

Youth, university education: An emblematic “meeting” for sustainable development

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Abstract

Peace is a requirement for human and environmental protection, a binding yearning for sustainable development that is strongly threatened by wars and eco-social injustices. Among these threats, climate change affects the new generations most predominantly and the most vulnerable people, increasing the risk of conflicts and long-term inequalities. As such, the challenge of young people has been dubbed by them as a “climate war”. With the use of a militant and military term for what they consider the battle of their generation, alongside incontestable scientific evidences, they aim to provoke political institutions to accelerate the ecological transition. The article highlights how behind this Youth crusade and to fight against the catastrophic outlook foresaw by experts, there is the need to give life to training ecosystems oriented to the value dimension of fraternity. The contribution appeals to the University, among other training agencies, to form fraternal generations in every area of life and work. No ecological transition will be possible without developing a sensitivity that integrates attention to the environmental sustainability with both civic and solidary concerns. The consequence to omit such concerns would lead to individualistic and functional paradigms in the green field.

Keywords: Youth; sustainable development; education; fraternity.

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1. Educate for encounter, a human project for sustainable development

We are currently going through a global, energetic and ecological transition – marked by the Covid-19 pandemic, by the advent of new wars, not only in Eastern Europe, and by the harmful consequences of climate change – that concern the entire globe and its population but also carries with it the hope of creating a peaceful world society: «It is a question of holding together the

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dynamics of sustainability and solidarity, of development and equity» in a peaceful path that is built incessantly, a common path, a patient research work (Malavasi, 2020, p. 8-9). As stated by the 2002 Johannesburg Declaration (United Nations), in the commitment to sustainable development it is necessary to appeal to constructive partnerships for change and to enrich “our rich diversity which is our collective strength” by mobilizing it in a perspective of mutualism and cooperation. «Recognizing the importance of building human solidarity, we urge the promotion of dialogue and cooperation between the people and societies of the world, regardless of race, religion, language, culture, tradition and ability» (p. 3). Today, *educating the new generations to congregate* is a political-pedagogical responsibility for a human project of sustainable development that recognizes the value of planetary interdependent living, to be capitalized on belonging to the Homeland Earth (Morin, 1994) and to undergo the so-called ecological transition with the least amount of friction.

Such transition, which oppose an extractive economy (Zamagni, 2021) that destroys biodiversity year after year and increases social inequalities, requires a socio-cultural metamorphosis. This (r)evolution needs to occur within the communities and the territories whilst being grounded and adapted to the local culture. As such creativity is a prerequisite of the needed transformation processes.

«We need to plan a transition, or rather, multiple transitions towards ever greater social, economic, cultural, ecological and environmental sustainability. We can still move and make different, better choices and actions, to find a new balance and “make peace with the Earth”. Making peace with the Earth presupposes making peace with ourselves, with others who are different from us. This situation can be conceived as an opportunity to raise the levels of solidary community and to invest more in social inclusion» (Prisco, 2021, p. 162).

This historical liminal time can then be an open window of authentic human opportunities, inaugurating an unprecedented cycle in the way of facing challenges, transforming the “end of the world” into the “end of a world” (Giaccardi, Magatti, 2020).

A topic often overlooked and underestimated, in the almost pragmatic way of considering and addressing current challenges – from the economic crisis to climate change, from immigration to international geopolitics –, is the *human* one, which is pivotal, identifiable and the pedagogical core of multiform demand for sustainability that is today rising in our society (Sandrini, 2020). In relation to these challenges, the sense and value of the human (Francesco, 2021) should be central while educating people, specifically in regard to the dramatic rupture that occurred in our society at four levels of personal balance: (i) the inner self, (ii) solidarity with others, (iii) nature with all living beings, (iv) the

spirituality with God. It is the person in his integrity, as an individual and as a human community, the first and last unitary text (Malavasi, 2008, p. 210).

The menaces of war or war itself, breaking of international treaties, energy and nuclear threats, social hatred, a culture of waste, the impacts of climate change on populations, economic discrimination, are all symptoms of the human being distanced from its authentically relational nature and the breakdown of its balance: the person is a thing among things if he does not consider others; to reach happiness, to foster his development and is devoted of joyful compassion.

However, youth movements for sustainability, solidary communities during a pandemic, international cooperation in times of war, sobriety in domestic consumption, political alliances for ecological transition and humanitarian reception are courageous attempts to put cultural paradigms and socio-economic models back to *the value of relationships at the centre as well as putting forward the shared care of the “common home”*.

These examples reinforce the need to invest in and rediscover the formative-pedagogical responsibility towards each and every one, “no one excluded” as proposed by the UN Agenda 2030 (United Nations, 2015), in particular with regard to the new generations, encompassing in the concept of sustainable development the idea of the future.

The encyclical *Laudato si’* written by Pope Francis in 2015 appealed precisely to the education of people to develop an ecological citizenship. The Global Compact on Education initiative has launched and developed such initiative.

«There is a need to join efforts in a broad educational alliance to form mature people, capable of overcoming fragmentation and contradictions whilst being able to rebuild the fabric of relationships for a more fraternal humanity. [...] Every change, however, needs an educational journey that involves everyone. For this, it is necessary to build an education village [...] an alliance between the inhabitants of the Earth and the common home, to which we owe care and respect» (Francesco, 2019).

How to support, with an *educational and training agenda*, this transformation among the new generations to enable a future scenario with a positive and uplifting outcome?

To this end, it is essential to promote an *ecological citizenship* that appeals to the educational achievement of the desired freedom, for a pedagogical reflection, in the human sense: every young person and every person who experiences a profound inner emancipation acquires greater sensitivity towards their own poverty, of others and of the Earth. He/She investigates the beauty and the good, personally promotes their local and global vitality. It shuns the fragmentation of reality, freeing itself from material and immaterial ties,

simplifying its existence. He/She does not feel disoriented or threatened in the face of diversity, on the contrary he/she tries to live together “under one Sky” and “on one Earth”.

Education can kindle this inner spark of *gratitude* in people.

«Educational systems centred on “well-being” and “well-becoming” ‘conver’ anonymous subjects into free, unique agents, capable of aspiring to a dignified existence worth living with other free and different agents, in a participatory, inclusive and generative perspective of positive differences; not selective and homologating in the output profiles» (Santi, 2019, pp. 89-90).

For this reason, the Pope’s appeal to pay attention to the education of the new generations is crucial: ensure that every boy and girl has the *educational opportunity* to refine his or her ecological sensitivity, so that the educational openness of each young person expresses itself accordingly. This development must be embedded within the processes of socio-economic and environmental renewal of the communities in which he/she lives and works, in the name of equity. *Relational quality* shall be placed at the centre of the educational commitment of the Youth, so that it can be encountered together in the educational path of personal growth and known intimately, whilst being pursued with creativity and in line with the development of society. The human family, «is a fragile and complex experience – and therefore rich – which involves not ideas, but people» (Francesco, 2016).

In the name of sustainable development, a shared environment can become a choral communion of intentions around which pedagogists accompany the educational experience of young people at the university, within training courses full of content, motivation and meaning (Simeone, 2012) from not only a scientific but also human point of view: for those who design – professors, researchers and administrative staff – university education is a chance, because it constantly offers the possibility of reinvigorating hope in the future through active contribution of the new generations.

University education and pedagogical planning represent an emblematic opportunity for an authentic, lasting, creative and responsible *engagement* of the youth for a sustainable future through multiple experiences. In this context, the sustainability becomes a territory for dialogues within the university perimeter, told with scientific data and lived words, ignited in understanding and desire, guided by encounters. The University becomes an *educational village* to experience open and reciprocal relationships, with both human and scientific collaborations. Daily, in collaboration with the professors, students imagine, develop and study new sustainable models, fostering new skills. Aiming for ecological citizenship requires the dedication of the University to

guide the education of young people as well as to provide the means to achieve it.

The invitation for an education's commitment that can be addressed to all schools, educational agencies and in particular to universities, so that they are proficient on how to introduce the *topic* of sustainability including a "human" sense at every level of learning, convert courses and paths carefully and ensuring a growth to address the decisive challenge of the century with the aim of achieving a sustainable development by balancing social, economic and environmental assessments. A responsibility that extends beyond 'typical' centres of education to include companies, organizations, institutions: it is necessary to create an *enabling training ecosystem* for young people (Ellerani, 2017), which promotes attitudes and skills that create that circularity in society and safeguard the planet's raw materials, but also favour the enhancement of everyone's talents for the common good and construction of just institutions. The hope is that, in the future, it will no longer be necessary to specify some types of work and profession with the term *green*, since everything will turn to respect for the Earth and a community project of peace.

As the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart and specifically through the activities of the Alta Scuola per l'Ambiente (ASA), youth commitment is promoted with most actual topics of sustainability, through teaching, research and university's third mission activities: students are brought to the attention of the current issues such as the 2030 UN Agenda for Sustainable Development and its seventeen socio-economic objectives, the European Green Deal, the Horizon Europe research plan, the Italian National Recovery and Resilience Plan. The knowledge, both professional and personal, comes from working and studying in a multidisciplinary *hub*, among young undergraduates and graduates, doctoral students, researchers, professors, and experts from the profit and non-profit organisations which are all animated by a passion for sustainability. This makes Alta Scuola per l'Ambiente, a university centre that contributes to a *transition that is both green and humane*. This is achieved by exploring broad scientific themes in a multi-voiced dialogue; by believing in the values of planetary solidarity, social equity and respect for the Earth; by cultivating the relations with who we work to interpret and implement the ecological transition.

Designing a quality education (SDG4) at university level then means interacting with the complexity of reality by identifying training paths that enable to encompass youth creativity, mixing fields of investigation, challenging the human in every disciplinary perspective, connecting the future professionals and citizens already in the learning phase, proposing concrete projects of collaboration with the local territory and orienting the construction of knowledge towards objectives of the common good. Young people carry

with them a development potential that coincides with the general interest and the good of all (Margiotta, 2017).

2. Competences for Fraternal generations, the importance of educational systems

Regarding the contribution that the new generations can offer for socio-cultural renewal and ecological transition, it is necessary to recognize that the direction of our current efforts to redefine development and promote sustainability was already widely outlined in the twenty-seven principles expressed in the Rio Declaration of the United Nations (UNCED, 1992). Today, the principles have grown to thirty, among which the followings are most required in this time: the search for lifestyles, production and consumption in harmony with nature, attention to generations to come, the indispensability fight against poverty, the participation of all in public life, the importance of the role of women, young people and local communities, international cooperation and peace as guarantees of human and environmental protection.

If in 1992, the way and the horizon of sustainable development were so well outlined, what prevented society from trying to reach it? The question is implicitly provocative and emerge from the reflections and questions posed to the international political world by youth movements fighting for sustainability and for the environment. The Youth brings with it a humanity that is a driving force for a transformative change that cannot be written down.

The question may suggest varied answers related to the numerous disciplines and fields of investigation on which the University works. These investigations help to understand the past and contribute to the design of the future. Reflecting on this question, one of the answers can be that the individual and socio-cultural paradigm that in recent decades has influenced the multiple spheres of the Western life and its material culture has created a high barrier to change – from work to free time, from mobility to tourism, from eating to dressing – or that the *common goods* have been discredited in favour of maximizing private and public goods. The ecosystem, the air, the water, the soil, the climate, health, democracy and education are common goods, which to be preserved for the benefit of each and every one, require societies and people to be engaged in relationships of reciprocity.

The demand by the Youth can be assumed “genuine” in its vigour. It also demonstrates that new generations are ready to put sustainability at the centre of their life, profession and community choices. The concept of sustainability is taken up and interpreted with a wide perspective by the Youth, with the many objections connected from all over the planet linked to global warming,

deforestation, climate migration, exploitation of natural capital, loss of biodiversity, the inequality in the quality of life, the throwaway culture, the excess of useful relations in contemporary society. Young people are to be thanked for where and how they direct their gaze and ambitions. Today, they express both a significant depth and a broad view to address sustainability, with a vital innovative drive.

In this field, climate change is viewed as the “War” for the new generations. In discussion with university students, the word “war” is often pronounced and where the past “militant” actions are exposed especially in the struggle against time that is said to offer less than ten years to avoid falling into a catastrophic future due to the tropicalization of the climate. Science, for them, is entirely in the battle as it is recognised for its credibility. Experts have outlined the scenarios whereby, heat waves, river floods, storm surges, droughts, loss of vital ecosystem services such as food supply, famine, are expected to occur more frequently and disclosed with great analytical depth by reliable sources such as the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (2014; 2018). Those reports are read and valued by young people.

The scientific data are accompanied with appeals that contains a strong human accent, which originate from all parts of society and ask to pay attention, in eco-social justice perspective, to who will pay the most for the damage of these environmental impacts (Sandrini, 2019). Those are precisely the new generations and the most vulnerable of society, exposed to the various forms of poverty that afflict our coexistence.

This challenge that young people are facing, which they defined as a war, has another prospect of engagement, one that is paradoxically opposite to this military term: *fraternity*. Pope Francis (2019) is a voice in the human and cultural landscape of the millennium who urges us to understand fraternity in its depth, and the need of an educational journey since it can neither be promulgated nor imposed.

Meetings and discussions on the care of our common home is to build horizons capable of converging in unity. Those that creatively integrate the openness to others, making the fragility of human reality and the planet one’s own, participating in the local and planetary community, acting together to solve problems, overcome the enmity towards all that is foreign on which fears are often projected, do not give rise to mutual hostility, resist the cruelty of the world, overcome the stickiness and impermeability of indifference, value diversity.

Another voice on the international scene, E. Morin indicated the path of fraternity for human survival (Sandrini, 2021), dedicating one of his latest writings to it (Morin, 2020). For the philosophe, in this critical stage of history, the fundamental problem of humanity is to improve oneself starting from

increasing our capacities for understanding and love, committing oneself to developing oases of fraternity, recognizing the equality of rights and full humanity to every person but also the inseparability of unity and human diversity. Since fraternity is fragile, it must become the path of human adventure towards horizons of peace.

The culture of fraternity commands young people to be committed to service and “good” care for the other in the communities in which they live (Bornatici, 2020). They must also embrace the passion of relationships, understand it as enjoyable and loving but also as suffering and labor associated with the complicity brought with it, so that *social cohesion* is achieved for the most: «For three years, he had been planting trees in solitude. He had planted a hundred thousand. Twenty thousand had sprung out of a hundred thousand. Of those twenty thousand, he expected to still lose half, due to rodents or all that is unpredictable in the design of Providence. There remained ten thousand oaks that would have grown in that place where there was nothing before» (Giono, 1996, p. 26). The ecological transition, as an objective of sustainability at the local level, requires active involvement, participation, willingness to discuss, an ability to account for diversified needs of a territory and above all of the most fragile people who live in it. Malavasi (2021, p. 100) reminds us that the expression *sustainable development* designates a renewed interest in the value of the communities and places they inhabit. This extends to the identity of people and cultures, the wealth of entrepreneurial and associative initiatives, the spiritual resources and intra and intergenerational solidarity. The culture of sustainability represents a kind of *social capital* that indicates the degree of civic cohesion, inter-institutional collaboration, the breadth and depth of solidarity ties.

The perspective of fraternity must also accompany the youth in their employment choices, as work is a dimension of life that represents one of the most representative declinations of their expectation for the future and their full engagement in transforming society.

«*To educate ourselves in the work*, means to outline a good job, *a job that educates*, that is, rich in potential and meaning, to which values and meanings are bestowed. Good work is what allows you to implement skills and creativity or to promote integral human development, increasing work motivation and satisfaction. It means planning and implementing *vital enterprises*, generating social value through the energy of people who work “in” lived relationships, respecting human dignity, in the perspective of the common good» (Vischi, 2020, p. 11).

Today the new generations look with interest to the so-called *green jobs* (Vischi, 2018), all those jobs, new or redeveloped, which contribute to preserving the environment, a large pool of *placements* in various development

sectors, from energy to mobility, from agriculture to tourism, from education to economics, from urban planning to biotechnology, from eco-design to marketing, from fashion to management, from eco-finance to bio-architecture, in research and development. However, it is necessary to help young people to understand how environmental sustainability can never be dissociated from the search for sustainability with a human and social character, on pain of the repetition of individualistic and utilitarian socio-economic paradigms even in the green field, with consequent competitive pressures and multiplication of social inequalities. «There are not two separate crises, one environmental and another social, but a single and complex socio-environmental crisis. The guidelines for the solution require an integral approach to combat poverty, to restore dignity to the excluded and at the same time to take care of nature» (Francesco, 2015, n. 139).

The production of new economic paradigms including, for example, the *circular economy*, in which the new generations will find themselves working, can bring not only environmental but also social benefits if the new market orientations are skillfully intertwined for civic, solidary and fraternal purposes. Paying attention to the development processes of the territories is an example of such new paradigms as much as sharing and participating in values and objectives between stakeholders and organizations; promoting the well-being of communities in terms of offering relational goods; exchanging good practices of social inclusion that reduce the conditions of disadvantage for people in the communities; regenerating cultural paradigms towards new community assets linked to sharing and sobriety. The circular economy is in fact a production and consumption model that is not only *green* for the decarbonisation and saving of natural resources and increase energy efficiency, but is also a *sharing* and *renting economy*, which implies sharing, loan and exchange on the network. (European Parliament, 2021).

In the context of sustainability, the orientation of the new generations towards the assumption of multiple dimensions of value linked to the prospects of life and work and towards multiple and integrated impact indicators, a task strictly connected with university education. This education can find, even in the category of circularity expressed in the economic sphere, the opportunity to teach the human (Malavasi, 2020) as well as to serve peace by disarming the culture of separation, power, indifference and enmity thanks to young people. *To educate fraternal generations, for a human project of sustainable development.*

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