

Young Adults in a Climate Changing World

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Introduction

*It's going to impact the rest of my life; the kinds of decisions I can make, the kind of world I can live in. It's going to augment other social problems which we already have. Our lives are not going to look like our parents' lives, because of climate change.*¹

The young adults of today will mature in a world different to that of their parents'. In the decades ahead, climate change and widespread environmental degradation present the biggest threats to human health, progress and wellbeing, regional peace and security, sustainable livelihoods, and to the overall health and diversity of our planetary ecosystems.² This article considers the future challenges that will be faced by today's young adults in a climate changing world, and more broadly, outlines some of the considerations, particularly for education, that need to be addressed to help prepare young adults for a climate changing world.

There are over 400,000 young adults in Ireland, and as they mature, the implications of changing environmental conditions will mean that their world will face food shortages, regional and international population displacement, new public health threats, land-use pressures, shortages in freshwater supply and drought, and decline in the health of our planet's ecosystems. Here in Ireland, the human impacts of increasingly unpredictable and intense weather events on homes and businesses are already significant. These impacts here and elsewhere are not being evenly distributed; affected most intensely are populations whose vulnerabilities are exposed, and their capacity to respond undermined by social, economic, and geographical inequalities.

The living earth is being exhausted and the gap between rich and poor is widening. These are the consequences of a single crisis that, as highlighted quite clearly by Pope Francis in *Laudato Si'*, is social and environmental, a problem of social injustice and a wider disconnect with our common home, the living earth. Although climate change affects individuals of all ages, young people can expect to bear a particularly heavy burden

because they will face this challenge throughout their lifetimes. The situation of youth in countries greatest exposed to the climate threat is especially fragile.

Understanding the Scale of the Transformation Required

Climate change is one of the defining challenges of our time, in terms of both the societal responses needed to address it, and the means necessary to face its adverse impacts. The non-negotiable nature of climate change places a moral imperative on states to protect the current generation and future citizens from preventable harm. Indeed, while some aspects of climate injustice are well acknowledged in international negotiations and policy frameworks – namely, those who have caused the least harm are most affected and have fewer resources to respond to the impacts – commitment to intergenerational and intragenerational justice is often absent from policy frameworks, or not translated from political discourse into policy formation.³ This is despite sufficient evidence to show that the costs of inaction over the long-term greatly outweigh the costs of taking immediate action.⁴ Today's adult policy makers are making decisions (which can be absent, weak or ambitious on climate action) that will influence the future that young people inherit as they become tomorrow's parents – they will bear the implications of policy responses, or lack thereof, on how we organise ourselves now in a climate changing world.

Although Ireland has a relatively small population size, it is a high emitter of greenhouse gases.⁵ Historically, over the last two decades,⁶ Irish climate policy has suffered from an implementation gap, and failure to take consistent, ambitious action has had consequences for Ireland's international reputation.⁷ Despite ratifying the Paris Agreement in late 2016,⁸ and despite the Programme for Government (2016) acknowledging that 'climate change is the global challenge of our generation, and requires radical and ambitious thinking to respond to a changing environment', Ireland's emissions continue to rise.⁹ The policy objective for 2050 is an 80 per cent reduction in combined emissions from energy, transport and buildings,

and carbon neutrality in agriculture. While the year 2050 may conjure up images of mega smart-cities connected by super highways of flying car-fleets suggesting some far-off science fiction future, 2050 is just over three decades away. Yet, data from 2016 signals that across all sectors of the economy, emissions trajectories are heading in the wrong direction.¹⁰ Ireland is currently falling short on undertaking its fair share of the global effort required to prevent and reduce the risks involved.

As argued strongly by the Climate Change Advisory Council (Ireland's independent advisory body on climate change), and echoed by the Environmental Protection Agency, the extent of social and economic transformation required to achieve Irish policy objectives and international commitments, and help mitigate dangerous climate change globally, is considerable. Both bodies assert that transformational change, long-term planning, a stable policy framework, and concrete policies are now essential across all aspects of Irish society to help shift towards a low carbon future:¹¹



There is no Planet B

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The transformation required across Irish society to meet this objective represents a different and more difficult task than any other area of public policy. The costs of inaction will fall much more heavily on future generations. The current generation in Ireland, and elsewhere, will have to be leaders in transforming the economy and society to halt the rise in global temperature, the most well-known measure of climate change.¹²

The time available for meaningful action to prevent dangerous climate change is quickly diminishing, and despite international scientific and political consensus, along with evidence of the unfolding impacts, the rate of progress on this problem of the global commons remains too slow.¹³ Countries, like Ireland, are threatening the rights of young people here at home, and in countries most affected by climate injustice.¹⁴

The Policy and Educational Challenge

A critical challenge facing policy-makers as they address climate change is that necessary proposals, on their own, may be regressive. In order to be progressive, how can policies be so shaped so as to consider the specific vulnerabilities and needs of certain social groups who will be adversely affected by climate mitigation? As the world moves forward in implementing mitigation and adaptation measures, the combined wisdom and involvement of all individuals, from citizens to policy and scientific experts will be needed. Young people need to be prepared to play a central role within this process; they are the ones who will live to experience the long-term impact of today's crucial decisions.¹⁵ There is evidence to suggest this is already happening; public and political conversations on how to bring about environmental change frequently identify young people as the drivers of change – they constitute the majority of the population in many countries and have increasingly strong social awareness and environmental perspectives.¹⁶

For example, Pope Francis in *Laudato Si'* believes that young people 'demand change [and] wonder how anyone can claim to be building a better future without thinking of the environmental crisis and the sufferings of the excluded' (§13). He goes on to argue that young people in the societies that should be making the greatest change in consumer habits 'have a new ecological sensitivity and a generous spirit', and are 'making admirable efforts to protect the environment' (§209). Here in Ireland, the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and the Environment frequently refers to the role of young people in climate action: meeting young people 'invariably makes me optimistic about how we deal with climate change and our environment',¹⁷ and young people are 'Ireland's Transition Generation - the way [they] live today will have huge effects on future generations.'

Through direct engagement on energy solutions and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), nation-wide initiatives such as the National Dialogue on Climate Action also aim to position young people at the centre of their engagement practices. Because young adults need to be a key stakeholder group in climate policy planning, this focus has its merits.

The challenges of the immediate decades ahead, the positioning of young adults as important players

in environmental change, and the need to prepare young adults for the costs and opportunities of a low carbon world will demand considerable capacity building and engagement. However, this focus on young people cannot be based on a business-as-usual approach. Policy makers need to develop best practices for addressing climate change concerns as highlighted from a youth perspective. This may require identifying the best activities and mechanisms that allow policy makers to authentically engage and work collaboratively with young adults, as well as identifying how best youth-driven projects can help address the compounding vulnerabilities brought about by environmental decline. According to a United Nations report on youth and climate change, access to information is important, as is consultation, involvement in decision-making, and support to help young people collaborate with their peers to mobilise on issues.¹⁸

*What could be more important than the future of our world? As young people, we have the most at stake, so we should be stepping up to our roles as the major stakeholders and stand up for the kind of future we want.*¹⁹

Nevertheless, young people cannot be expected to engage meaningfully in local mitigation or adaptation programmes, policy dialogues with governments or coordinated campaigning, without first being empowered with the necessary education and skills.²⁰ The changes in the world today are characterised by ever increasing complexity and contradiction, as well as new knowledge horizons, and these changes create tensions for which education, learning and awareness-raising must aim to prepare individuals and communities by enabling them with the capability to adapt and respond.²¹ A climate changing world requires the incorporation of new knowledge and practices to chart the course required to build a sustainable future. Young people will need to be empowered, their skills nourished, and the spaces provided to allow them to engage in policy making processes. Formal and informal educational processes will have to equip today's young adults to cope with not only living on a damaged planet, where risks are multiplied by global environmental decline, but also a world that will have to mitigate and adapt to the effects of dangerous climate change through transformative policy measures.

Climate change and the shift towards a low carbon future will affect employment sources and patterns.

Adapting to these changes requires a policy and education model that facilitates 'education for sustainability and enhances employability that can enable young people to enter a low carbon labour market'.²² In attempting to achieve this goal, national skills development and employment policies linked to broader development plans will need to incorporate education for sustainability, with coherent skill strategies to prepare young people for work in a low carbon economy.²³ These considerations have considerable implications for how and what we teach young adults through our educational institutions and more broadly, how our wider communities choose to collectively transition. Education for sustainability is, therefore, critically important. It places teachers and educational institutions, along with formal and informal pedagogical processes, in a decisive position to the current and future wellbeing of the world.²⁴

Goal 13 of the UN Sustainable Development Goals commits member states to take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts through, among other activities, 'improving education, awareness-raising and human and institutional capacity on climate change mitigation, adaptation, impact reduction and early warning'.²⁵ This activity can be closely related to Goal 4 which acknowledges that 'obtaining a quality education is the foundation to improving people's lives and sustainable development'.²⁶ While this Goal is generally understood in terms of equality and access within education, its target also includes the aim of ensuring that 'all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including... through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles', among other objectives. It is worth noting however, that criticisms have been directed at the SDGs as seeking to 'repair the existing global economic model significantly', forging ahead with a business-as-usual approach to sustainable development.²⁷

Here in Ireland, academics, such as Peadar Kirby, draw on the language of *Laudato Si'*, to argue that existing educational trajectories educate young people into a value system which supports and sustains the dominant techno-economic paradigm so frequently criticised in the papal encyclical.²⁸ Acknowledging the changes that must be made between now and 2050, if the human family is to keep within safe planetary boundaries, he contends that the socio-ecological crisis of climate change must dominate the concerns of educators: 'we are

educating young people for a society that is fast disappearing, we are giving them none of the skills they need for the challenges they are going to face'.²⁹

Similar sentiments are expressed by the President of Ireland, Michael D. Higgins. In a recent address for World Philosophy Day 2017, he argued that new ways of thinking are required to meet the challenges of the coming decades: 'in conditions of change it is surely important to have the capacity to generate the questions, listen to the suggestions as to how we might live together sustainably in an ethical way'.³⁰ In terms of responding to environmental change, this requires an educational response that alerts young people to the social and environmental challenges that society faces over the immediate decades, and empowers them with new values, practices, and imaginations for an ecologically challenging, low carbon future. A climate changing world calls for an integral ecological approach to knowledge, learning and education – these processes need to be inclusive, based on a humanistic, integrated approach with renewed ethical and moral foundations.³¹

Perhaps the most radical vision of a way forward is offered by *Laudato Si'*. Quoting Pope Benedict XVI's address at the 2010 World Day of Peace, Pope Francis argues that only a renewed sense of intergenerational solidarity can address the injustices climate change provokes. This needs to move us to a deeper reflection on the meaning and values that will help transform a concern for future generations into a realisation that what is at stake is our own dignity: 'What is the purpose of our life in this world? Why are we here? What is the goal of our work and all our efforts? What need does the earth have of us?'. (§160)

The transformation required is a great educational challenge, and the way forward must offer a distinctive attitude in thinking, lifestyle and spirituality, whereby:

Environmental education should facilitate making the leap towards the transcendent which gives ecological ethics its deepest meaning. It needs educators capable of developing an ethics of ecology, and helping people, through effective pedagogy, to grow in solidarity, responsibility and compassionate care. (§202)

Conclusion

Sustainability and living within the Earth's planetary boundaries has emerged as a central policy and justice concern in the face of climate change, the degradation of vital natural resources, and the loss of biodiversity. With a population of over 400,000 in Ireland, young people are an important group to consider, include, and consult when formulating and implementing policy measures that aim to transition to a low carbon, more ecologically sustainable future. The ecological challenges of our times demand that young people be provided with the opportunities that will give them the skills and knowledge, attitudes and values to respond and participate meaningfully in a climate changing world. This will require not only providing young people with a greater voice by strengthening values-driven learning, engagement and participatory opportunities across the sectors of society that involve young people, but also orienting all the social structures that provide these opportunities towards more ambitious, and transformative climate action.

Notes

1. Hannah Mills, Nova Scotia, quoted on 'Youth to Youth Minister: Climate Change has no place in our Future'. See: <http://peoplesclimate.ca/youth-to-youth-minister/>
2. Barnett, J., and Adger, N. (2007) 'Climate change, human security and violent conflict', *Political Geography*, Vol. 26(6).
3. For example, while Ireland's National Mitigation Plan (July 2017) explicitly states that climate change is 'one of the greatest global challenges for this and future generations' and 'confronting climate change is the global imperative of our generation', the Plan has been criticised by NGOs for failing to give regard to the principle of climate justice, or establish a concrete plan for how Ireland will reduce its emissions over the coming years. See for example: Stop Climate Chaos and Environmental Pillar (2017) *Submission to the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment on the draft National Mitigation Plan (NMP)*. (Available at: https://www.stopclimatechaos.ie/download/pdf/scc_pillar_joint_submission_on_national_mitigation_plan.pdf)
4. In 2006, the landmark Stern Report on the Economics of Climate Change estimated that the cost of inaction could be as much as 20% of global GDP, in comparison to just 1% of GDP for taking climate action. See: Stern (2006) *Stern Review: The Economics of Climate Change*. London: HM Treasury.
5. The largest proportion of emissions come from the agriculture sector (35%), followed by transport (22%) and energy industries (15%) (Environmental Protection Agency. (2017) *Ireland's Greenhouse Gas Emission Projections, 2016-2035*. Wexford: EPA. Available at: http://www.epa.ie/pubs/reports/air/airemissions/ghgprojections/EPA_2017_GHG_Emission_Projections_Summary_Report.pdf)
6. Curtin, J., and Hanrahan, G. (2012) *Why legislate? Designing a Climate Law for Ireland*. Dublin: The Institute of International and European Affairs. Dublin: The Institute of International and European Affairs. (Available at: <http://www.iea.com/publications/why-legislate-designing-aclimate-law-for-ireland>)

