

YOUNG PEOPLE AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT¹

by

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The National Youth Policy (2004), which was launched on the 21st March, to coincide with the celebration of Youth Day, states that in the field of the environment, the State should follow a policy that "*helps young people to take an active role in the protection and improvement of the environment for a sustainable future.*" (10.6).

The concept of sustainable development goes beyond the natural environment and also includes social and economic dimensions. Agenda 21, adopted at the Rio Earth Summit in 1992 defined Sustainable Development as "*development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.*" The definition itself highlights the importance of the role of young people towards development. Young people are, in many ways, the common denominator between the past and the future. Agenda 21 was a major step in establishing that young people have a unique contribution to make towards sustainable development. Apart from inviting them to take part in decision-making, Agenda 21 recognises the practical role of young people in the field. Agenda 21 defies the general argument that young people should not be given a role in development because they are inexperienced, unqualified or altogether immature. On the contrary, the open-mindedness, activism, and flexibility of young people enables them to carry out many non-formal roles in pushing forward the agenda of sustainable development. In brief, Agenda 21 clearly conveys the message that the long-term success of sustainable development is dependent on the involvement of young people.

Without intending, in any way, to discredit the work carried out by many committed people who no longer fall within the youth category, it is an undeniable fact that a great deal of pro-environmental and non-formal social work in Malta is the fruit of initiatives thought of and carried out by young people. The underpinning vision of most young people when it comes to sustainable development, idealistic as it may come across, is that of a world where there is enough wealth which is equally distributed, and where people know how to read and write

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which helps them to surpass the increasing challenges of everyday life as well as helping them to secure adequate employment. It is a vision of a world where pollution levels are decreased in order to enable a healthier living and where increased global warming does not threaten the livelihoods of millions around the world. Above all, it is a vision of a world where everyone lives with dignity, where poverty and human rights violations no longer torment the lives of people all over the globe. This is not sheer idealism. This vision is very often translated concretely in voluntary work through so many NGOs and youth organisations. Young people's altruism runs counter to the frequent media portrayal of young people as egoistic, irresponsible and apathetic individuals. Even at a European level, encouraging voluntary work by young people is one of the key policies in the field of youth. Unfortunately, Maltese NGOs, including youth NGOs, are suffering from the absence of a law regulating their existence. In view of this, the National Youth Council (KNŻ) and other representatives of civil society are calling for the immediate publication of the white paper on the subject and for an open dialogue to ensue.

Amongst the priorities in the field of youth, one can identify a number of goals. First and foremost, one has to enhance the active participation of young people in any form of action promoting or leading to sustainable development. In broad terms, KNŻ believes that this active participation has to be nurtured primarily at the local community level and in this respect we have embarked on a pilot project involving a number of local councils and young people from the various localities. More specifically, going by the maxim "think globally and act locally", I think that the principle of youth involvement at the local level should give particular importance to the issue of sustainable development.

Education is doubtlessly one of the best tools in helping us reach whichever goals we chose to set. Education can cover a very wide spectrum of issues which are related to sustainable development, from the efficient use of energy source to sustainable consumption or educating young people in how to balance out their rights as consumers and their responsibilities as citizens. What I consider to be of utmost importance is the promotion of healthy lifestyles. The nexus between healthy lifestyle and environmental awareness is made clear in our National Youth Policy. However, it cannot completely be effective when children and young people are constantly affected by so many harms in our environment. Our National Curriculum already addresses various aspects of sustainable development. More than ever before, now there is a pressing need for education to inform *and* mobilise young people to take up activities that contribute directly to sustainable development. The possibility of engaging young people goes beyond formal education but it is nonetheless imperative for the issue to be more specifically emphasised *within* the curricular framework in such a way that young people do not simply learn "about" a variety of topics but are indeed involved in

tangible projects. This should not be restricted to purely environmental activities but should include a holistic vision which includes, above all, taking the views expressed by young people seriously. A good starting point, already indicated by the National Curriculum is the establishment and strengthening of school councils, in such a way that young people are integrated in the democratic decision-making process.

On a wider plain, this is an opportune moment to recall that Agenda 21 places the responsibility on governments to *"Establish task forces that include youth and youth non-governmental organizations to develop educational and awareness programmes specifically targeted to the youth population on critical issues pertaining to youth. These task forces should use formal and non-formal educational methods to reach a maximum audience. National and local media, non-governmental organizations, businesses and other organizations should assist in these task forces"*. It is high time that such task forces are set up. Moreover, with the setting up of the Commissioner for Children, Malta should be in a better position to fulfil the sections of Agenda 21 that deal with young people and sustainable development.

To my mind, one of the most important aspects of the involvement of young people in sustainable development is that young people have an inherent capability of networking. Young people will take up the challenges of achieving sustainable development if other young people tell them about it and encourage them to join this project or that initiative. They will also take up the challenge, and live up to it, if the older generations remind them of the role they have to play in achieving sustainable development and if they are entrusted and given the right to decide and act upon matters concerning their future. Since the future depends mainly on the power exerted in shaping it, society has the duty to grant young people the right to participate fully in the shaping of their future and educate and empower them to give a valid and intelligent contribution in this regard.
