

YOUTH IN EUROPE  
OFFENBURG  
TALKS “ ”



#4

ENVIRONMENT,  
CLIMATE CHANGE,  
SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT  
– HOW GREEN IS YOUTH WORK?

**REPORT**

**Reithalle in Offenburg  
11th – 12th October 2021**

*The contents of this report are based on the inputs and discussions in the workshop and do not necessarily reflect the opinion of the National Agencies for Erasmus+ Youth organising it.*

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The discussions of the 4<sup>th</sup> edition of the **YOUTH IN EUROPE: OFFENBURG TALKS on 'ENVIRONMENT, CLIMATE CHANGE, SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT – HOW GREEN IS YOUTH WORK?'** can be summarized as follows:

The effects of the human-made ecological crisis concern all of us. They have severe geopolitical consequences for the global ecosystem, for societies and economies. To counter the crisis, environmental activism has gained momentum in recent years. Since young people are especially at risk suffering the effects, they are playing a crucial part in these activities. From a youth work and youth policy perspective there needs to be a discussion of their relationship to environmental topics, how it exerts an impact on youth work and youth policy, and the kind of role youth work can play as part of environmental movements. The lessons learned from the presentations and discussions at these Offenburger Talks also provoked further questions for debate and reflection.

- Climate justice campaigns and activism by young people have become major aspects in many young people's lives, though by no means all. A key challenge for climate activists is to attract young people from various social and cultural backgrounds in environmental issues.
- In youth work, climate justice is just one issue amongst many, though it is clearly as relevant as concerns with equalities and social justice. Youth work must, however, recognise the diversity in youth orientation to climate issues just as it has to do so in relation to other issues.
- Climate (and environmental) issues are not something new to youth work but a significant feature of its practice. Youth work has a long history of engaging with environmental and 'nature' issues, though the interpretation of those commitments, objectives and activities has differed over time.
- The efforts of youth activists in relation to climate action provide proof of an increasing (political) participation of young people and their effective activation in less traditional organisational and institutional contexts.
- Of particular note for environmental activism is the need for an expanded conceptual framework on (alternative) forms of youth participation, especially concerning co-ownership, since more traditional and formal modes often no longer work.
- The multiscale, multifaceted, inter-dependent and diverse character of the climate strike movement has consolidated the political identity of youth and demanded intergenerational equity and alternatives to existing power relationships, especially between the generations.
- Through embedding climate justice within youth organisations, a model of 'empowered inclusion' can be observed, on account of ensuring pluralistic participation, building the capacity of the youth sector and engaging in collective decision-making.



- Climate change has, however, not become a universally adopted priority within the European youth sector, in both, youth policies and youth work; there is a strong probability, however, this seems set – imminently after COP 26 – to change.
- Climate change is steadily securing a more prominent place in (youth) policy making. However, within the youth policy making community, it is necessary to move from ‘hesitant ambivalence’ to a more determined and committed green youth work and youth policy strategy.
- Climate change is firmly anchored within an awareness of the global dimension of an acute problem but many actions and activated young people emerge in a very local context. From a youth (work) perspective, local engagement is crucial to build up a strong base and provide the foundation and catalyst for national and international actions.
- Youth workers must stand alongside young people, accompany them, amplify their voice and ensure full and meaningful participation. Supporting young people’s perspectives and aspirations demands a reflective balance of both ‘dutiful’ and ‘disruptive’ action by youth workers.
- Youth climate movement and youth work need alliances beyond and within their boundaries and to forge connections with other professional and progressive groups. The climate movement has to work with other social movements and on wider geopolitical issues and youth work must play a role in facilitating dialogue and bringing diverse stakeholders together.
- Regarding the accountability of youth work in environmental (and other social and political) issues it is sometimes controversial if its role is seen only as a change agent, or it insists on its autonomous pedagogical status in which priorities and responsibilities are defined solely by itself.
- To debate climate change and related themes seriously it is certainly necessary to question underlying political and economic systems. However, when the climate movement claims ‘We don’t need climate change, but system change’ it must be asked which other, alternative systems lie within the framework of debate?
- Youth work needs to answer the same question if it shares the perspective of climate movements on system change. But many youth organisations and youth work providers are integral part of the ‘system’ and may not be able to question it.
- If there is consensus that change is needed, how might such system change be achieved? It seems that most of the activists count on dialogue and ongoing communication with the ‘system’. What is the position of youth work with regard to addressing system change?
- The climate crisis is the existential issue of our time and cannot be divorced from issues of injustice and inequality. This suggests the need for recon-



ceptualising the world. The Anthropocene as a last phase in the world's evolution urges respect for all elements of our biotopes.

- Youth work needs both to cultivate and respond to opportunities to inform, and to debate with young people about the interdependency of the natural world, including human beings and about relationships with the earth, nature and living creatures.
- Such a paradigm shift will extend rights beyond humanity without negating individuality, one that minimises borders and boundaries in recognition of a shared world, and one which embraces inclusivity and pluralism as the anchor for understanding the world.

The reflections on climate change and sustainable development are inevitably a variation of the previous themes and phenomena of the series YOUTH IN EUROPE: OFFENBURG TALKS, their meaning for young people, for youth work, for youth policy and for society at large. Even if it seems that in terms of urgency climate change is of the highest priority, and therefore arguably more paramount than the others, the interrelationship with other topics cannot be neglected. Youth work must promote awareness of global and interconnected social issues and support a plurality of voices through inclusive structures, capacity building and cross-sectoral approaches. Edition #4 of the YOUTH IN EUROPE: OFFENBURG TALKS provided deep insights in these matters, derived from policy and practice and research.



## INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The series YOUTH IN EUROPE: OFFENBURG TALKS are expert workshops on themes and phenomena relevant to the youth sector with an impact on youth policy, youth work practice and young people's lives in general. They aim at achieving more mutual knowledge and understanding of youth work and youth policy in Europe and are organized by a steering group representing five National Agencies of Erasmus+ Youth in Action<sup>1</sup>.

The aim of the 4th edition on 'ENVIRONMENT, CLIMATE CHANGE, SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT – HOW GREEN IS YOUTH WORK?'<sup>2</sup> was to reflect on recent political developments in our societies in relation to these topics, while also looking from a youth work and youth policy perspective at these issues. It sought to explore the relationship these topics have to youth work, what their impact has been or may be on youth work, and vice versa, and what kinds of responsibilities youth work has on these matters. Of particular interest was the role youth work might play as part (or not) of environmental movements and protection. In short, the key question at stake was: how green is youth work?

The event took place 11<sup>th</sup> & 12<sup>th</sup> October 2021 in the Reithalle in Offenburg. Thirty participants had been invited on the basis of their expertise and interest in the subject, coming from Belgium, Germany, Estonia, Finland, France, Ireland, Lithuania, Malta, Netherlands, Serbia, Slovenia, Spain, Czech Republic, the UK and the USA. The event<sup>3</sup> was facilitated by a moderator<sup>4</sup> and organised in various sessions: after the opening session on the first day, three thematic sessions looked from various perspectives on the subjects in question; in each of these sessions 20–30 minute presentations were followed by questions to the speakers and breakout groups that enabled participants to reflect on and debate the issues at hand. Another session on the first day was devoted to youth work practice, inviting four youth workers and practitioners to a joint panel<sup>5</sup>. The second day was opened by a short film, followed by another three sessions in the same format as on day one. Each of the two days culminated and concluded with summary reflections by three rapporteurs<sup>6</sup>.

All relevant proceedings were live-streamed and a larger number of interested people and parties followed the plenary presentations on social media. The inputs as well as key points and results of discussions are summarized in this report. It is largely based

1 JINT Belgium / Flanders; Archimedes Foundation Estonia; EDUFI Finland; JUGEND für Europa Deutschland; Movit Slovenia.

2 The topics of former YOUTH IN EUROPE: OFFENBURG TALKS were: "Young people and Solidarity today" (2018), "Nationalism, Populism & far-right Ideologies of young people – the role of youth work" (2019) and "Shrinking spaces for youth work – Challenges for post-democratic societies" (2020, virtual).

3 See programme attached

4 The fourth edition was, as all earlier editions, facilitated by Darko Markovic, Inn.Side learning & development, Serbia

5 This session was facilitated by Dr Rilke Mahieu, Flemish National Agency JINT

6 Dr Guy Redig, former professor Youth work/youth policy, consultant culture, youth (work) & governance, Belgium; Dr Neringa Marija Tumėnaitė, University of London, UK, Lithuania and member of the Pool of European Youth Researchers (PEYR); Prof. Dr Howard Williamson, professor of European Youth Policy, University of South Wales, UK



on the reports and further comments of the three rapporteurs<sup>7</sup>. For further reading please find the reader with all contributions including the three reports, along with material resulting from earlier editions of the YOUTH IN EUROPE: OFFENBURG TALKS, here:

<https://www.jugendfuereuropa.de/ueber-jfe/projekte/YouthInEurope-OffenburgTalks/>

The videos of all contributions can be found here:

[https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLU9YWY9nV8rBl87rUvXoG0GHrbWba\\_u4J](https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLU9YWY9nV8rBl87rUvXoG0GHrbWba_u4J)

## Rationale for the topic

### ‘ENVIRONMENT, CLIMATE CHANGE, SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT – HOW GREEN IS YOUTH WORK?’

Environment, climate change and sustainable development concern all of us. The effects of the human-made ecological and environmental crisis can be seen on all continents and are expected to become more and more intense, with severe consequences for the global eco-system, our societies and economies. Increased natural disasters, armed conflicts and large-scale migration movements are a predicted result of such growing global ecological imbalance. And as the future generation, young people are especially at risk of suffering the effects.

To counter the environmental crisis and to stop the significant and accelerated climate change and its consequences from getting worse, immediate action has been taken in recent years by individuals, non-governmental organisations and institutions in order to adapt to the changes and to limit the damage and destruction happening now and in the future. Environmental activism has gained momentum and is expressed in specific activities reflecting an increasing commitment to the environment.

Young people are playing a crucial part in this respect, particularly in recent years through the ‘Fridays for Future’ and similar movements as they play a prominent and supportive role in the implementation of the ‘2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development’ and related frameworks. *The World Youth Report 2018 on ‘Youth and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development’*, prepared by the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA) underlines the importance of the 2030 Agenda in enhancing youth development efforts and explores the critical role young people have in the implementation of sustainable development efforts at all levels.

The topic ‘environment, climate change and sustainable development’ also plays an ever-increasing role in European youth work. In 2018, around 50,000 young people took part in a Europe-wide survey which led to 11 Youth Goals with concrete sub-goals. These *European Youth Goals* summarise the issues that affect young people in Europe, the political priorities that are important to them and identify in which areas change still has to happen so that young people in Europe can both release and realise their full potential. Goal #10 Sustainable Green Europe asks to “achieve a society in which all young people are environmentally active, educated and able to make a difference in their everyday lives” and

<sup>7</sup> The compilation of this report was supported by Andreas Hirsch, Advisor in European Youth Policy, JUGEND für Europa, Dr Rilke Mahieu, Flemish National Agency JINT and Prof. Dr Howard Williamson



states that *“everyone including young people has to start taking responsibility for their actions, and impact on the life of future generations. Becoming sustainable is not a choice, it is an obligation.”*

Most recently, ‘environment, climate change and sustainable development’ has also been a topic of discussion at the 3rd European Youth Work Convention; in its final declaration *‘Signposts for the future’* it is stated that besides a rise of anti-democratic tendencies, shrinking spaces for civil society, violations of human rights, and disappearance of trust in public authorities, *“all this is taking place within a climate crisis of which young people are acutely aware, which undoubtedly endangers social cohesion and diminishes the quality of life and a digital realm that is becoming overwhelmingly present”*. According to the declaration, *“it is young people.... who ... display creativity and imagination, and demonstrate resilience, when facing uncertainties and disruption in their lives... Those ‘active’ and ‘empowered’ young people who do articulate their needs, perspectives and convictions are, too often, overlooked or ignored by the societies and communities in which they live”*.

Looking further from a youth work and youth policy perspective to the items under focus, there is a need to explore their relationships to youth work, their impact on youth work, and vice versa, and what responsibilities youth work may have to them. When asking ‘how green is youth work?’ it includes as well non-formal learning ‘for, through, and about’<sup>8</sup> the environment, (green) mobility within and outside youth work, the relationship between rural and urban areas, (green) food production and consumption, environmental behaviour, intergenerational relationships, to name a few more subjects; there was also interest in the historical dimensions of youth work’s connections to environmental issues e.g., the ‘woodcraft’ of the Scouts, the German Wandervögel and the ‘back to nature movements’.

Some concrete sub-themes (amongst others) addressed to youth work and youth policy helped participants to reflect in the YOUTH IN EUROPE: OFFENBURG TALK on the given topics<sup>9</sup>:

- Challenges regarding environmental issues when informing young people’s growing concerns
- Conceptual frameworks on the relation between youth work and the topics at hand
- Different theoretical/disciplinary perspectives and core concepts
- Evidence-based state of the art regarding youth work and responses to environmental issues
- Environmental issues as a subject of youth work, approaches, strategies, tools
- Relevance of (cross-sectoral) cooperation with environmental initiatives and policies
- Role of European and national programmes for engaging in environmental issues
- Making youth work greener and environmentally friendly, particularly in mobility programmes

8 *A phrase first coined by Howard Williamson in 1985 in the context of enterprise education: education ‘for, through, and about’ enterprise.*

9 *At the Talks the different terms climate change, climate justice, climate policy, environmental protection, sustainable development have been used interchangeably. In the further text we do use these individual terms without repeating the full enumeration.*



- Support of UN Sustainable Development Goals through non-formal education and learning and other activities
- Relationship between the Sustainable Development Goals and Human Rights Education
- Role of youth workers and Youth NGOs as facilitators of processes in environmental issues
- Strategies of young people to claim spaces for participation in respective policy areas
- Promotion of environmental justice and intergenerational solidarity through youth work.

## WHICH TOPICS WERE DISCUSSED & BY WHOM?

In concrete terms, the six presentations and the youth work practice panel looked at the subject of ‘ENVIRONMENT, CLIMATE CHANGE, SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT – HOW GREEN IS YOUTH WORK?’ from diverse perspectives and touched upon a variety of thematic aspects. In detail:

**Dr Lasse Siurala**, Aalto University, Finland and Tallinn University, Estonia:

***‘Youth work and climate change – A follow up on the 2019 Finnish Presidency Council debate and questions about the future’***

Lasse Siurala provided results of a survey targeted at European Union government representatives of youth affairs as key persons in driving European youth policies and promoting the interests of young people about the effects of youth climate activism in the member countries as well as in youth work and youth policy. The survey tried to identify how the governments orient themselves and how youth policy reflects climate change. At the Finnish EU Presidency debate in Nov 2019 on “A vision for youth work in Europe – climate change, young people and youth work” the topic was largely recognised as important, a position also confirmed in other recent policy initiatives. The results in a nutshell show: a. climate change in youth work is in a transitory period with different pace of development across Europe; b. youth policy makers in Member States recognise positive outcomes and expect the society to support youth climate activism; c. youth climate activism shows a potential and ambivalent collision between various forms of youth agency and participatory approaches; d. existing forms of agency need to be modified and emerging new voices with new and unconventional forms of agency including all forms of dissent should be recognised; e. youth work between ‘emancipation’ and ‘integration’ needs to clarify where it stands with regard to climate change and climate change activism when constructing its youth work identity. To sum up: if human rights are at the core of youth work, climate change should be a youth work priority.

**Dr Jamie Gorman**, Department of Applied Social Studies, Maynooth University, Ireland  
**Valery Molay**, National Youth Council of Ireland

***‘Facilitating youth engagement in climate policy making: a case study of the National Youth Council of Ireland’s “Future Generations- Climate Justice Project”’***

Young people face significant barriers to engaging in climate policy processes due to their subordinate position within adult structures of climate governance and political





participation. Further barriers are faced by youth from marginalised and disadvantaged groups, pointing to the need for an intersectional analysis of youth within other categories of marginalisation. To shed light on how youth work might address these barriers and support meaningful youth engagement in climate policymaking, Jamie Gorman and Valery Molay presented the findings from a collaborative inquiry process with the National Youth Council of Ireland (NYCI) led *Future Generations - Climate Justice Project*. This is an innovative example of how youth NGOs can respond to the climate crisis and facilitate greater youth political participation in climate policy making. The project was based on two assumptions: a. the climate crisis is a symptom of an unsustainable economic and political system, which is also at the core of other social issues in our societies; b. demographic trend related to class, race and educational level could be identified in the youth climate movement, which meant that not all young people were participating in the debate around climate justice and climate solutions. The project's approach included young people, youth workers and management staff from youth work and related other structures. The project can be seen as a model of empowered inclusion for youth climate justice work, including pluralistic participation, building capacity of the youth sector, promoting collective decision making and going beyond awareness raising to action taking.

**Alonso Escamilla**, Biderbost, Boscan & Rochin & Member of Pool of European Youth Researchers (P), Spain

**Teresa Martin**, Pontifical University of Salamanca, Spain

*'How green was the Erasmus+ Programme? The cases of Bulgaria, Finland, Germany and Spain as green "thermometers" in the field of youth work'*

In recent years, the environment has become an issue in the public agenda, including in the European Union (EU) which has launched initiatives to become a greener and more plant-friendly space. And youth work seems to be an effective framework to address climate change through awareness-raising events, educational programmes, and sustainability campaigns. Alonso Escamilla & Teresa Martin looked at the degree to which the EU Erasmus+ Programme addressed the issues of environment, climate change and sustainable development within its strategic partnerships in the field of youth during the 2014-2020 period, by developing a cross national comparison between Germany, Bulgaria, Spain and Finland and checking if there is any correlation between the socio-economic context (based on the example of youth unemployment rate, the median equivalised disposable income for young people, and young people not in employment, education, training (NEET)) and the respective green topics. Generally speaking, the issues regarding environment, climate change and sustainable development could not be seen as a priority in the chosen four countries and within this specific sub-action of the strategic partnerships in the field of youth; the results also show obvious disparities in the four studied countries. The results of the analysis do not validate the hypothesis that the socio-economic context of particular countries has some kind of influence on the project's topic. For the current Erasmus+ Programme period (2021-2027) it will be key to determine a baseline for the



incorporation of the European Green Deal into the programme's priorities.

**Fien Morren**, Globelink vzw, Anderlecht, Belgium

**Finn Van Dinter**, PULSE Transitienetwerk Cultuur Jeugd Media, Brussels, Belgium

**Esther Vallado**, Environmental scientist & education expert, Spain

**Christina Thomas**, Regional Youth Council North-Rhine Westfalia, Germany

**Dr Rilke Mahieu**, Belgian-Flemish National Agency JINT (moderator)

***'Youth work practice panel'***

The Youth Work Practice Panel invited four practitioners to look from diverse youth work backgrounds on links between environment, climate change and sustainable development and youth work practice: Fien Morren provided insights on youth participation as a key in creating sustainable youth work, Finn Van Dinter showcased a cross-sectoral network for a sustainable and just society, Esther Vallado reported on best practices in European mobility programmes in the field of youth education for environment, climate change and sustainable development and Christina Thomas informed how sustainability has become a topic of a regional Youth Council in Germany.

Central questions of the discussion were: How did the youth sector respond to climate activism and how can it be made more sustainable? Do youth workers care about sustainability, how is reflected in their work and what competencies do they need to address this topic? What role can youth work play to support young people's commitment and activism regarding climate and sustainable justice?

A main message of the panellists was that youth workers and their organisations usually do care about sustainability. In addition, there is an overall sense that this topic is today embraced by an important part of the youth sector, and that many youth workers and organisation are eager to deepen their commitment to a sustainable, just world. In fact, sustainable values fit very well into the DNA youth work. To turn sustainability from a value into a youth work practice and reality, there are however some major challenges to be tackled. Many of them are related to capacity, including a lack of dedicated financial support or incentives to efforts to green the youth sector, a lack of human resources within organizations to develop and implement sustainability strategies and a perceived lack of competences among youth workers to take up the topic at hand (that is often perceived as overwhelmingly complex). On a more fundamental level, there tends to be hesitancy among youth workers to 'push' this topic in their youth work if it is not brought up directly by the young people they work with. Youth organisations also fear to be perceived as 'green washing' when their own activities are not fully sustainable. Also, in reaction the youth climate actions in 2019 (street protests, school strikes), youth work usually did not intervene in those actions "to not steal the young people's thunder".

The insights of the panellists offered important guidance on how to overcome the above-mentioned barriers to raise the position of sustainability on the youth work agenda. They can be summarized as follows: a. there is no need for youth work organisations to strive for "sustainable perfection" as an end point because this does not exist. Rather, every small step taken today towards transition counts; b. sustainable behaviour can take many



forms when working with young people; the point is to find forms that suit the target group. Not every youngster needs to become an activist, there are plenty of other ways to voice concerns or to take sustainable action; c. there is a clear need to move beyond talking (the ‘bla bla bla’), to focus on action. Both, taking action within an organisation as in activities with young people helps to bring back a feeling of self-efficacy and move away from a sense of powerlessness; d. cooperation within and beyond the youth sector can be a leverage to overcome cold feet and to stimulate capacity building; e. while a basic understanding of climate issues and sustainability is a must, it is not a requirement to be an expert in all technicalities of climate change. What a youth worker needs can be learned on the job and together with young people. Youth organizations should mainly take the role as process manager, where the learning process of young people is facilitated in a non-formal, participatory, playful, cooperative manner.

**Violeta Duncan**, Alexander von Humboldt Foundation, Berlin, Germany

***‘Intergenerational, low carbon and climate resilient communities: European practices centering youth participation in urban climate governance’***

Violeta Duncan, as a community economic development and urban planning expert, focused in the presentation of her research conducted under the Alexander von Humboldt German Chancellor Fellowship on the question ‘under what conditions do youth participate in urban climate governance?’ as the ways in which public, private and civil society actors and institutions articulate goals, exercise influence and authority and manage climate planning and implementation processes. The project aims to inspire local leaders to develop and adopt intergenerational approaches to climate action planning and implementation. It seeks to answer the question ‘what capacities must communities build to advance intergenerational justice in local climate action?’ and intends to uncover opportunities and strategies to anchor global intergenerational equity goals in local climate action plans, policies, programs, and investments. Results of her research show that meaningful youth participation ensures young people’s adequate influence on all areas of society and on all parts of the decision-making processes and that policies accordingly respond to the needs of young people. Thereby it is essential and most efficient to focus on local level where state and local governments and other local political actors are partnering with youth to advance local climate protection, to look at intergenerational governance processes and structures facilitating youth-leadership in local climate action. However, it is imperative that young people participate actively in all relevant levels of decision-making processes, including the global one, because it affects their lives today and has implications for their futures.

**Niccolò Milanese**, European Alternatives and Institute of Human Sciences, Vienna

***‘The return of geopolitics and the youth climate movement: what implications for youth?’***

Niccolò Milanese showcased in his contribution at three examples (a. Amazon rainforest fires, b. climate and non-climate refugees and c. weapons and war) that climate



change campaigners cannot avoid geopolitics in the coming period and greater attention is needed to questions of post-coloniality and racism, war and conflict since they inevitably open up geopolitical questions about global justice. Climate change as a central part of (geo-)political debate today will challenge the youth climate movement and bring more tension. Therefore, youth work(ers) wanting to support the movement and its members, preparing young people to be able to navigate potential conflicts and disagreements whilst also aiming at having a political effectiveness, might consider three major lessons: a. accompany the current generation of youth strikers: the present generation will need support to move from a position of political innocence to a position of political engagement. This will require providing information and education on different aspects of the intersection of climate change with geopolitical issues, but also mentorship and psychological support entering into a conflictual political space; b. keep a safe space of innocence for the youngest: if climate change becomes increasingly caught up with other political issues, there is a danger this space of innocence and moral force will be compromised. Youth workers should try to keep a protected space for the youngest to safely explore and express their appreciation of the preciousness and fragility of nature; c. let the world in and be open to reconceptualization: youth workers and the resources they can bring to the youth movements have a role in establishing spaces of intercultural dialogue around climate change as rapidly as possible, building appreciation that climate change has different effects, different interactions with different parts of life, and can even be understood according to different epistemologies in different parts of the world, whilst attempting to reinforce unity and consensus.

**Dr Maria Pisani**, Youth & Community Studies - Faculty for Social Wellbeing, University of Malta

***'Down the rabbit hole with Sophia and Gaia: decentering youth in youth work'***

Maria Pisani developed a critical post-human model of youth work and positioned youth work as a philosophical encounter, whilst also questioning the humanist legacy that lies at the heart of youth work theory. If youth work is to respond to the challenges of the Anthropocene, we need a radical shift, a youth work praxis that is ready to transcend disciplinary borders, to explore new ideas, theories and methodologies. Such a new perspective demands new theoretical paradigms, a radicalism that transcends human relations and 'society' and decentres the human, whilst also embracing human-non-human relationships and acknowledging our interdependence. A youth work praxis that responds to today's challenges requires a 'radical repositioning' of the young person, whilst also thinking through some of the themes, such as autonomy and in/inter/dependence that frame and inform youth work practice. This radical move demands two shifts, the first is a step away from the hierarchal relations that continue to privilege some 'men' over others, more than evident in the disproportional impact of climate change on the poorer countries of the world; the second is to confront the prevailing notion of human exceptionalism, thereby engaging issues such as climate change, environmental degradation, capitalism and glo-



balization in all of its entangled complexity. A critical posthuman youth work practice needs to recognize the particularity and value of every individual human being, while simultaneously dislodging our species from the centre. We need to provide the space, opportunity and skills for young people to question in an affirmative way, to think about their relationships with other humans and non-humans, to explore the ethical issues and decisions that need to be taken, and to imagine new possibilities and opportunities.

## SPOTLIGHTS ON RELEVANT PHENOMENA AND (POLITICAL) CHALLENGES ...

Can we build a common vision for the youth sector in Europe in addressing climate and environment related challenges? Academics, civic society organisations and youth work representatives offered multiple perspectives in addressing this topic during the two-day Offenburger Talks. They sought to forge understanding and connections between four distinctive but overlapping issues: a. climate change and justice, b. wider social justice, inclusion, democracy and (perhaps not only human?) rights, c. youth participation and d. youth work (and youth policy). The debates focused largely on the question what role youth work can play, by being a mediator, or opening dialogue, and reaching out to those excluded from the conversation, supporting actions, and providing non-formal education and learning experiences around issues to do with climate, environment, and sustainability. The lessons that emerged from the presentations and discussions were rewarding and provoked some more questions for debate and reflection. They can be summarized as follows:

### 1 *Climate justice and activism of young people*

Today, climate justice and activism are clearly a major aspect of many young people's lives, though by no means all. Many young people, and increasingly children, come into climate activism predominantly from more privileged backgrounds, while those in more disadvantaged contexts, who suffer most from environmental degradation, may well be the least likely to engage in climate protest and action. A key question for climate activists is how to attract and increase the number of young people (and in general more citizens in democratic cultural structures) from various social and cultural backgrounds in environmental issues in order to ensure diversity and accessibility in climate governance, particularly by people from economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

### 2 *Diversity of relevant youth work topics*

Youth work must recognise the diversity in youth orientation to climate issues just as it has to do in relation to many other issues such as schooling, jobs, benefits, health, housing, drugs, death, family, leisure, friendships, safety, loneliness, and volunteering. Thus, climate is just one issue amongst many, though climate justice is clearly as relevant for youth work as concerns with issues such as equalities and social justice. Moreover, the intersectionality and interrelationship of issues need to be considered.



## *2 Climate issues and youth work – something new?*

Climate (and nature) issues are not something new to youth work but a significant feature of its practice. In fact, youth work has a long history of engaging with environmental and ‘nature’ issues, though of course the interpretation of those commitments, objectives and activities has differed over time. Environmental issues were prominent in the evolution of many forms of youth work, alongside internationalism and peace, and most prominent ‘Education for Sustainable Development’. Also, ‘global youth work’, focusing initially on social justice has paid steadily increasing attention to environmental destruction, renewal, and climate injustice.

## *4 Different models of youth participation and climate action movement*

There are many typologies of youth participation – representative democracy, established youth participative structures such as youth councils, deliberative democracy, offline or online, activism and protest, collaboration, co-management, and co-production. Participation must be approached as a continuum, evolving from taking part (a more consuming relationship) to having part (a co-ownership). In the case of climate change and climate justice an expanded conceptual framework on (alternative) forms of participation is needed since formal ones often do not work (anymore). The aspiration to accommodate ‘unconventional participation’ within the policy-making structures and the efforts of youth activists in climate action give proof of an increasing (political) participation of young people and their effective activation in less traditional organisational and institutional contexts. It is explained by the fact that these less (or non-) organised young people faced little access to traditional participative possibilities including policy decision-making and to ‘adultist’ forms of climate governance.

## *5 Climate governance for all?*

The multi-scale, multi-faceted, inter-dependent and diverse character of the climate strike movement has consolidated the political identity of youth and demanded intergenerational equity and a demand for alternatives to existing power relationships, especially between the generations. The actions of young people and increasingly of children have had a positive impact on policy in general and are provoking more radical solutions. Youth work can play a big role in this regard by facilitating discussions, bringing diverse actors and voices together and thereby enable youth-inclusive climate governance. Through embedding advocacy and activism for climate justice within youth organisations, a more systematic and equitable approach to climate governance and a model of ‘empowered inclusion’ can be observed, on account of ensuring pluralistic participation, building the capacity of the youth sector, and engaging in collective decision-making.

## *6 Climate crisis and European youth policies*

So far, climate change has not become a universally adopted priority within youth work in Europe. An analysis of recent European youth strategies (the EU youth strategy 2018,



the Council of Europe youth sector strategy 2030), of Erasmus+ strategic partnerships, of the conclusions of the EU youth dialogue, and of the final declaration of the 3rd European Youth Work Convention 2020 suggest that climate issues have had marginal presence and profile in debates within the youth sector. This seems of course to change. Climate change increasingly is securing a more prominent place in policy making, in particular in the context of the European Union's Green Deal and Climate Pact. However, within the policy-making community at national level, some strongly recognise the role of youth work in addressing climate change, some are not yet completely convinced of the urgent necessity of including climate related topics in youth work. Therefore, it is necessary to move from 'hesitant ambivalence' to determined green youth work and youth policy.

### *7 Climate crisis and local, national, international levels*

Climate change illustrates the global dimension of an acute problem but many actions and activated young people emerge in a very local context. From a youth (work) perspective, local engagement and activism seem crucial to build up a strong base for more actions at national and international level. A significant amount of impact can be achieved at local level, which also can be highly empowering for young people. Even if there are many cities where little effort is made to address climate change or even worse, this can create an interest to learn why these distinct differences exist and how they could be influenced for the better. By building networks and foster peer-learning between communities engaged in youth-inclusive climate governance, these effects could even be amplified.

### *8 Climate crisis and the position of youth workers*

In general, youth workers must stand alongside young people, accompany them, amplify their voice and ensure full and meaningful participation. Approaches to youth participation in youth and community work practice is by no means straightforward. The history of youth work is littered with questions about 'which side are you on?'. From the local to the global, and all points in between, youth workers have to consider how they navigate and negotiate the space between young people's views and voice, and those of the decision-makers and sometimes those who pay their wages. Supporting young people's perspectives, aspirations and right to a seat at the table is likely to demand a reflective balance of 'dutiful', 'disruptive' and sometimes 'dangerous' action.

### *9 Climate action and youth work beyond their boundaries*

Both the youth climate strike movement and youth work need to forge alignment beyond and alliances within their boundaries, in the interests of developing a broad and united front. There is also a strong case for establishing connection with other professional and progressive groups. The climate movement must be working at the intersection of new and older social movements (such as Black Lives Matter), and at the intersection with



wider geopolitical issues. It is important to identify those who might, even temporarily and perhaps from a different value and objective base, be 'allies'. Alliances clearly need careful and conscientious negotiation.

#### 10 *Accountability and autonomy of youth work*

Regarding the role of youth work in environmental (and other) issues, it is a controversial question to ask if there is a special, explicit accountability for youth work. On the one hand, youth work is often seen as a change agent, also to be used in relation to climate change. On the other hand, youth work is predominately an autonomous pedagogical system, at least in many countries, and it should arguably be the privilege of young people themselves (and their organisations) to decide if they want to go with topics like climate change or rest indifferent or even reluctant to engage in this form of activism. The question remains, therefore, who decides if climate change is the focus and subject of youth work activities, or not?

#### 11 *The systemic dimension and climate change*

To seriously debate climate change and related themes we need to question systemic dimensions and underlying political and economic systems. The effects of climate change are unequal across the planet, conceptualized by the Global North. The climate crisis as a symptom of an unsustainable economic and political system, is also at the core of other social issues in our society. To reach climate justice, we must go beyond a sole focus on environmental issues and see how the current neo-liberal order, exported and often imposed on the world by the West and Western-backed institutions, is not sustainable. If the climate movements claim 'We don't need climate change, but system change' it must be asked which alternative systems are being considered and merit debate.

#### 12 *Youth work and 'system change'*

Youth work needs to answer the question if it shares the perspective of climate movements on system change. Many youth organisations and youth work providers (in particular those run by public authorities) are integral part of the 'system' and may not be in a position to question it. And if so, how do we want to get there, in order to achieve system change? Do we need a more strategic or a more radical approach? It seems that a majority of activists, in both the climate movement as well as in youth work, wants to organise dialogue and ongoing communication with the 'system'. However, in view of the urgency of the issues to hand, maybe sometimes the balance must be corrected. Perhaps it is 'imbalance' that is required?

#### 13 *Reconceptualising the world*

The climate crisis is the existential issue of our time. Out of several reasons a reconceptualisation of the world and of what climate change implies is needed. One could argue that if the current generations continue to see animals and the environment as an exploitable





source at any cost, we will not be able to achieve cohesion with the planet. The Anthropocene as a last phase in the evolution of the world urges respect for all elements of our biotopes. All aspects of our physical world deserve the utmost radical respect and must be seen as co-owners. There are hopeful possibilities on the horizon, but it requires and demands the transcending, not the defence of borders, not just amongst human beings but between them and others in the animal and natural world. Climate issues cannot be divorced from issues of injustice and inequality, and they are also the opportunity to re-appraise the place of humanity within the circle, not pyramid, of life.

#### 14 *Paradigm shift in youth work*

Youth work needs both to cultivate and respond to opportunities to inform and debate with young people about the interdependency of the natural world, including human beings. On that count, youth work is not just about people. It may remain a relational practice, but it is about relationships with the earth and other animals, not just human animals. Youth work practice could adopt such thinking. Such a paradigm shift will invariably command some uncomfortable conversations, not least around the paramourcy of human rights. A radical transformation is needed, one which extends rights beyond humanity without annihilating individuality, one that minimises borders and boundaries in recognition of a shared world, and one which embraces inclusivity and pluralism as the anchor for understanding the world. And, to that end, youth work can and arguably should make a significant contribution.

## CONCLUSION

These reflections on climate change, environment and sustainable development are inevitably a variation of the previous themes and phenomena of the series YOUTH IN EUROPE: OFFENBURG TALKS that have already addressed solidarity, exclusion / inclusion, populism and nationalism, (shrinking) civic spaces and civic engagement... and their meaning for young people, for youth work and for society at large. Sustainable development and environmental concerns are linked with peace, freedoms, rights and many other concerns, while climate movements also address the geopolitical dimension and the importance of social issues. Even if it seems that in terms of urgency climate change is of the highest priority and therefore arguably demanding more paramount attention than others, the interrelationship to other topics such as social justice and the integrated context must be highlighted and should in no respect be neglected.

Youth work has a special, explicit accountability to address climate change and those other related issues. But youth work also faces a dilemma here: the climate crisis as well as other social (justice) issues seem to be symptoms of an unsustainable economic and political system which leads to the question which alternatives to the status quo do exist; alternatives which accept that all aspects of our physical world deserve the utmost radical respect and must be treated/seen as co-owners of the world. The question about tactics is also relevant: how 'radical' or 'friendly' actions should or must be to get to desirable forms



of 'system change'. Youth work must help finding answers here and a way to navigate and negotiate between and within competing demands and expectations.

Debates about youth work, youth participation, democracy and citizenship always raise issues of frameworks and foundations, content and process, roles and limits. More than that youth work must promote awareness of global and interconnected social issues and support a diversity of actors, a plurality of voices through inclusive structures and capacity building, including competence development of youth workers and activists. Cross-sectoral approaches in youth work are needed, particularly at local level in order to engage in already existing structures, urban planning for instance, which has spin-off effects such as strengthening local democracy, managing conflicting interests, and promoting social cohesion

Climate issues unavoidably impinge on youth work policy and practice. Youth work must commit to addressing them. But at that interface, multiple options present themselves such as the policy context, the context where the youth work is taking place, the knowledge and skills and capacity and confidence of the youth workers involved, the position, interests and aspirations of the young people taking part, and the resources available for deployment on the project in progress. In short, this is the essence of the youth work journey: the group, the issue, the context and the method.

Edition #4 of the YOUTH IN EUROPE: OFFENBURG TALKS provided deep insights into these matters, derived from policy and practice and research. More research and exchange are needed on how different models of activism, of youth participation (i.e. youth protests), and of youth work practices affect both young people and society.

