Youth and climate change: A generational challenge

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Abstract
With the growing challenges of sustainability and climate change people need to be able to engage in more democratic and participative processes of learning. This paper argues that the youth generation is key to this engagement. With the short-timescales now involved it is the key generation on which to focus attention.

The Challenge

Half of the world’s population is under 20 years old. Many of these young people will be faced with the growing challenge of tolerating and adapting to global conflicts induced by the scarce resources of fertile land, drinkable water, fossil fuel or habitable, peaceful space. They could be the new immigrants that are excluded or the rescuers in mounting disasters. Many in the more industrialised countries will increasingly be pressurised and forced to change their behaviour, career paths or consumption habits in the face of the rapidly changing global economy that we are facing in the current “buy now-pay later” global recession. But what is increasingly certain is that this excluded youth generation will be ill-prepared to face this challenge by the current adult generation of decision-makers, local community leaders and educators.

The current youth generation has more opportunity than older generations to face the escalating challenges of climate change. A growing body of scientists, environmental lobbyist and politicians suggest that how we change our personal and professional behaviour over the next period of 30 years will be the key to climate change mitigation and adaptation. So this generation will need to be making the key decisions and promoting the key behaviours to reduce our carbon footprints.

This opportunity for young adults is reinforced by their willingness and ability to change fixed patterns of behaviour, to be mobile and hence adaptable about where and how they work, to be eager to get a new job that aligns with their own values and concerns, to be enterprising and innovative in developing new lifestyles or livelihoods, and to be better educated through school or college about climate change. Paradoxically, many young people are clearly unhappy and unfulfilled by consumer society. This may explain why

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1 UNESCO education portal, section on responsible youth consumption. (http://portal.unesco.org/education/en/).
2 Youth in the UK is generally seen as 13 to 19 years old, in the EU as 16 to 30 years old and in the UN as 15 to 25 years old. In this paper the term youth uses the EU age range ie. young adults.
3 Some scientists, environmental lobbyists and politicians are now saying that human behaviour over the next 10 years will determine our fate.
5 Let’s cut the carbon in our schools and colleges – Go Green Action Guide. People and Planet.
many are seeking alternative, and, in many cases, more sustainable lifestyles. So potentially this is the generation to act as champions and evangelists of a new consumer/producer lifestyle. But are our institutions and political structures willing and able to nurture and empower this youth generation?

Young people in the more industrially developed countries already have huge power in their consumption eg. of clothes, travel, and electronic gadgets. It is estimated that if the rest of the world were to consume like the developed world, we would need the equivalent of four extra earths. As half the world’s population is under 20, young people’s consumption patterns are decisive for tomorrow’s world. However as they start their adult lifestyle as first-time consumers they are likely to fix their lifelong patterns of consumption. As a generation young adults are probably most ready to welcome the era of globalisation in terms of global media, travel and political single issues. As new, often debt-ridden, consumers they may also embrace the buy-now-pay-later “free lunch” consumer culture. These pressures against localisation and for fashionable consumption are reinforced by peers and role-models from their own and other cultures.

Families and peers can have a key influence on both reinforcing and changing youth behaviour. Young adulthood is a period when the effects of the commercialisation of childhood are being seen and lifelong consumption habits are being fixed. The goods and services young people consume are intrinsically linked to their developing sense of identity. Relinquishment of this form of self-expression in the name of abstract environmental problems would be a non-starter. However, there are opportunities to create change for more responsible consumption as they are also periods of independence in lifestyle, critical questioning of adult and parental lifestyles and consumer choices. Even so it will be very challenging for young people to stop consuming, or even significantly reduce the speed or volume of their consumption.

Over the next 30 years patterns of employment for the youth generation will change considerably as jobs are advertised more globally; job-hunters are more willing and able to move; business communication is more electronic; patterns of worldwide consumption and production change more quickly and flexibly. Transferable skills and mobile, migrant staff will be in demand to face the challenges that climate change presents.

As the youth generation start their career paths as first-time employees, they will be introduced to institutional cultures where their workstyle will clash with their preferred lifestyle, perhaps until they are fully fledged working adults. In the workplace, new young employees are channelled to learn the habits, culture and practices of often creaking production and financial systems. Successful employers may well attract bright

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6 The International Young Professionals Foundation in Australia works towards effective positive change for future generations (www.iyps.org) and has done some research on the influences on young Australian’s consumption patterns.


8 This challenge and the attitude-action gap will be researched over the next three years as the focus of a PhD. Less is More – working towards responsible consumption as a desirable choice for UK youth, Collins, R. UCL, Feb 2008.
new talent but they are likely to draw on most of the energy and enthusiasm of that talent, leaving little space for youthful leadership in the local community. Youth employment with economically and socially irresponsible employers is rightly at risk. But youth employment with socially and environmentally responsible employers has never had better prospects.

In the more industrially developed countries there seems to be little political support for developing the socially and environmentally responsible new leadership that will be required for low impact economies and societies. Barack Obama has recognised this when he proposed a Climate Change Education Bill\(^9\) which is currently going through the US Senate. Political support for the next generation of leadership in sustainable development has been championed by a growing range of organisations – such as the International Institute for Sustainable Development in Canada\(^10\), Forum for the Future with its scholarship programme in the UK and the British Council with their Climate Advocates programme across Europe\(^11\).

In the less industrially developed countries traditional cultures inevitably hold more decision-making power in the elders. The challenge here is both to encourage the educated youth generation to support and work in their local communities, rather than migrate to more privileged and less threatened parts of the globe. Those that are educated specialists, such as doctors or agronomists, will have all the temptations associated with globalisation and the brain drain, displacing their skills to other countries and communities. These pressures on the youth generation will inevitably sever their family roots, abandon traditional family skills and reduce the inter-generational understanding of their family locality. Although this process is well advanced in the richer, more industrially developed countries\(^12\), it will severely reduce the pool of local indigenous family-based knowledge in fragile ecosystems that need this most of all in terms of storing carbon and reducing greenhouse emissions.

The worldwide culture of “buy now- pay later” has given us the credit crunch and climate change. But more anti-socially it gives the youth generation an unwanted inheritance with mounting debt and declining options. In 30 years time as the next generation of leaders, they will have less non-renewable resources, biodiversity and habitable coastal cities, with more climate-induced disasters, conflicts, disease and migration. This challenges faces us all now – but most of all it faces the youth generation\(^13\).

**Inter-generational decision-making and social learning**

\(^9\) The US Senate is considering a bill to authorize the National Science Foundation to establish a Climate Change Education Program. [www.govtrack.us/congress/bill.xpd?bill=s110-1389](http://www.govtrack.us/congress/bill.xpd?bill=s110-1389)


\(^11\) In each of 15 EU participating countries 15-20 young influencers, aged 18-35, will work together as Climate Advocates to unearth new ways to reduce carbon use or utilise methods already found but not yet properly exploited. [www.britishcouncil.org/climatechange-challenge-europe.htm](http://www.britishcouncil.org/climatechange-challenge-europe.htm)

\(^12\) Increasingly termed the Minority World.

\(^13\) UNICEF’s publication Climate Change and Children emphases that children and young people will be most affected by climate change. [www.unicef.org/publications/index_42166.html](http://www.unicef.org/publications/index_42166.html)
No pattern-book policies are likely to provide the required political support for the youth generation, as it is so culturally, economically and educationally diverse. Different approaches will be needed but in two key areas – inter-generational, inter-cultural, participative decision-making and social, lifelong, reflective learning that is supported by more than formal educational institutions. Our current institutional approaches to decision-making and learning have generally failed to meet the challenges of climate change so we must quickly look for new (or from some cultures, old) models.

It is time to shift the balance of decision-making towards the generation that will have to manage this unwanted inheritance, to make political and economic decisions that can span a generation, and to enable real inter-generational and inter-cultural dialogue about climate change to be realised in institutions where the youth generation can learn. However at the same time a range of social learning and marketing approaches need to be developed to address the significant attitude–action gap of the youth generation. This is the gap between the global issues that concern young people (such as terrorism, war, poverty, famine and climate change) and the local actions they take to tackle those issues. This gap prevents the cultural shift from token awareness to personal action and reaction.

Climate change confronts young people with complexity, uncertainty, value-laden choices, uncontrollability and controversy. Mitigating or adapting to climate change demands collaboration, innovation and transformation. In contrast to these needs the current culture of educational institutions exposes the same young people to compartmentalisation, knowledge, simplicity and certainty where educational success is mostly measured in terms of competition and conformity. We do not seem to have an education system that accepts change. Such slow-changing, conservative institutions perhaps should not be our main focus or locus for urgently improving climate change education.

Introducing young people to the complexity and sensitivity of change emphasises that small changes can often have big consequences. The flap of a butterfly’s wing on one side of the globe could change the weather on the other side! This adds optimism to learning by showing that small personal changes can have big global consequences. Equally the unpredictability of climate change may encourage young people to err on the side of caution, following the precautionary principle.

**Finding a way forward**

The youth generation may be more ready than their elders to make radical change. Older generations may be more reluctant to make fundamental lifestyle changes and take pro-

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14 A report from V, the UK youth volunteering charity, researched this gap in vinformed: Barriers preventing passionate young people acting on their concerns. It detailed the findings of a survey of 1,000 16-25 year olds. [www.wearev.com](http://www.wearev.com)

environmental action. However these adults may be confident that change on a massive scale can happen but expect the next generation to make that change. To make the required quick, but fundamental behaviour changes young people will need access to a mix of education, experience, information and networks that they cannot always get from educational institutions alone.\(^{16}\)

In this context climate change education should be rooted in local communities with their mix of ages and cultures around a defined locality with all its own future challenges for climate change, with education institutions providing the space and facilitation for collaborative social learning. Educational institutions can provide much of the climate change context for local community learning. Social, multidisciplinary, problem-solving, action-based, reflective learning, could focus, for example, on valuing localisation, questioning globalisation, reflecting on the past, measuring change, innovating designs and celebrating change. In contrast subject-based, exam-orientated, reductionist learning might refer to this as geography, history, maths, design technology, english or art.

Peer communities of young people, based either in educational institutions, neighbourhoods, the workplace or virtual cyberspace, should be given support and funding for youth-led access to information and advice about consumer choices, participation in local inter-generational decision-making on the longer-term plans for mitigation and adaptation.

Young people need opportunities, space and facilitation to clarify and communicate their own values and lifestyle choices with peers, employers and decision-makers in a sustainable way. Young people need to clarify their values and understand those of others, through debate, argument, criticism and even conflict, especially with peers, so they can explore and respond to a range of lifestyle choices, as well as practice and advocate change that is socially and environmentally responsible.

Vocational training and work experience can offer great learning opportunities in the current climate of change. Lasting solutions to the growing threat of youth unemployment or under-employment in the current worldwide recession needs to reflect the whole range of challenges facing employers, especially climate change. Now is a great opportunity to develop specific work experience schemes and pre-employment vocational training that introduces opportunities for young entrepreneurs interested in developing the low carbon economy. It should also enable them to select employers who have the sort of social and environmental responsibility that can compete globally and lead to future business growth.

In terms of adaptation to climate change, especially in more threatened parts of the globe, there is going to be increasing need for practical training of young people, as the most mobile and adaptable generation, in disaster prevention using skills related to first aid, shelter building, and intercultural understanding in the face of mass climate-induced migration.

\(^{16}\) Prof. David Selby has argued this convincingly in The Need for Climate Change in Education, [www.bne-portal.de/coremedia/generator/pm/en/Issue__001/Downloads/01__Contributions/Selby.pdf](http://www.bne-portal.de/coremedia/generator/pm/en/Issue__001/Downloads/01__Contributions/Selby.pdf)
The brain drain of young talent, from countries that need this talent to tackle climate change, clearly results from many national immigration policies and university internationalisation policies. Doctors, agronomists and engineers are inevitably tempted by higher salaries and more security in more industrially developed countries. However the huge differences in the ratio of doctors to patients in African and European countries illustrates the effect this will have on the lives and wellbeing of others. Policies that encourage a fairer trade of young talent are not likely to get the same public support or media exposure as a fairer trade for coffee growers, but they could arguably have a wider effect on human wellbeing.

Encouraging a culture of youth e-communication for both work, holidays and recreation will introduce the global impact of climate change on other youth lives, lifestyles and livelihoods. Developing a culture of sustainable communication, such as audio and web conferencing, without the need for short-haul flights will only improve youth employability, as well as empathy for others from more threatened and disadvantaged parts of the globe.

A major mismatch of youth culture with low carbon lifestyles is the fashion for global gap-year travel, expeditions or short-term volunteering by a series of short-haul flights. The promotion of youth bus travel, alternative travel advice, local volunteering, or even virtual 18-30 holidaying with friends could all help to boost the low carbon lifestyles of young people seeking new experiences and friends.

We are currently seeing how unsustainable our financial, banking and production systems are in the more industrially developed, globally linked countries. We are beginning to recognise that our “buy now- pay later” culture must change. It is the youth generation that is most able and suited to make this change. Consumers may move to the cheapest choice, Voters, policy-makers and the media may move away from the “long-term issues” of the world. However the economic downturn buys us time to change; promotes the values of thrift; and most importantly creates conditions for innovation and change, encouraging a search for a new, fairer, less credit-based economic system based on the true costs and value of consumption and production – hopefully a youth-led search.

“Young people are the most untapped resource on Earth, but more often than not our age and experience - or lack thereof, according to adults - is the main criteria by which we are judged, and therefore excluded from many consultations, processes and actions... All over the world, at any given time, there are scores of young people responding to the development challenges of their communities. In spite of their lack of recognition, their message remains the same: Youth want to be involved, and the social, environmental and political imperative for young people's participation will need to be taken seriously by development actors nationally and globally”. 17

Some examples of youth-based networks and websites

The range of youth networks and websites that focus on youth reaction and action in terms of climate change is growing rapidly. It does not include the many networks and websites targeted either at schools and children or at a general interested audience. Most of these networks and sites are designed, developed and supported by youth from the Minority North – those with easy access to e-communication and travel to international events. This northern-led international youth “movement” is inevitably presented with the real challenge of enabling and empowering the youth voice from the Majority South.

The most obvious focus for youth action and reaction to the challenge of climate change has been the series of annual UN conferences over the last 10 or so years. Over 500 young people from around the world attended the 14th annual UN Climate Change negotiations in 2008 in Poznań, Poland. These youth leaders demanded global cooperation towards a strong, ambitious, and just climate treaty. Youth delegations from over 50 countries met with government representatives, participated in colourful actions and creative demonstrations, and let the global public know what their governments were doing on their behalf. Collectively their plans include building the global youth movement by supporting smaller delegations, shaming negotiators who obstruct the policy process, and demanding that a youth voice be heard in the official meetings of the conference.

There is a strong history of youth participation at international climate negotiations. But is it really inter-generational decision-making? In previous years, actions organized by youth group have made a dramatic impact but have they influenced decisions. In Montreal in 2005, they envisioned an ice-free future by playing a game of 'ice hockey' in a swimming pool. At 2006's Nairobi conference, they lined the entrance hall as negotiators entered, standing with duct tape over their mouths to symbolize the lack of formal youth representation at the negotiations.

Youth-led electronic networks have provided the basis for this sort of youth-led collaborative international campaigning and action. These can be illustrated by a range of social networking sites, mainly from more industrially developed countries:

- It’s Time To Take Back Our Future: A youth guide to taking action against the Harper agenda and for the planet (www.itsgettinghotinhere.org)
- Australian Youth Climate Coalition (www.youthclimatecoalition.org)
- Canadian Youth Climate Coalition (www.ourclimate.ca)
- SustainUS (www.sustainus.org)
- People and Planet – UK Student environmental/ social justice group (www.peopleandplanet.org).

Several social network sites focus on youth lifestyle change in response to climate change, with training toolkits and capacity-building, especially through training workshops, festivals or other youth/student events, to encourage peer education with youth and student groups:
• The Lifeshift Network encourages young people to “practice what they preach” – personally adopting a lower carbon, more equitable lifestyle that provides personal satisfaction and wellbeing – before persuading or lobbying others to do the same. A planned series of training courses and a training toolkit for youth leaders and trainers will focus on consumer, citizenship, media and development education through a series of practical group activities. (http://lifeshift.ning.com)

• The British Council supports over 200 18 to 35 year olds from 15 EU participating countries who work together as Climate Advocates to unearth new ways to reduce carbon use or utilise methods already found but not yet properly exploited. (www.britishcouncil.org/climatechange-challenge-europe.htm)

• The British Council also supports the International Climate Champions. These Champions are young people of school age, selected to help spread the word about climate change and to get others involved. Partners are initially from the G8 + 5 (Brazil, Canada, China, France, Germany, India, Italy, Japan, Mexico, Russia, South Africa, UK, USA). (www.britishcouncil.org/climatechange-international-climate-champions-about.htm)

• The British Council also supports the Asian Young Leaders Climate Forum in a youth climate change network in East Asia, focusing on social networking, training courses and solution-based campaigns at UN events. (http://community.britishcouncil.org/aylcf) (http://climatecoolnetwork.ning.com)

• The National Trust is working with 16 to 19 year olds across the UK to take on the challenge, receive training, networking, support for practical projects and “become climateers”. (www.youmeandtheclimate.org)

A number of websites include youth-made films and videoclips on climate change:

• Nuff Global, coordinated by TVIbit Youth Centre, Norway, organised an international youth film festival on climate change with 24 winning films on view. (www.nuffglobal.net)

• Green TV has accepted films on climate change and low impact lifestyles. (www.green.tv)

• The Sky Short Film Competition for action on climate change closed in Dec. 2007. Films up to 60 secs. long can be seen. (www.greenshoots.sky.com)

• Youtube has a wide range of site showing youth-led videoclips on climate change or sustainable lifestyles eg. Innovate or Die: a pedal-powered machine contest with a great set of pedal-powered inventions. (www.youtube.com/group/innovateordie)

• Global Cool is a large portal site with a video section. (www.global-cool.com)

Several universities and colleges have established student or staff-led initiatives to encourage pro-environmental student behaviour or changes to the management of the campus:

• Student SwitchOff (www.studentswitchoff.co.uk)

• University of Leicester’s Big Green Week (www2.le.ac.uk/offices/estates/big-green-week/programmewednesday)

• University of Durham’s Sustainable Living Action Group (SLAG) (www.dur.ac.uk/environment/durini/slp)
A number of commercial, governmental and voluntary organisations have established websites with information, activities, challenges, competitions and youth networking:

- The Big Green Challenge on Community Action for Climate Change started in early 2008. ([www.biggreenchallenge.org.uk/about](http://www.biggreenchallenge.org.uk/about))
- Solar Generation is a Greenpeace web-based network of young people, currently with groups in over 12 countries, who want to focus on youth action against climate change ([www.solargeneration.org](http://www.solargeneration.org))
- UNEP’s YouthXchange project has, after considerable research on youth and sustainable consumption, developed an online youth information training toolkit which has been adapted for use in a wide range of countries. ([www.youthxchange.net](http://www.youthxchange.net))
- Ben and Jerry's Climate Change College is a programme that offers the chance for 18-30 year olds to educate themselves about the causes, politics and potential solutions of climate change. ([www.climatechangecollege.org](http://www.climatechangecollege.org))
- Woodcraft Folk’s C-Change Project includes advice, podcasts and activities developed by young people for young people. ([www.switchonswitchoff.org](http://www.switchonswitchoff.org))
- The InterClimate Network promotes innovative projects that inspire practical action on climate change by bringing experts and enterprise to work with schools and youth groups, to tackle one of the world's greatest challenges. ([www.interclimate.org](http://www.interclimate.org))