

Youth and Environmental Education for Sustainable Development

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Abstract: *New political frameworks and courses of development regarding the welfare of the young are more and more being directed towards platforms for involving young people in the issues of environmental protection and sustainable development. However, despite the dedication of political decisions on consulting young people and their participation in these issues, still, there is no consensus on the way and implementation of this dedication, and on the manner of implementation in various program fields. This paper is giving frameworks for understanding the need for the adequate environmental education of the young people, which, as a consequence, also has the sustainable development of the society as a whole. The first one refers to the argument that young people have the right to be involved in and consulted on the environmental issues. The second one is that improvement of the services for young people requires recognition of their views and interests and their appropriate articulation, which is implied from the standpoint of their participation. The third one refers to the needs of recognition and involvement of the benefits of the sustainable growth, which normally arise as a consequence of the participation of the young people in the protection of the environment. Finally, it is concluded that young people should be given a chance to be involved in the appropriate environmental education and discussions on economic, societal and environmental issues, having in mind that participation of the public in the environmental protection issues cannot be reserved just for the adults.*

Keywords: young people, activism of the young people, environmental education, sustainable development.

1. Introduction

“Education is the most powerful weapon you can use to change the world.” Nelson Mandela

In 1992. the governments that participated in the Earth Summit made the historical agreement related to sustainable development-economic system which promotes health and survival of the people and ecosystems. The definition of "sustainable development", which is most commonly used, was made by Lester Brown, the founder of the Worldwatch Institute. The definition was also included in the report of "Our Common Future": "Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" [1]. This definition is the basis of all the efforts of the international politics regarding the protection of the environment. Sustainable development is a global development management philosophy that aims to conserve the integrity of the Earth's ecosystems while supporting economic growth and social welfare. The concept of Sustainable Development first appeared in the 1970s and early 1980s [2], but only came into prominence following the 1987 World Commission on Environment and Development report.

The term sustainable development was proclaimed in Norway, in 1989. Minister conference (so-called Bergen convention), organised by the Norwegian government with the help of Economic Committee of the UN (United Nations), and the following year, the concept was adopted by the European Union as well. The draft for the Chart of the Earth was a part of the unfinished work on the Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. [3], the first time that the UN tackled

this problem, its defining and solving.

In 1992. there was the second conference - The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, on protection of the environment and development - UNED in Rio de Janeiro, where the connection between the development and the environmental protection on global level was shown for the first time. There were around 10.000 official representatives from 160 countries, including 116 national political leaders. The recommendations of the Brundtland Report were adopted, and one of the most important results of the Summit was the enactment of the Agenda 21.

Furthermore, in August 2002, there was a World Summit on sustainable development in Johannesburg [4]. On this summit, the participant countries agreed to start making and adopting national strategies of sustainable development as soon as possible, where economic and social aims were added both on local and global levels for the first time.

Twenty years later, after several summits held, human civilisation was very near environmental collapse. Modern society was faced with numerous challenges on the way of reaching the sustainable community. Establishment of international conventions and researches in the field of environmental protection and sustainable development greatly contributes to the development of the sustainable society. However, the possibility of reaching sustainability, and environmental sustainability in the first place, requires the change of behaviour patterns not just of the society as a whole, but also the behaviour of each individual as well. These are the reasons for establishment of the new ways of managing and solving the topics related to the issues of

environmental protection. In addition, it is important to notice that since sustainability is a multidimensional concept, economic, social and environmental aspects must be considered and integrated, too [1], [6] - [10].

Environmental accidents and endangerment of the environment and health of the people in the '60s of the previous century, brought about not only the increased pressure of the environmentally conscious communities on decision makers in charge of the environmental and its protection issues, but also the increase of democratic decision making and public involvement in making these decisions, as well as testing of different mechanisms for implementation of this process into day-to-day decision making, and their efficiency and application in different conditions, as well as the understanding of necessity of not only the appropriate environmental education of young people, but also their inclusion in environmental issues. Many authors agree that good environmental education is crucial for achieving sustainable development [10]. Equally, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization - UNESCO concludes that environmental education is essential to sustainable development [11].

2. Young People as a Category

Old and doctrine question is: what is youth, an artificial structure of the abstract being or a real societal entity? There is no commonly accepted definition of "youth". Youth is a relatively defined totality, which every society identifies as such and it most often represents an age group of so-called young generations between fourteen and thirty years of age. 1/5 of the population in Republic of Serbia belongs to youth category.

It is difficult to determine and define the age borderline of youth. Thus, formal definitions of this life period differ between the institutions of the UN, EU and national institutions. Worldwide, there are different definitions of the youth age borderlines and it is considered that no other life period provokes as many discussions on age borderlines as this one. Duration of youth is actually socially and not biologically determined. Schooling is the key factor which shortens or prolongs youth.

Youth is shorter within a group of young people who spend less time in school, whereas young people who are most educated have longer way to becoming adults. In transition countries like the Republic of Serbia, prolonged youth is often a matter of force. Young people in Serbia are in favor of the suggestion that the upper borderline of youth is 30.

In the Republic of Serbia, in the National strategy for young people, the young are defined as people between fifteen and thirty years of age. There are approximately 1,5 million young people in Serbia, which makes 20% of the population [12].

Term "young" describes the phase of life between childhood and adulthood. Youth is a special period of life in which, together with biological and mental maturity, develops the process of inclusion of an individual in the community. During this period, it is expected of young people do

develop skills and capabilities in order to undertake the roles in all fields of social activities. Process of inclusion of the individual in the society lasts as long as the individual reaches the appropriate level of social autonomy, responsibility and independence [13].

Specific situation in Serbia in terms of poverty in the society, low percentage of employment when it comes to young people and challenges that young people face in the process of transition from childhood into adulthood, requires somewhat flexible approach. Thus, the upper borderline of youth is moved to thirty years of age, having in mind that the population is very heterogeneous and is characterized by different development goals in different stages of youth.

Within the stratification of the society, the youth is relatively unique when it comes to:

- the position it has with respect to social production,
- participation in the system of social power,
- specific features of its psychological-moral profile.

Basic common characteristics of the social status of young people are:

- status inferiority, i.e. marginal social status, as a consequence of exclusion of young people from on-going flows of social, economic and political life and work;
- "prolonged youth", i.e. preparation for undertaking social and economic roles of the adults, so called "mature generations" and thus dependent status when it comes to family and society.

Furthermore, youth is neither complete nor homogeneous formation in social, ideological or political sense. Youth is observed as "a contradictory generation structure", within which there are prominent differences based on different position in the social structure.

Specific features of the Republic of Serbia are reflected in radical system changes, i.e. postsocialist transformation (transition), representing highly multidimensional process, which equally contains economic, political and cultural subsystem of global society, whereas in the terms of everyday life, it penetrates life conditions of both groups and individuals, redefines their relationships, changes their behaviour, expectations and perspectives. Society in Serbia is significantly characterized by the processes of (self)destruction, which in some fields of social reality reached the phase in which is justified to speak of destroyed society. Identity crisis, psychological burden, lack of perspective, economic dependence due to unemployment, destruction of the system of values represent consequences which are closely connected with social, economic, cultural and historical situation in Serbian society. State of social destruction, which arises as a consequence of catastrophic social events (civil wars, collapse of economic system, decline of social activities and institutions, disintegration of values...) struck different social aggregates and groups with different intensity [13].

Catastrophic social events do not share the same dimension, thus, they are not homogeneous. These events are marked by very deep splits: modern trends versus anti-modern trends;

the past versus the future; authoritarian regime versus democracy; traditional way of thinking versus rational one; ethnic country versus civil country. Young people are the first who react to social changes and turns and they are the first to suffer consequences of these changes, and according to numerous authors, youth represents one of the most vulnerable groups in the transition process.

All the above mentioned circumstances prevent young people from being included in social flows and activism, as the main driving force, does not have critical intensity which can start changes in order to improve living conditions.

3. Activism of young people

Active involvement of young people in solving problems of their local community and all other problems universal for all people and climates, like environmental issues, is significant not only for their healthy growing up, but also for more successful and high grade functioning of every society.

Activism is a term which signifies voluntary culture of political participation on different levels, whether it is a struggle around concrete and local issues or whether it is a global criticism of social and political systems. Social activist movements are the expressions of collective aspirations of both groups and individuals, but they are also bearers of social change in the industrial society. Consumer culture, relationship between the man and the nature, relations between people themselves based on differences, establishment of modern industrial state- all these things have become main topics for struggle in global- societal field.

Activism, generally observed (as well as concrete forms of activism) have their foundation in value orientation which questions whether it is or it is not good to get involved either for oneself or for the others. As absurd as the situation may be, in which the value is being questioned whether it is or it is not good to make effort for oneself, certain social circumstances and characteristics of an individual very often lead to fatalism, which is reflected in the standpoint that "whatever we do, someone/something else decides on our behalf". Situation can get even more drastic when it comes to activism directed to improvement of the position of the others, to solidarity and altruism. Activism as the value orientation is a very complex phenomenon, consisting of at least two aspects: activism as a desirable manner of behavior in the process of satisfaction of interests and the needs of the others (which is based on altruism or "philanthropy") and activism as the manner of behavior directed to satisfaction of personal interests and needs (based on egoism or "selfishness") [14].

There are various forms of activism directed to certain social problems like economic activism (boycotts, strikes), lobbying, media activism (internet activism, hactivism, independent media), propaganda, non-violent confrontation, violent confrontation (riots, even terrorism), youth activism (students' protests), demonstrations, petitions, so-called "civil disobedience", etc. There are numerous examples of the actions which provoked the public to start thinking, arose ethical considerations, questioned the legitimacy of the

authorities and created social climate that influenced politicians and decision makers to change their decisions. And these were successful because they were started and realized by enthusiasm, optimism, experience and good will.

3.1 Voluntary work as the foundation of activism

Voluntary work is the very basis of activism. Global environmental organizations like Greenpeace, Friends of The Earth, Amnesty International, World Wildlife Fund, PETA, Human Rights Watch, etc. are supported by millions of volunteers. There are various interpretations and comprehensions of voluntary work and they are very closely related to tradition, cultural circumstances and social context of the certain country. Voluntary work through active inclusion into society, with the purpose of proactive initiation of the changes in the society, is most often related to active participation in political, non-profit organizations, informal civil initiatives and interest groups.

Voluntary work is one of the foundation stones of the civilized society, because it revives most noble aspirations of the mankind- support for peace, freedom, possibility of choice, safety and justice for all people. Voluntary engagement, i.e. voluntary and free work on behalf of the others or for general good is very important for solving many problems existing in every community, as well as for strengthening of solidarity between members of the community. Voluntary work, as a form of civil activism brings out the best in people, changes people's awareness, improves quality of living and develops tolerance. Voluntary work is not only beneficial for the ultimate users of that work, but also for volunteers, who gain new experiences and feel useful, which is the most important thing of all.

In modern society the importance of such engagement is also observed from the aspect of contribution to economic development, decrease of poverty, peace building and overcoming critical situations, help in case of natural disasters, protection of the environment, etc. It is estimated that there are around 420 million volunteers all over the world. In developed countries, volunteers are mostly unemployed and retired people.

Voluntary work has different forms and meanings, depending on the environment and it is under great influence of history, politics, religion and culture of the certain region. Still, it is possible to determine some crucial characteristics of what defines each voluntary activity. Common denominators of voluntary work are:

- work free of charge,
- voluntary work,
- time-limited work (defined number of engagement hours)
- work directed to realization of other people's welfare (help directed to people that volunteer is not blood related to),
- organized work.

3.2 Youth activism

Youth activism represents the voice of the young people, gathered around the common idea of making a social

change. Worldwide, there are young people working as activists, coordinators, researchers, teachers, reporters, social workers in peace movements, environmental, humanitarian and educational organizations, societies for protection of animals, protection of the human rights, various antiracist, antihomophobic, pheminist, anarchist groups, political offspring, etc.

4. Young people and the environment

Young people have special worries and special responsibilities towards the environment. The number environmental risks and dangers disproportionately affect young people who have to live longer despite the deterioration of the environment caused by previous generations. These are the reasons why young people will be forced to get involved in the new manner and in the new forms of activism, which will generate efficient answers to newly arisen environmental challenges [15].

It is evident that young people represent a great part of world population. They, as well as little children, are especially sensitive to environmental risks, like access to potable water, for example. Besides, young people will have to live longer and with consequences of on going environmental decisions. Future generations will also be affected by these decisions, as well as the way that present generations showed their concern in tackling issues like exhaustion of the resources, loss of biodiversity and radioactive waste at present.

Environmental education is one of the best ways to prepare young people for facing growing environmental problems of the planet Earth. This environmental education pressingly implies not only giving information and knowledge on how burdened and disturbed global ecosystems are on the verge of collapse, but also the guidelines, knowledge and skills for overcoming the environmental consequences caused by action of the human civilization. Besides the fact that they have greater part in distant future, young people are very well situated to promote environmental awareness, simply because they often have better access to information than elder people. Partly, this is the point which should be more exposed through environmental education in schools, at least in developed countries, or even sporadically somewhere else. Apart from exposure in formal education, young people live their lives in the era in which environmental protection has great influence. The foundation against the ecological way of thinking and behavior is not rooted within young people and thus they can introduce new ideas and views of the problems.

Environmental education represents the understanding of the problems of global environmentalization of the material and spiritual activities of the society, and as an individual field it appears at the end of the 60's of the previous century. It roots from the beginning of the 20th century, with the appearance of the three movements, whose influence can be felt even today. These are: knowledge of the nature, preservation of education and the outdoor education. These scientific disciplines contributed to further development of the environmental education, which puts a special accent on social dimension of the environmental problems, in view of

the fact that it is focused on making a population which possesses awareness, behavior, knowledge, skills and motivation needed for solving environmental problems. That is why environmental education implies preference of the new life style, new ethical and cultural values, new free and personal responsibilities. The fact is that education itself cannot successfully overcome all the problems our environment faces today, but it can contribute to their solving.

Environmental education has a very important role in promoting the environmental protection (chapter 25 of the Agenda 21 deals with this problem) [16]. Environmental education of young people enables necessary synthesis of knowledge whose aim is to protect and improve the environment. Through the planned educational system, the environmental knowledge is developed, the knowledge of basic characteristics of the environment and ways of preserving and improving the environment, as well as the knowledge of basic environmental issues of the modern society. Environmental education must also point to increasing degradation of the environment. Thus, this kind of education implies the necessity of rational usage of natural resources, getting informed of the facts in regard with the environment, as well as improving and raising the awareness of young people when it comes to environment and its preservation.

Main goal of the environmental education is creation of opportunities for individuals, organizations and communities to take the actions which will be focused on environmental protection. The UN defined the period between 2005 to 2014. as a decade of Education for sustainable development. The aim is to implement the concept of sustainable development in educational processes worldwide and on all levels and forms of education.

Environmental education and forming of environmental way of thinking with the young people begins in the early childhood, hence the very important role of educational organizations on all levels of knowledge acquirement (elementary schools, high schools and universities). The task of upbringing and education is knowledge acquirement, so that future generations who are included in solving environmental problems, possess systemized knowledge of temporary environmental problems, character and the essence of endangered environment and the ways of eliminating negative consequences of the disturbed environmental balance [17].

5. Conclusion

The environment provides numerous goods and services necessary for survival of humanity and preservation of the mankind [18], [19]. Keeping with this, the integration of ecology into general development, according to the principles of sustainable development, is an obvious necessity, with a special accent on the category of young people, having in mind that the future lies with them. *"To care about sustainable development means to accept responsibility for the well-being of future generations and also of our habitat, of our planet. An affirmative attitude towards sustainability has to be an integral part of the moral*

foundation of our activities and of your lifestyle. This means that promoting sustainable development must be an important aspect of the educational agenda at all levels.” (Professor Konrad Osterwalder, PhD; Under Secretary General of the UN Rector of the United Nations University, Osterwalder 2009).

Despite the proportion of the issues of informing and participation of the public in the Laws of the Republic of Serbia, lack of bylaws and ignorance of the citizens, the participation of the public in decision making is on a very low level. This goes together with inadequately proportioned of both formal and informal environmental education, its protection and sustainable development.

These are the reasons why it is necessary to include the category of young people in the field of protection of the environment and strengthening their activism on the local level and municipality level, having in mind that youth represents significant part of the population in the sustainable development issues, as well as "the resource" for supporting the changes of the present communities on their way to becoming sustainable communities.

Today's youth is directly struck with consequences of the behavior of the previous generations and inherited polluted environment. Also, youth represents a group of population which can be influenced more easily when it comes to accepting new patterns of behavior which are in accordance with the basic postulates and principles of sustainable development.

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