1), 'armchair' (1), 'individualistic' (3), 'self-interest' (2), 'collective' (6)	20
Diversity	'Diversity' (2), 'inclusion' (1), 'discrimination' (3), 'acceptance' (4)	10
Accountability	'Accountability' (4), 'ethical' (2), 'responsibility' (1), 'façade' (1), 'performative' (1)	9
Others	'Refugee crisis' (4), 'Violence' (3)	7

Table 1. Keywords spoken during the focus group.

Environmental degradation and sustainability

Concerns about the degradation of the state of the planet were raised by many participants. The latter brought up the abundance of plastic, wildfires, greenhouse gases emissions and resources depletion. Building a sustainable society was also a recurring theme.

Inequality

The participants kept coming back to theme of inequality. Inequality comprises both an economic dimension (growing wealth gap, food insecurity, unequal access to healthcare, et cetera.) and a social dimension (unequal access to employment opportunities, education, political participation, et cetera.). Social inequality was explained as a consequence of the difficulty of mankind to tolerate difference. "We humans fear others, we cannot accept diversity of people", argued one of the participants. This leads to social segregation in cities, to discrimination, and even to violence. In addition to *inequality* within countries, a major concern is inequality *between* countries, and in particular, between the global North and South. For instance, it was argued that 'developed' countries sometimes have "more means and more ways to change things" than 'developing' countries.

Furthermore, participants noted the centrality of inequality. Inequality is at the heart of all global issues. Inequality is a 'vicious circle', as it is both the cause and result of many issues. For example, inequality and climate (in)justice are in a loop: inequality is at the source of the lack of climate justice, but lack of climate justice in turn creates new inequalities between groups.

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[1] This is not intended to be a precise measure; it is only a way of estimating which issues were brought up and debated on the most during the discussion. In addition, the classification of the keywords in the different categories is not foolproof. It could be argued that some keywords, like 'sustainability' or 'climate justice' could be placed in more than one category.

According to one participant, inequality "sets a precedent where economically wealthy people can just destroy forests and natural habitats, and indigenous peoples can't do anything against it".

Collective action

A concern that was highlighted by multiple participants was the absence of (effective) cooperation between stakeholders. The "lack of collectivized effort" between governments, institutions, companies and individuals, impedes our ability to address global issues such as the ecological collapse or the refugee crisis.

A particular problem is the lack of inclusion of youth in policymaking. The role played by youth and the work it accomplishes are not taken into account. Participants emphasized the 'mismatch' between the current leadership, from an older generation, and the overlooked efforts and ideas of the current generation to take action. "We're becoming more conscious, but we're being led by people who aren't from that same consciousness", argued one participant. Similarly, one participant explained that changes were slow because most firms were managed by an older generation, with different interests and priorities than the youth.

Another interrelated issue is the disengagement of a part of the youth from political life. Democratic apathy results from the fatigue, frustration and disappointment of the youth, whose perspectives and problems are not heard. Indeed, more and more young people have a mindset of "'I pay my taxes, that's my contribution to society", according to one participant. This indifference towards society is concerning. In addition, participants noted the widespread tendency of stakeholders to pass onto others the responsibility to solve global issues. "It's a lot of unloading the guilt on other people", one argued. The rise of 'armchair' activism is worrisome as well: "if you post a story about something, then that's kind of your contribution, and it sort of ends there".

Diversity

Issues related to diversity were also addressed by the participants. Participants expressed concerns for the decrease in acceptance, and the corresponding increase in discriminatory practices and behaviors. Inclusion of minority groups (e.g., ethnic minorities, LGBT+, refugees) in political processes was also mentioned.

Accountability

A final theme often evoked during the discussion was accountability. Companies and individuals do not take responsibility for their actions. Multinational corporations do not recognize the harm they create or genuinely attempt to change the ways they operate. Multiple participants commented on the issue of brand activism, that is, when firms "project this image of sustainability and ethical practices".

> "A lot of companies have some sort of performative corporate wokeness. It's like a veil of "Oh, we're in this together", like Uber or Airbnb, where at first it seems collectivistic... but it ends up as a kind of exploitation."

> "It's an interesting pattern that all the younger companies that have become very successful, like Uber or Airbnb, don't quite own the assets or don't perform a specific service. It's private individuals performing these services and creating this value and yet, it's the companies that really get rich."

Conclusion: Wicked problems and their solutions

Global issues discussed above can be labeled as 'wicked problems', a term coined by Rittel and Webber. As the participants discussed, they are highly interconnected, which makes the process of solving them very difficult. Inequality is intertwined with sustainability, environmental degradation with lack of accountability, lack of accountability with lack of collective action, et cetera. All those issues involve a wide range of stakeholders who disagree on priorities and solutions. For example, "climate change is something that requires a global coordinated response", however the "non-alignment of priorities" between developed and developing countries hinders the likelihood of solving the issue, according to one participant. Indeed, developing countries often have "more urgent" objectives than cutting down their CO_2 emissions. In addition, some relevant actors, such as youth, are not even included in the decision-making process.

So how can wicked problems be addressed? It is very difficult to find a 'one-size-fits-all' solution for global issues, as they are layered and complex. But one thing that the participants agreed on is the importance of education. In order to propel change, individuals must be educated on sustainability, acceptance and diversity, et cetera. Awareness should be raised at all levels on global problems and the need for immediate action.

Optimism in the Face of Challenges: Reasons to Hope

Prospects for the future

Some skepticism about the ability of humankind to evolve for the better was raised. "I'm not sure if I agree that we learn from our mistakes. I think we *should* learn from our mistakes, but I think that we are already making so many", one participant stated. For instance, the lack of immediate action on a large-scale regarding climate change, despite having known about ecological collapse for decades, is alarming. Another participant said:

> "I feel like sometimes I do doubt the fact that we would be able to really accomplish what we want to accomplish and really able to jumpstart that systemic change that I think would be necessary to really make more of the progress in all social issues than we are making, because I feel like with the current trends, a lot of people are sort of reversing back into that conservative viewpoint."

Nonetheless, overall, all the participants expressed some optimism for the future. "I really believe in hope, in our generation and the generations that are coming", one participant declared. Hopeful developments mentioned include social entrepreneurship, the rise of youth activism, and the growth of organized collectives seeking to address social and environmental issues.

The role of social media

The growth of social media and internet is a development of our generation. Participants were divided over their merits. Social media and internet have many downfalls, they argued. First, "a lot of information on social media is very truncated, which takes away from the complexity of the issue". The incompleteness of the knowledge shared on social media and internet is dangerous, especially now that more and more people rely on them as major sources of news. Social media and internet are "not good at giving the depth of the information. It's not able to present its complexities", which results in mis- and disinformation. As another participant stated, "it's problematic that for instance we're trying to grasp a really complex conflict in one tweet or one infographic or one Instagram story". Second, according to one of the participants, social media is a 'radicalized' platform of dialogue: "It's either you're right or you're wrong and that's it. There's no middle ground".

Nonetheless, internet and social media are valuable tools, the participants recognized. While it might not always be (fully) correct, it is a reservoir of knowledge, that allows individuals to satisfy their curiosity on many topics and issues. Furthermore, social media and internet allow for individuals from all corners of the world to communicate and work together. Lastly, they give power to individuals who would not be heard otherwise, by allowing them to put political pressure on governments. "It gives people like you and me the opportunity to influence some decisions that are made", one participant explained.

Generation Z: Strengths and Abilities

Collectivist vs. individualistic mindset

Participants discussed extensively the issue of individualism. The consensus was that the mentality, at least in European societies, is on the whole egocentric. As one participant explained, "the current global mindset is very individualistic and self-interested, maybe even defensive in a way". However, the participants disagreed on the origin of that mindset. Some argued that it was human nature to be self-seeking, while others contended that mankind was naturally a collectivist specie. The latter claimed that individualism was the result of culture and socialization.

Be that as it may, most participants agreed that our generation's mindset is more open-minded and altruistic than previous ones. "I really believe in hope, in our generation and the generations that are coming. I think they'll have a bit less of an individualistic perspective. I think [change] is coming", affirmed one participant. A sign of that shift in attitudes is the creation of startups and other more collectivistic businesses and organizations.

Concerned, engaged, proactive youth

When asked about the qualities that made our generation suited to tackle future challenges, all the participants were of the same mind. According to them, our generation has more dynamism, motivation, and enthusiasm. The youth want to engage with global issues. One of the participants, member of a youth organization raising awareness about peatland damage, said "the kind of energy that I see there is absolutely amazing". In addition, a sense of urgency – regarding, for example, environmental degradation – has made many young people feel concerned and take action.

Overlooked Youth: Addressing the Lack of Meaningful Participation

Unheard perspectives, flawed narratives

The discussion revealed that the youth do not feel heard by governments and other decision-makers. The day-to-day concerns of young people are most often not addressed. In the Netherlands, for example, the biggest issues faced by the youth are the housing shortage and the student loan system, and policymakers have yet to take concrete action to solve them. "They nod yes, but nothing is really being done about it", voiced one participant. The demand to include birth control in the basic package of healthcare is not taken into account either. Another participant expressed frustration regarding the way COVID-19 was handled: policymakers took decisions that would importantly affect the lives of young people without ever including them in the discussion. The consequences of prolonged periods of lockdown and online education on the mental health of students were not confronted. The long-term repercussions of cutting in half – or completely, at times – the class-hours of primary and secondary school students were not anticipated. The lack of consideration for youth concerns is not without implications itself. As one participant stated:

> "I feel like it really frustrates a lot of people in our generation. Some turn to activism and try to like make themselves heard. But I also feel that a lot of people feel like, 'well we're not being listened to anyway, so why would I even try?', and it turns to democratic apathy."

Youth are not recognized as relevant or capable actors. As one participant said, "in politics right now, there's a huge lack of credibility when it comes to youth people… they don't believe in us because they think we're too young to understand things".

Moreover, the discourse used by politicians to refer to youth is critical. When the government talks about the youth, it is to point out a problem: drug use, delinquency, social media addiction, et cetera. Youth are painted as a source of issues to fix. Another way in which young people are referred to is as "passive, without agency". Flawed narratives as such are problematic, as they contribute to the formation of an image of young people as immature and untrustworthy actors.

Improving youth participation

"We should find solutions to be more democratic between the different generations, because of course they are taking decisions for our future. So we should have more of a say than they do", stated one participant. So, how should the lack of meaningful youth inclusion be tackled? The most obvious solution would be to give youth a seat at the table – to include youth representatives in political institutions, at least at the local level. "Giving them a voice" is necessary, because only them can express their perspectives and recommendations. Indeed, "if you speak for them, then it's not the same message". A suggestion was to establish a quota system, in a similar fashion to the already existing quotas for women in some countries, so that a certain number of seats is reserved for the youth. However, as was argued by one of the participants, the 'youth seats' would surely end up being filled by elite and/or politicians' children, which means that the diverging interests within the youth would not be adequately represented.

Participants also recommended that policymakers actively work towards implementing some of the projects and initiatives developed by young people, that often propose (partial) solutions to societal issues.

Another idea put forward was to set a limit of age to participate in political structures.

> "I do not think that we should put a limit of age to vote because everyone is still a citizen… but to be elected, I think it could be something quite fair. They had their entire life to be elected."

Conclusion

This report shed light on the global challenges that European youth feels concerned about the most. In addition, it explored feelings of hope and optimism for the future, delved into the potential of Generation Z to bring about change, and addressed the overall lack of recognition of youth as key actors in tackling critical issues.

This research faced a number of limitations. First, using an online medium limited the range of possibilities for the focus group. Indeed, it was only possible to conduct a simple discussion. Using other, more interactive, methods to trigger insights was not possible. Second, while a size of six participants was ideal in order for each of them to have the opportunity to participate while keeping the debate alive, organizing more than one focus group could have generated more ideas and opinions. However, due to time constraints, I was not able to run more sessions. Third, it was difficult to motivate individuals to take part in this study. Even more so was creating a diverse group of people with the aim of including as many voices as possible.

Further research should investigate in more depth the course of action to follow to increase meaningful youth participation in decision-making processes.