

YOUTH CAPABILITY IN THE CONTEXT OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract. Youth is viewed as a significant agent of sustainable development of the society. It is included in international programmes and regional and national planning documents. Simultaneously, youth activity, responsibility, and involvement in the solution of substantial issues are inadequate. The aim of this article is to investigate the aspects of youth capability that is linked to sustainable development of the society.

In the article, the authors analyse the quantitative data gathered during the research "Solidarity Schools in the Baltic States" (2014)¹ about the attitude of Latvian, Estonian and Lithuanian school youth towards the aspects of sustainable development and their actions in promoting of sustainable development. Considering the common historical and socio-cultural experience of the Baltic States, it can be assumed that the influence of the present transformation processes on the youth is similar.

The results of the research show that in contrast with the assumption the study of youth capability reveals both the similarities and statistically significant differences in the values and actions of the young generation in Latvia, Estonia, and Lithuania. In the area of values, youth are aware of the importance of sustainable habits but their actions do not always correspond with the principles of sustainable development. Considering that the compliance of values to actions is the measuring stick of responsibility; the youth of all three Baltic States demonstrate rather low level of responsibility. It is necessary to promote the implementation of the ideas of global education and sustainability into the everyday life, real social practices, since youth values and views comply with the principles of sustainable development.

Key words: capability approach, responsibility, youth, sustainable development

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¹ More information about the project see: <http://www.humana.org/785-solidarity-schools-in-the-baltics>

Introduction

In the recent years, the research community has demonstrated growing interest in youth as the makers of future society, especially considering the substantial transformations and social changes on global and local levels. Youth mirrors changes in the society, and by analysing its actions, attitudes and values, it is possible to foresee the further development of the society (e.g. Szafraniec K., 2011). The role of youth is emphasized in different international documents, e.g. according to the European Commission "Europe's future prosperity depends on its young people and thus deserve particular support and consideration as well as seeks to strengthen people's current and future capacities, and improve their opportunities to participate in society" (EC European Policybrief..., 2014).

At the same time young people are labelled as the part of today's consumer society (Szafraniec K., 2011) that are not concerned with either the consequences of their actions and/or the balanced, sustainable development of society. Actual participation of youth in social, political and economic processes is often limited. Therefore, it is necessary to study how youth capability expresses itself in the creation of viable society. The aim of this article is to research those aspects of youth capability that are associated with sustainable development of society. The object of research is school youth (ages 13-19) in Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia. The objective of research is to study theoretical aspects of youth capability and sustainable development as well as analyse empirical data about youth capability in the Baltic States within the context of sustainable development. Considering the common historical and socio-cultural experience and geographical location of the Baltic States, it can be assumed that existing transformation processes are also similar. Concurrently youth capability can be viewed as one of the indicators that allow revealing both similarities and possible differences in the processes taking place in the Baltic States.

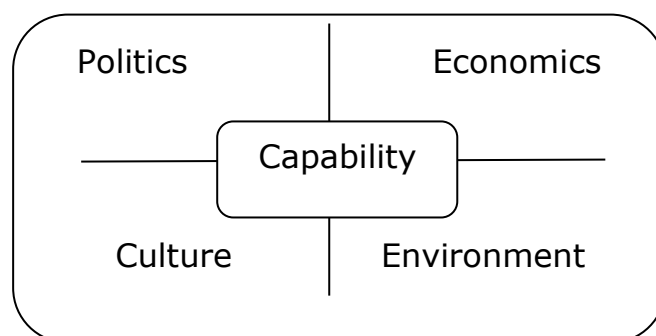
1. Theoretical framework of the paper

Sustainable development and youth capability are closely interrelated concepts. The accepted view is that youth is a generation of people with active lifestyle that is in the stage of development of social roles, learns it's educational, professional and other functions, and is prepared for securing and fulfilling their roles (Usinina N., 2013). Youth is a stage of life, and is as much a social construct as a term of science to discuss, evaluate, and assess a heterogeneous population group that shares characteristics of „transition“. The transitions include significant physiological, cognitive, social and economic changes when young people come to be recognized – and recognize themselves as adults (Goldin N., 2014). Youth has demonstrated both their ability and potential to be positive agents of changes who can help address and solve the problems that surround the planet's present and future. Youth has contributed fresh ideas and has been proactive in identifying solutions to development challenges. They have also shown their ability to build bridges of dialogue across cultures. Achieving sustainable human development would remain an aspirational concept without the

inclusion of all segments of society in a holistic, consultative and participatory way. Young men and women need to play a key role in this process (UNDP Youth Strategy, 2014). Youth is considered as main agent to achieve sustainable development both in individual and society level. According to the UNDP Strategic Plan 2014-2017, sustainable human development is the process of enlarging people`s choices by expanding their capabilities and opportunities in ways that are sustainable from the economic, social and environmental standpoints, benefiting the present without compromising the future (UNDP Strategic Plan, 2014). Thus youth activity is considered to be positive agent of social changes and sustainable development.

Considering and balancing environmental, economic and social aspects, sustainable development is viewed as a goal of development of present-day societies and nations. Sustainable development has various definitions; but the most adequate interpretation in connection with the current paper is the following: "Sustainable development is the ability of a community to develop processes and structures which not only meet the needs of its current members but also support the ability of future generations to maintain a healthy community" (Social sustainability..., 2014). This definition emphasizes social nature of sustainable development – it is unattainable without individual and collective participation. Desire and ability of members of society to participate is critical condition that ensures maintenance of environmental resources, improvement of life quality, facilitation of social integration etc. and other activities related to sustainable development. Members of community are responsible for its wellbeing and growth: "social sustainability is an ability acquired and held by communities over time, to initiate and control development, thus enabling communities to participate more effectively in their own destiny" (Lyons, M., Smuts, C., Stephens, A., 2001).

Necessity for society members to take responsibility for societal and environmental wellbeing as well as current social processes emphasizes the problem of capability. The human capability of an individual means the ability to use the opportunities offered by society. Human development is the expansion of human capability in the economic, political and cultural life of society (Figure 1).



Source: authors' construction based on theoretical statements

Figure 1. Dimensions of sustainable development

Several factors determine the human capability. Theoretically, they could be grouped into objectively given (living environment) factors independent from the activities of an individual and other social agents, such as the geopolitical position of the state, natural resources, cultural and historical development, demographic potential etc., and subjective factors (life-activity opportunities) such as purposeful action by the state, local governments, interest groups and other social actors, which create preconditions for the realization of the capability of individuals. The social capability of an individual expresses itself as the freedom of choice of action. In implementing one's capability in all areas of public life, people create the conditions for the free development of future generations. By realizing their abilities through action, individuals change the social environment and create new conditions for their own activities and activities of their peers. Security in an individual's economic activities, broad social networks, the ability and willingness to assume responsibility for what is going on in the neighborhood and society, a creative approach to one's own life-activity, maintenance of a healthy microclimate within the family etc. – these are new opportunities for action (Latvia Human Development..., 2005).

The Capability Approach developed by Amartya Sen and reworked by a range of European projects such as Eurocap, Capright, WorkAble, SocIEtY, for the evaluation of social policies in post-industrial societies provides an extremely fruitful framework for addressing youth inequalities that goes beyond current European and national level approaches. As such the Capability Approach focuses upon the individual's potential ability to achieve an outcome (e.g. having a job) that they value in the wider context, rather than solely looking at outcomes that have been achieved. Capability is a potential or substantive freedom to achieve alternative combinations of states or activities he or she has reason to value (EC European Policybrief..., 2014). The Capability Approach developed by Amartya Sen particularly emphasizes individual responsibility and freedom to choose for oneself such life trajectory that corresponds with one's system of values (Sen A., 1999). That way the capability approach provides theoretical grounds on which young people's voices have to be taken seriously. The concept of capability accentuates youth as independent agents that can actively influence objective circumstances. In the context of capability, an individual is not a passive observer but an active participant and driver of events. Thus one of the important research questions is readiness and willingness of youth to influence current processes.

Often capability is linked to youth participation or integration in processes taking place in society (EC European Policybrief..., 2014), as well as responsibility. Responsibility is the capacity of individuals to acknowledge their moral obligations towards themselves, their families, their local community, their profession, their country, society at large, future generations. Responsibility has meaning only if people's attitudes and value orientations are also reflected in their behaviour: responsibility cannot be simply a wish to do something, we must talk about real assumption of responsibility, activity that is carried out to exercise responsibility, with an awareness of and a readiness to face the consequences (Latvia Human

Development., 2009). Here we see actualization of problems of contemporary society when in theory youth is acknowledged as agents of social change but in practise social system provides limited opportunities to participate in decision-making. Thus youth becomes passive observers or alienate themselves from current social processes. Polish sociologist K. Szafraniec states that post-Soviet society demonstrates “citizenship deficit” – the unwillingness to co-decide about the future of the country where young people are the group with a particularly low level of involvement and low political activity (Szafraniec K., 2011). For this reason nowadays it is very important to convert “consumer” into “citizen” where the capability approach provides theoretical grounds on which young people`s voices have to be taken seriously (European Union's Seventh..., 2013).



Source: authors’ construction based on theoretical statements

Figure 2. **Youth capability as a precondition for sustainable development**

Summarizing the issues mentioned in theoretical materials (Figure 2); the authors want to emphasize that youth capability is crucial condition for assisting sustainable development.

Research results and discussion

Methodology

Comparatively descriptive research design has been chosen for measuring youth capability, and it permits to gain fairly expansive and detailed information as well as creates chances for comparison of different capability aspects in all Baltic States. The research uses data from international project „Solidarity Schools in the Baltic States” (2014) where by using quantitative research approach school youth (ages 13-19) from elementary and secondary schools of Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania were interviewed in order to discover their role in society as active acting subjects, their willingness to influence social, economic and ecological processes and their attitude towards global educational and sustainable development goals.

In the context of this survey, capability is conceptualized in two directions. One of them reveals youth’s conviction of their chances to affect and alter social, economic and ecological processes in society. Eight indicators that include processes from youth micro environment to global phenomena are used in its operationalization: planning of family budget, clean and orderly class and school vicinity, cultural and sport activities within local community, national unemployment, ethnic conflicts in Europe, poverty and food accessibility in Africa and melting of glaciers on North Pole. The other direction of capability conceptualization is youth actions that display real social practices of youth in actual life situations. Eleven indicators have been used in its operationalization (Table 1). In order to understand youth’s attitudes and actions

they were asked to assess the main life values: family, friends, free time, politics, career, religion, clean environment, cooperation, social networking and relationships, and health.

The research basis is made of 1413 youths from the Baltic States that go to primary and secondary schools: 555 are from Latvia, 449 – from Estonia, and 413 – from Lithuania. Even though one of improbable sample methods – accessibility sampling was used for the selection of respondents, since the questionnaire was filled in by the students of schools involved in the project „Solidarity Schools in the Baltic States”, sample realization adhered to the principles of territorial sampling as well. That way the sample includes youth from cities, towns, peri-urban areas and rural areas. Sampling was limited by project requirements, so in order to obtain representative results it would be necessary to broaden the sampling. Mostly relative indicators and central tendencies and dispersion parameters have been used for processing of quantitative data obtained in the survey and displaying of division of youth opinions. Although data do not comply with normal division, the arithmetical mean and standard deviation have been used for comparison in the interstate context. Such exception was allowed in order to discover insignificant differences in youth attitudes that are not revealed by other central tendency indicators. Besides, nonparametric Mann-Whitney and Kruskal Wallis tests were used for statistical assessment of differences in youth opinions where p-value method was used for result interpretation (significance level 0.05).

Analysis of empirical data

Youth capability directly depends on their conviction of the influence of their actions on environment from local to global level. Youth mostly feel their ability to affect their microenvironment – the processes taking place in family, school, local community; less often they see themselves as active subjects in activities that relate to the state, Europe or the world. These tendencies can especially be observed in two Baltic States considering the fact that half of the interviewed youth in Latvia and Estonia believe themselves able to affect planning of family budget and tidiness and order in the class and school vicinity. Whereas statistically significant differences ($p=0.0$) were observed in the answers of interviewed youth in Lithuania; they are not so convinced of their effect on the planning of family budget. As the survey results show, relatively smaller number of the interviewed Lithuanians (31%) believe that they affect planning of family budget. The corresponding numbers in Latvia and Estonia are respectively 60% and 53% of the interviewed.

Attitude of youth towards cultural and sport activities in local community cannot be assessed unambiguously. Although these processes take place within youth microenvironment, approximately half of the interviewed youth believe that they are not able to affect them and for this reason do not participate in them. Situation is comparatively better in Latvia where 43% of the interviewed youth believe that cultural and sport activities in local community are linked to their actions, while in the neighbouring states of Estonia and Lithuania the number of

thus thinking youth is considerably smaller – 34% and 13%, respectively. Besides, the observed variations in relative indicators are statistically insignificant.

Youth in all three Baltic States are aware of their capability in the area of environmental problems; more than 50% of youth acknowledge their influence in this field which is one of the highest rates after tidy and orderly class and school vicinity and planning of family budget (the latter relates to Latvia and Estonia). Although in this matter answers of youth have been relatively homogeneous in contrast with assessment of microenvironment processes, their opinions demonstrate statistically significant differences among the states ($p=0.043$): their capability is recognized by 55% of Latvians, 60% of Estonians and 51% of Lithuanians. Answers about such aspect of ecological environment as melting of glaciers on North Pole or social processes in Europe and the world in connection with ethnic conflicts, poverty and accessibility of food show a different picture. The smallest number of youth (about 15-20% of respondents) views them as being modifiable and changeable, so they are not ready to make an attempt at their solution. Answers show a slightly stronger conviction of interviewed Lithuanian youth; over 20% of them believe that they are able to affect the mentioned processes but at the same time they demonstrate the highest disinterest among three Baltic States. Around the third of interviewed Lithuanians (33%) show indifference towards ethnic conflicts in Europe, which points to a rather diffuse views and heterogeneity of youth as a social group in Lithuania. For comparison, there are 18% and 17% of youth with that type of opinion in Latvia and Estonia respectively; more than two thirds of youth in these states do not show indifference but rather feel their inability to affect processes. Interestingly enough that absolutely the smallest number of surveyed youth is convinced that they are able to affect solutions of unemployment problems in their state. There are 12% of them in Latvia, 11% - in Estonia, and 7% - in Lithuania. Youth is more convinced of the influence of their actions on ethnic conflicts in Europe, melting of glaciers on North Pole and poverty in Africa than mentioned issue (unemployment) that is physically closer to them – in their own country. Besides some of the interviewed youth reveal that they are not able to affect unemployment because it does not interest them. This type of indifference is demonstrated by 9% of young people in Estonia, 14% - in Latvia and 21% - in Lithuania. Therefore, it is possible to argue that interviewed youth in the Baltic States are more sure of their ability to influence social and ecological processes on different levels, and less sure of their ability to influence economic processes. These results testify of lack of economic capability of youth, but more particular conclusions require further research.

Table 1

Youth actions in different social situations

What do you do in different social life situations?*	Latvia		Lithuania		Estonia	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Sorting the waste	3.61	0.94	3.10	1.45	3.05	1.24
Buy only the products which have eco-friendly packaging	3.26	1.16	4.03	1.08	3.17	0.99
Take free plastic bags from shops as few as possible	3.35	1.24	2.67	1.19	2.31	1.14
Buy products which are produced in my country	2.85	0.82	3.47	1.26	2.76	0.92
Try eating healthy food	2.40	0.88	2.79	1.10	2.60	0.93
Try avoiding bad habits (smoking, using drugs)	2.25	1.08	2.71	1.80	1.62	1.13
Take interest in activities in my city	2.43	0.98	3.21	1.14	2.65	0.96
Take interest in developments in my country	2.46	1.02	2.52	1.10	3.44	1.00
Take interest and support global development	2.40	1.01	3.01	1.15	3.00	1.08
Donate money to charity or help socially disadvantaged people in another way	3.04	0.98	3.36	1.15	3.41	0.91
Express my opinion even if it differs from others	2.39	1.09	2.51	1.20	2.51	1.02

(*Question categories: always – 1, almost always – 2, sometimes – 3, hardly ever – 4, never – 5)

Source: authors' calculations based on survey results of the study "Solidarity schools in the Baltic states".

Indicator of youth capability in the context of sustainable development is not just their conviction or their subjective perception of their actions and its effect on environment; it implies also real actions in various everyday situations that influence both their own health and the health of others and broader ecological and social environment. Interviewed youth in Latvia on most occasions attempt to give up bad habits, express their opinions despite the opinion of majority, are interested in global processes and try to have healthy diet (mean 2.25–2.40), although their opinions show slight dissipation and existence of different assessments. Overall, their capability relates more to their health and attitude towards social environment (Table 1). Whereas they are less active in waste separation, try not to use plastic shopping bags and purchase products in ecological packaging (mean 3.61–3.26). Considering that the biggest dissipation exists in the opinions about plastic shopping bags and eco packaging, the results testify of youth dissent and different practises in their everyday life. Small differences are observed in actions of interviewed Latvian and Estonian youth but overall averages signify of fairly similar habits. Youth in Estonia more often try to give up bad habits,

use less plastic bags and express their opinions despite the ideas of the majority (mean 1.62–2.51). But the data show that not all youth act like that, because there is significant dissipation of opinions similar to what was seen among the interviewed youth in Latvia. Opinions of interviewed youth in Lithuania are even more dissipated and averages demonstrate differences among three Baltic States. Lithuanians more often try to express their opinion despite the views of majority, are interested in happenings on national scale and avoid using plastic shopping bags (mean 2.51–2.67) but rarely buy products in ecological packaging, local produce and give money for charity or otherwise help the poor (mean 4.03–3.36). Dissipation and differences of opinions are observed not only among the respondents in each country but also among countries; besides they are statistically significant in most criteria ($p < 0.05$). It is interesting that interviewed youth in all three countries have been on one mind in relation to only one criteria “express my opinion even if it differs from others” ($p = 0.096$).

In general youth is more active in relation to the improvement of their health and interest about different social events and less active in the area of environment-friendly habits. Although more than a half of interviewed youth understand that they are able to affect problems of environmental pollution, their actual actions do not always comply with that understanding. It is an incongruity between the meaning of ‘yes’ or what one should do and what youth would like to do and their everyday habits that is essential and often missing link in the context of sustainable development.

Another paradox of the situation is that socio-cultural, environmental, economic and political values which are the main driving force of capability are important to youth. Survey data testify to it, since all values presented to youth on average are considered very important or rather important. But they are not always reflected in their everyday life habits. Even such values as religion and politics that received the lowest assessment in the opinion of youth of three Baltic States are considered fairly important, since only about 15% of interviewed youth (mean 2.65) see politics and 25% (mean 2.75) see religion as totally unimportant which in these countries make up less than third of the sample scope. The most significant values to all interviewed youth are family, health and friends (mean 1.10–1.55), and there is relatively slight opinion dissipation among youth of each country which signifies of their consensus on these issues; also there are no statistically significant differences among countries ($p > 0.05$). Essential to interviewed youth in Baltic States are such values as clean environment and cooperation (mean 1.70–1.90) which are essential in the context of sustainable development but, as it was mentioned earlier, only partially express in the actions.

Conclusions, proposals, recommendations

1. In contrast to the original assumption about similarity of Baltic development path, the study of youth capability reveals both similarities and statistically significant differences in values and actions of the young generation in Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania.

2. On the value level youth acknowledges importance of sustainable habits but their actions are not always consistent with principles of sustainable development. Considering that consistency between values and actions is the measurement of responsibility, youth of all three Baltic States demonstrate rather low level of responsibility.
3. It is necessary to encourage implementation of ideas of global education and sustainable development in real social practices, since values and opinions of young people agree with principles of sustainable development.
4. In the context of capability youth of the Baltic States realize their freedom to choose values and express opinions. It agrees with capability concept that involvement in facilitation of sustainable development cannot be forced. Participation should not be a duty but a real option.
5. Further research can analyse factors that create gaps between values and actions of youth. It is significant for future perspective to gather data on youth capability indicators to explore how young people live in different European countries today and to examine what can be done to create social and institutional opportunities which will better enable them to live the lives they have reason to value.

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