

Implementing Socio-Ecological Transformation with Enthusiasm

About the authors and their positions

We have been involved with *BUNDjugend* (*Young Friends of the Earth Germany*) in both voluntary and full-time positions for many years, and therefore speak mainly for the part of the youth movement shaped and organised by this association. At the same time, we also feel part of the degrowth movement. Katharina Ebinger has been responsible for sufficiency, post-growth and intersectionality on the *BUNDjugend* Federal Board since May 2015. Janna Aljets has been working on critical consumption and post-growth in the *BUNDjugend* Federal Office since 2013, and has also helped to organise degrowth events.

This text is a subjective snapshot of the youth environmental movement and its links to degrowth. We have tried to collect as many current opinions as possible from young environmentalists, while also taking into account the history and diversity of the youth environmental movement.

1. What is the key idea of the Youth Environmental Movement?

The youth environmental movement: A fusion of radical system critique, political actions and ecological day-to-day habits

The German environmental movement is defined by three different tendencies, which still influence its direction to a certain extent today. Many established associations have been shaped on the one hand by traditional naturalists and environmentalists, and on the other by the anti-nuclear and peace movements. It is interesting to note that the founders of youth environmental associations in the 1980s were initially very strongly opposed to the pre-established structures of the environmental movement, as well as those which were being established at that moment.

The origin: Militant youth criticism

In this founding phase, young environmental activists were for the most part a radical and critical voice for independence, the breakdown of hierarchies, and direct political action. Although protecting the environment was a priority for young people, great emphasis was also placed on self-organisation, and freedom from hierarchy and bureaucracy, as well as the rejection of crippled structures of the State and industry. This was initially reflected in a colourful juxtaposition of youth groups, project workshops, environmental concerns in schools, and independent initiatives. The idea was that these spaces should be open to all, work transparently, build consensus, and create networks. In principle, each group was given the freedom to shape its own political actions. In contrast to established environmental associations, the groups' environmental protection and ecological demands

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were combined with a radical critique of the system. According to a statement regarding the *Deutscher Umwelttag von unten* (German Environment Day 'from the bottom up') from September 1992:

'We are assuming, therefore, that capitalism and ecology are not compatible ... High-tech environmental protection does not go far enough, and many more fundamentally different structures are required. ... The environmental movement must go further than lobbying for nature among many other social interest groups. It must not settle for the role ascribed to it by the 'democratic' system. ... Industry and centralism cause mental illness. ... Ecological upheaval in our society must also necessarily include the dismantling of structures of power and dominance.' (see Bergstedt¹ 1998: 132).

This militant criticism of the established economic and social system, and the desire for alternative forms of action and political participation, must be seen as important founding elements of the German youth environmental movement.

Convergence and cooperation

Despite criticism of the rigid, inflexible nature of established environmental associations, political and organisational reorientation soon became reality: many youth groups converged with adult associations, both financially and organisationally, and began to cooperate more closely with them. This was demonstrated, for example, by their adoption of some of the environmental associations' demands (for example, environmental tax reform), and their communication of environmental association topics to young people for discussion in an age-appropriate manner.

This is where the youth environmental movement's specific political and environmental mission to educate was crystallised, a mission which still forms a central part of its identity today: through workshops, actions and meetings, young people should be taught the skills to deal critically with established opinions, develop their own political standpoints, and develop them into actions and projects. Youth associations are therefore also seen as a means for strengthening the voice of young people in politics, society and the economy.

In terms of content, environmental protection, both locally and globally, is at the centre of the youth environmental movement. Based on the interests of the active members, the following topics have been developed: dealing

¹ We are well aware that Jörg Bergstedt is a highly controversial person whose positions we largely reject. We also consider his one-sided discussion of the history of the youth environmental movement to be problematic. Nevertheless, we have used his article to illustrate this part of the history of the youth environmental movement, and to build on this specific perspective. We have supplemented this by talking to people involved in the start-up period of the movement.

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with climate change, the critical examination of renewable energies, the fight against exploitation of natural resources, and the demand for ecological, small-scale farming are important concerns for young activists. For many years, these topics have also been discussed from the perspective of global justice, and are thus linked to discourse about critical development policy. At the beginning of the noughties, the paradigm of sustainable development replaced the 'classic' concept of nature and environmental protection, thus opening up holistic perspectives which increasingly take into account social components –in particular in the area of *education for sustainable development (ESD)*. This is reflected in many specific projects, such as the *WELTbewusst* (WORLD-aware) critical consumption urban walks for school classes.

Individual sufficiency as a contribution to climate protection

In recent years, another major focus has been added. For young environmental activists, the question of how they themselves can live on this planet in a sustainable and climate-friendly manner is key. They question the established, resource-intensive, environmentally harmful lifestyles of society, and put ecological alternatives to the test. They are vegan, restrict their travel to the local region, and exchange and share consumer goods. They openly criticise the prevailing materialistic consumer culture, and see themselves as ecological role models, especially for older generations.

The youth environmental movement currently feels a strong identification with this personal approach applied to members' own lives. To what extent this causes the de-politicisation and 'taming' of young people is not easy to answer without ambivalence. Especially in the fruitful cooperation with degrowth activists, we see great potential to politicise current issues and concerns, and thus to return to the roots of the youth environmental movement.

2. Who is part of the Youth Environmental Movement, what do they do?

The activists: Grassroots-democratic, committed, highly educated, and white

The current youth environment movement, which emerged from resistance to established environmental associations, includes those under the age of thirty. They have retained their historical claim to a grassroots form of organisation and functioning. *BUNDjugend*, *Naturschutzjugend* (Youth Association for the Protection of Nature), *Naturfreundejugend* (German Young Friends of Nature), and *Deutsche Jugendbund für Naturbeobachtung* (German Youth Society for Nature Observation) are all still formally run as grassroots organisations.

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Structural boundaries and possibilities

Positions, procedures and topics are discussed and exchanged intensively between the state and federal levels, as well as between full-time and voluntary members. This also makes these groups very different from international youth organisations such as *WWF Jugend* (WWF Germany's Youth Programme) and *Greenpeace Youth*, which are much more hierarchical. The federal structure is also centralised, with both regional and federal associations, which on the one hand allow for regional foci and forms of action, but on the other require centralised –and often slow and laborious– decision-making and change processes. Also, due to the federal structure, it is very difficult to form an unambiguous picture of the youth environmental movement. The regular debates and tensions evident in youth environmental organisations are mainly the result of the relationship between professional full-time officials on the one side and passionately committed volunteers on the other.

Due to the great diversity of topics surrounding environmental protection and sustainable development, activists in the youth environmental movement are generally involved at many levels of society, bringing their ecological concerns to the table in a range of economic, political and scientific processes. In addition, international networking (e.g. *Young Friends of the Earth*) is playing an increasingly important role, as many environmental problems are also addressed and discussed in their global dimension, and strategic alliances are both meaningful and necessary in order to act with sufficient political impact.

Basis for the formation of political will and political demands

Strategically, the work of the youth environmental movement can be divided into two areas. The first area of focus is education and politicisation, where the aim is to raise awareness of environmental problems among the general public, and to sensitise people to necessary changes. In this context, the educational mission of the youth environmental movement is primarily aimed at individual options for action, while simultaneously aiming for long-term empowerment and enabling young people to become political actors. They learn skills and competences to make their own lives more environmentally friendly, and to convince others to do the same.

The second area of focus is political lobbying and campaigning, which is regarded as very important in the internal context. The movement seeks to create structures and framework conditions which enable alternative, sustainable lifestyles. This is publicised at irregular intervals through demonstrations, campaigns and information drives.

Blind spots and gaps in the movement

The youth environment movement is finding itself increasingly confronted

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with social issues, as it is forced to realise that certain environmentally friendly practices are available to only a few privileged groups in our society. This problem reflects a partial blind spot of the movement, which is mainly due to the composition of its activists. Like the adult associations, the youth environmental movement is strongly influenced by the *white*², educationally privileged sector of German society. The majority of activists come from academic homes and/or go to university themselves. In addition, there are few activists with migration backgrounds; and this perspective is thus insufficiently represented, both strategically and politically, in the environmental movement. In contrast to the adult associations, this latter point is continually scrutinised and discussed by the youth associations, which at least points to an openness and a certain sensitivity to this problem. However, the path towards an intersectional³ understanding of youth environmental work remains an arduous one.

3. How do you see the relationship between the Youth Environmental Movement and Degrowth?

Post-growth, sufficiency, transformation? Degrowth!

In addition to climate, energy and agriculture, over the past decade degrowth (initially referred to as post-growth) has become a cross-sectoral issue for the youth environmental movement. The fact that infinite growth is not possible on a finite planet has become a truism. The criticism of environmental destruction has been linked with a rejection of the existing economic system, which depends on the unlimited exploitation of natural and human resources, and which places financial profit above the common good. Environmentally-minded young people are interested in systemic issues, and criticise a system of growth and competition that functions at the expense of people and the environment. Although the movement's activities are primarily environmentally motivated, criticism and forms of action are increasingly focused on tackling the underlying causes. *BUNDjugend*, as well as many other youth environmental associations, thus shares the values of many civic organisations arguing for comprehensive social change. It is therefore no coincidence that *BUNDjugend* has helped to found *Attac*, a network critical of the globalisation process. Today, many workshops, actions and projects revolving around the socio-ecological transformation of the economy, politics and society are organised under the banner of post-

² We consciously define the concept of *white* as a political category in italics, in order to indicate that it is a privileged position characterised by structural injustice between whites and 'blacks' or 'people of colour'.

³ Intersectionality describes the overlapping of multiple forms of discrimination. In contrast to a pure summation of discrimination, the focus here is on the specific discriminatory experiences which can arise through the interaction of, for example, racism, sexism, disability discrimination and/or classism.

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growth and degrowth.

Sufficiency in everyday life

To us, the topic of sufficiency and the question of how everyone can have enough appears to be one of the central interfaces between the German degrowth movement and the youth environmental movement. Young environmental activists place great emphasis on personal sufficiency, and demonstrate as far as possible how sufficiency can be implemented in everyday life. They question the prevailing logic of forever-higher-faster-further-more, and derive great pleasure from energy saving, climate control, sharing, gifting, and rejecting packaging. They are pioneers of a consistently ecological and sustainable lifestyle, and demand that this be made accessible to others as well. They have recognised that the lifestyle in industrialised countries can only be achieved at the expense of the environment, nature and people in the Global South, and that their generation's environmental footprint will fall on the shoulders of the following generation. Thus, in the form of personal and societal sufficiency, they see a strategy with the potential to reduce the impact of ecological crises, and which allows them to become directly active themselves.

Degrowth as an ideological reference

Historically, the youth environmental movement may have gone off the path of a militant critique of capitalism, preferring instead cooperative and reformist strategies. But even here, no single uniform picture can be formed. While some may impartially champion a systemic change through a smart mob (a flash mob with a political message) or a critical-mass bike convoy, others may seek existing solutions, preferring to start a repair café. In our opinion, both forms of political critique can be equally found in the German degrowth movement.

The emerging tendency towards degrowth and the debate surrounding it acts like a new umbrella under which the youth environmental movement can also be grouped. Here, activists recognise the overlaps and similarities with other movements, initiatives and projects, and are able to place their own concerns within a larger framework. In addition, this also happens in a much less complicated way than in the adult associations. Finally, most young environmental activists are convinced that major social and environmental restructuring is necessary. There are already countless examples of successful cooperation with other organisations (e.g. *Konzeptwerk Neue Ökonomie*⁴ and *fairbindung*⁵), initiatives (e.g. repair cafés and urban gardens), and individuals forming part of the degrowth movement.

In the youth environmental movement, the debate surrounding degrowth is

⁴ Roughly 'Laboratory for New Economic Ideas'

⁵ Literally 'fair connection' or 'fair bond'

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seen as an enrichment, and we hope that the link between the two remains fruitful. In our opinion, both can learn a lot from each other ...

4. Which suggestions do they have to each other?

No sufficiency without politics, no politics without sufficiency!

Sufficiency enables individuals to perceive their own effectiveness

In the youth environmental movement, degrowth/post-growth is often equated with the strategy of sufficiency. First of all, it acts as a placeholder for questions about the extent to which there is a need for further discussion, especially at the political level. The focus of attention is leading a sufficient life at the personal level, because young environmentalists feel a great need for direct effectiveness. Anyone who is able to change their own eating habits, travel, or consumer behaviour to be more environmentally friendly and sustainable, immediately learns that some things can be changed in the here and now, even if their true effectiveness is often left unclear. Young people appear to have lost confidence in rapid, effective change at the political level, and adopting a sustainable lifestyle enables them to recapture part of their own effectiveness. While demands at the political level often end in failure or ignorance, a sufficient lifestyle can result in the direct saving of resources, albeit to a limited extent. This personal activism and, above all, the willingness to try out new things and experiment in one's own life, provide many positive examples for demands arising from the degrowth debate.

Change of mentality: Sufficiency as young people's attitude towards life

Young environmental activists demonstrate that a sufficient lifestyle can be fun, enriching their lives and fostering a sense of community. The ideas and ideals of a sustainable degrowth society, seen to a certain extent as utopian by others and criticised for this, are already being lived by these young people. They are role models, pioneers and experimenters, and living proof that social change and a cultural change in outlook are possible. This is especially brought up when discussing the fossilised structures of the adult associations: 'Hey, you adults up there! While you're still debating and throwing around clever words, we've already done it. And you know what? It's easy *and* fun!'

This brings us to a further aspect of why the experience and history of the youth environmental movement can expand the debate around degrowth. Young activists can legitimately represent the youth perspective, and thus speak from a societal point of view which often remains unheard. In many respects, their problems, challenges and perspectives differ greatly from those of established political activists. Due to their age alone, their views of

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current situations and future scenarios are different. Last but not least, the collective experience of the youth environmental movement in asserting itself against established voices offers great added value for supporters of degrowth.

Obstacles: How is sufficiency possible for all?

We do not wish to negate the fact that a socio-environmental transformation of society requires much more than changes to individuals' lifestyles. Not all sustainable options for action are equally available to all people, as the societal and infrastructural environment is an important factor in determining who is able to do what. For example, living in the country without connection to public transport or access to organic food is an obstacle to sustainable living. This is why there is a need for political restructuring and redistribution, which, as far as possible, allows everyone to live a life that is not at the expense of others.

Once again, here the youth environmental movement can learn from the proposals and political demands of the degrowth debate. It is not true that the youth environmental movement has become completely apolitical –just take a look at its long-standing resistance to lignite, which is now also being taken on board by degrowth activists. Nevertheless, where the efficiency of individual decisions reaches its limits, the societal framework must be changed, and here we see great potential in learning from the degrowth movement: Environmental activists can learn which political demands they should address to whom. They can also lend more weight to their own political demands, and connect them to a different, more sustainable way of doing business. On the other hand, the degrowth movement can learn from the youth environmental movement's locations and topics of protest, and thus turn degrowth into something much more concrete than the theoretical debates suggest.

In this sense, there is a partnership between the degrowth and youth environmental movements which strengthens both, and which benefits lobbying in favour of a policy of degrowth. Currently, we see this process as a major challenge for the youth environmental movement in terms of communicating their own sustainable lifestyle to the whole of society. It is up to activists whether this is done in a reformist way through, for example, the construction of bike paths, or whether environmental concerns are linked to a sharp critique of the exploitative structures of the capitalist system. As indicated above, there is enough scope to allow for inspiration within the youth environmental movement, with diverse suggestions to be found in the degrowth debate.

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5. Outlook: Space for visions, suggestions or wishes

Outlook: Back to the roots?

As fertile as the links described here between the youth environmental and degrowth movements are, there is still much to be done in terms of networking and development to enable the two groups to further relate to each other.

The current global and social crises can no longer be solved solely from a thematic perspective. They must be supported by a broad social movement, and by many initiatives, organisations and associations. A socio-ecological transformation wishing to provide a solution to interlinked crises must bring together various emancipatory and social forces. In this situation, the professionalisation and institutionalisation of youth environmental associations can be of practical value, since they have considerable expertise in this field. Nevertheless, existing social movements, including the youth environmental movement, must become more open to different strategic alliances. In addition, stronger cooperation with other movements could at least help to reduce the internal lack of diversity, and the resulting lack of diversity in perspectives.

This requires a departure from the competitive thinking to be found in many areas, and from self-serving organisational logic, which is also evident in the youth environmental movement. While today we are still asking which topics, actions and campaigns are of benefit to an organisation, the question to be posed in the future is: What represents a valuable contribution to socio-ecological transformation? The result may be uncomfortable new strategies, which will also require change from the youth environmental movement.

The degrowth movement shows us that we are no longer merely working on small, step-by-step improvements, but that in our activism we should also keep major change in mind. This attitude requires confidence, pragmatism, and the knowledge that much of what we do along the way will be of an experimental nature. Here, we also want to call on ourselves to think back to our roots, and to reflect on the rebellious spirit of the founders of the youth environmental movement, without neglecting the collective experiences and organisational learning processes gathered in the meantime. The founders of the youth environmental movement were courageous enough to demand systemic change. Did not our predecessors become activists with precisely this intention, because they wanted to break up ossified structures, and to live fair, ecological ideals in the present? All these ideas and demands can be found today in the degrowth movement, as well as in the repoliticised youth environmental movement.

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Links and Literature

Links

Young Friends of the Earth Europe: <http://www.foeeurope.org/yfoee>

“Wachstum ohne Ende?” brochure by BUNDjugend, 2012: <http://www.bundjugend.de/produkt/broschuere-wachstum-ohne-ende/>

Beweggründe cooperative project between BUNDjugend and Naturfreundejugend about the locations of change: <http://beweg-gruende.org/>

Beweggründe – An educational film about socio-ecological transformation, by Naturfreundejugend and BUNDjugend, 2016: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FB27miZ-i-0>

Presentation: “Degrowth, Solidarische Ökonomie und die Gewerkschaften – wie passt das zusammen?” at the SoliKon congress in September 2015 (with Janna Aljets): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8JNyf2l5zKo>

WELTbewusst und WELTbewusst erLEBEN, Traditionsprojekte der BUNDjugend zu Konsumkritik, Globalisierung und Postwachstum: www.weltbewusst.org

Applied as well as further literature

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