

# **HASA report**

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This document concludes the discussion about European youth's hopes and discontents. The conversation took place online on May 23rd and involved 5 young people, three of them being university students and two of them having full-time jobs. There were two women and three men present during the conversation, all of them of Polish nationality but currently living in two different cities. The age of the participants varied between 22 and 26. The conversation took a bit more than one hour. This report summarizes the main points that were raised in relation to each question.

## **1. Which challenges that today's European youth will need to confront concern you the most?**

Climate change was the main theme in our conversation about the first question. Sadly, we all feel very pessimistic and hopeless about this issue. Of course, we see that the topic is being raised more and more often in the mainstream media and many young people care about the issue. However, we think that climate change is being addressed rather superficially. There are many declarations but actions do not really follow up on words.

In our view, addressing climate change would require a big degrowth project and many structural changes, which are not economically profitable. By that, we mean much more than the popular argument about corporations being more powerful than governments. Of course, in our view this is the core of the issue and this power imbalance is very problematic. But it doesn't do justice to many complexities that are involved in addressing climate change.

First of all, it's not only about corporations but also about states owning companies that contribute to environment pollution and climate change. Furthermore, states also need to take care of their own particularistic interests and, thus, are reluctant to bear huge costs of remodelling their energy systems. Overall, it is neither in the economic interest of the companies nor the states to take action to mitigate climate change. Therefore, we think no real steps will be taken until Europe faces direct and tangible consequences, such as climate migration.

Thinking about the future, we consider climate migration a major challenge our generation will need to face. And we think that even when this will affect Europe in an immediate way, the problem of power imbalance and economic interests will remain present and impede successful intervention. We see that the Northern countries have disproportionate power in

institutions such as the EU or ONZ and therefore the interests of the South are not represented well and probably won't be represented well when the crisis occurs. Looking back at how the syrian migration was handled within Europe, we think that the interests of the North will probably overshadow the best interest of Europe as a whole.

Overall, everyone involved in the conversation was very pessimistic about climate change and its consequences. We know that there are scientific solutions that could already be implemented but we think that no one will take such responsibility.

**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?**

We are positive about how much attention climate change has received in a very short amount of time and we see that many people find this topic very important, advocate for pro-environmental action and make changes in their lives. However, we are very aware of how limited current youth is in taking action. Small-scale changes and taking personal responsibility matter but it's a drop in the ocean of what really should be done about climate change. Hence, the limits to youth's activism were a major theme in our discussion.

Generally, we are quite sceptical about how effective online activism is in the context of thought bubbles and social media algorithms. In our view, online climate change activism mostly reaches individuals who are already convinced about the importance of the matter. Thus, its real impact is limited. People from outside our bubble are not very likely to encounter content that contradicts their views. They are even less likely to seriously consider opposing views. We see three major causes of this problem: (1) big tech companies, (2) news fatigue and fake news, (3) class differences and (4) the basic mechanism of 'us vs them'.

Firstly, critical activist messages do not sell well on social media so their reach is limited. Unless there is some scrutiny over the algorithms, youth activism will remain limited.

Another set of challenges stems from news fatigue and the prevalence of fake news. The amount of information and views one encounters daily far exceeds an individual's processing capabilities. This tiredness is an obstacle to taking serious interest in matters such as climate change. The prevalence of fake news makes this process of self-education even more complicated. Staying informed and critical requires time and energy which many people cannot afford.

A related point is that youth activism or taking interest in climate change as one kind of privilege. For many people, climate awareness cannot be a priority due to the challenges of their daily lives. Things as pragmatic as cooking dinner and being able to sustain oneself financially are simply more urgent than larger political problems. Second of all, many people's jobs are highly demanding, both in terms of time and energy. It is understandable that they are not engaged in climate activism or that they don't self educate about these issues. After all, everyone needs free time, intimacy with their close ones and distance from the worries of the modern world.

The mechanism of 'us vs them' constitutes a fourth major limitation of online activism. Climate awareness and climate action are associated with a certain identity, a stereotype of a left-leaning hippie on a vegan diet. For people from outside our bubble, caring about climate frequently seems like a matter of superficial personal expression, rather than genuine concern. Because of this mechanism of othering, we see limited opportunity for dialogue between people of different political views, as well as for coherent action.

Although our optimism was overshadowed by many concerns, we are positive that so many people took interest in climate change in recent years. The fact that this debate is now a part of the mainstream discourse might be a major achievement of the activists and environmental think-tanks. And because climate is widely discussed in recent years, many young people may consider voting for parties with concrete environmental programmes. In our view, this is the main impact our generation could have as climate change can only be addressed on a systemic level.

### **3. Which abilities that you and your generation of students possess do you think will be valuable in confronting the challenges we face?**

Despite many limitations described above, we think that our generation has valuable qualities and characteristics. First of all, being critical and rebellious is a natural property of the young. It motivates us to move beyond words and get involved in activism, starting on the local level.

We see this capability to self-organize and participate in grass-root movements as the most valuable way of confronting the challenges of the modern world, including climate change. Although local impacts are small when looking at the bigger picture, they are nonetheless real. It's the best we can do. While we are very pessimistic about any change happening

within the institutions that are bound by economic interests, we feel positive about self-organized groups of young people trying to influence their own communities.

**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?**

The last question generated an interesting discussion in our group. We were not really sure if 'our generation' can be seen as a coherent group with a shared potential. If anything, there are more divisions than commonalities between the people of our age. This links to our discussion about thought bubbles and class differences: people within our generation have radically different views and political alliances.

Because of this in-group variety, we were unsure whether we can talk about the potential of 'our generation' as a whole. Can we ascribe some general strengths or weaknesses to everyone of the same age? Perhaps it would be more useful to talk about the abilities of certain individuals or groups, such as individuals engaged in local movements. However, there is also a question of *who* is the one using or overlooking our potential. We think that our abilities or potential should be assessed in relation to a particular political aim. For example, political parties that consider climate change important could work closely with local activist groups and offer a platform so that their actions have more reach and impact?