

# YOUTH WORK AND CLIMATE CHANGE

## – A follow up on the 2019 Finnish Presidency Council debate and questions about the future

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### 1. THE STUDY AND ITS QUESTIONS

#### *Climate change intensifies*

In August 2021 the ICPP 6th Assessment Report was issued arguing that: "Recent changes in the climate are widespread, rapid, and intensifying, and unprecedented in thousands of years." These changes concern carbon dioxide concentration, sea level rise, Arctic Sea ice melting and glaciers retreat leading to extreme heat, heavy rainfall, drought, fires, ocean warming and biodiversity damage. The Report further specifies that global warming has most dramatically intensified during the last 10 years. "Unless there are immediate, rapid, and large-scale reductions in greenhouse gas emissions, limiting warming to 1.5°C will be beyond reach." According to the Report it is no longer unclear what has caused this: "It is indisputable that human activities are causing climate change, making extreme climate events, including heat waves, heavy rainfall, and droughts, more frequent and severe." The ICPP Report again underlines that immediate measures across societies are urgently needed.

#### *Youth takes action*

Young people have understood this urgency. The most conspicuous action has been the global Fridays for Future (FFF) movement of school students, originated by Greta Thunberg. Students skipped Friday's classes to participate in demonstrations to demand political leaders to take action to prevent climate change and to push the fossil fuel industry to transfer to renewable energy. It started November 2018 and quickly spread across the world. In 20 September 2019 more than 4 500 strikes gathered roughly 4 million protesters, in over 150 countries, perhaps the largest climate strikes in world history. In 2019 altogether about 8 million young people participated in these demonstrations. On Friday 19 March 2021, another global climate strike was much reduced compared to previous years because of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. All this has not arisen from totally out of blue. There is a history of youth climate activism before 2018. Climate activism originated in 1993 and many SDG documents were adopted since the 1972 Stockholm UN Declaration on children and young people as critical and active agents of climate change.

#### *Youth policy starts reflecting climate change – The Finnish EU Presidency debate Nov 2019*

At the time of its EU Presidency in 2019, Finland had already established climate change as the Government's priority, also a key priority for the European Union. The Education, Youth, Culture and Sport Council meeting on 21-22 November 2019 held a policy debate on "*A vision for youth work in Europe – climate change, young people and youth work*". (The discussion paper available at: <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-13398-2019-INIT/en/pdf>). Overall, youth climate action was recognised as important. It was felt that youth work organisations should, and they will be active in reducing climate warming. Due to the time limits, the debate did not allow space to elaborate in more detail what these measures were or should be.

The Special Eurobarometer 513 on Climate Change (2021) showed that 93% of Europeans believe that climate change is a serious problem, including 78% who say it is a "very serious"

problem. For the first time, climate change ranks first as the single most serious problem facing the world as a whole just ahead of poverty, hunger and lack of drinking water and the spread of infectious diseases. Furthermore, 15-24-year-olds are more worried about climate change than any other age group.

The European Climate Pact (9.12.2020 COM(2020)788 final) following the EU Green Deal (2019) focused *“on spreading awareness and supporting action”*. It appreciated the young climate activists, who *“have captured the world’s attention and shaped the discussion on climate change”* and concluded: *“We invite young people to use the Pact to drive systemic and inter-generational change for society as a whole”*. The youth field can also be involved with the implementation of other sectorial action, such as the *Education for Climate Coalition* (An EU initiative December 2020). European Climate Law has received political agreement Spring 2021 awaiting final adoption. To raise its climate change ambition, the Commission presented 14 July 2021 its Fit for 55 -package to cut emissions by at least 55% by 2030.

In this context, Finland with the consent of Portugal as the Spring 2021 EU President found it reasonable to follow up on the Finnish Presidency Council debate on “youth work and climate change”. The aim is to map the current situation in Member States and to profit from their understanding of the possible role of youth work.

#### *The research questions, the data, its representativeness, reliability and validity*

The study is based on a short 3 -page electronic questionnaire with 9 questions. The questions looked at the effects of youth climate activism in the member countries. What kind of visibility has it received, to what extent has it appeared on youth work agendas, how should the society, youth policy and youth work react to it, what are the near-future plans to support youth work climate activities and how should the youth field relate to EU climate policies and practices?

The survey call was signed by the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture, Division for Youth Work and Youth Policy with the consent of Portugal as the President of the Council of EU during the first half of 2021. The call was disseminated 23 May 2021 to the Member States’ representatives of the Council Youth Working Party through the Secretariat of the Council of European Union. By the end of June, after many reminders, 14 responses were received, a response rate of 52%. That means that it is not known to what extent the data exactly represents the entire population of Member State representatives. Geographically the responses were relatively evenly dispersed with also a few bigger Member States. As a result, one should be aware that the percentages presented in this report might not be accurate and should be regarded as rough estimates. They are, however, good enough to raise questions and reflect on the issues studied.

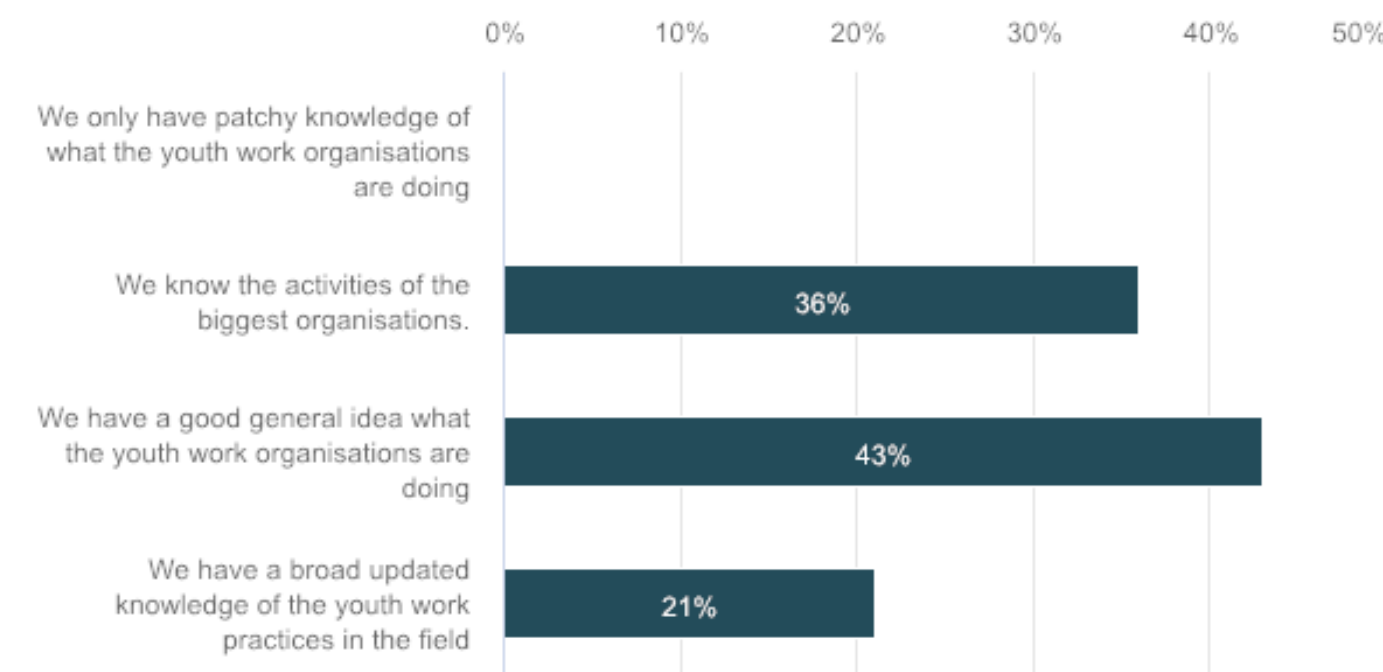
This data has a relatively large non-response share (48%) and small number of responses (14), which both decrease the reliability of the results. The validity is dependent on how precisely the questions and answers refer to what is studied. The questions measure the opinion, approaches and attitudes of the respondents to climate issues in youth work. The respondents, the government representatives, are professional youth policymakers and are expected to properly express themselves in this regard. One source of error could be the “social desirability effect” of surveys. Respondents tend to answer to give a positive, generally desirable image of their attitudes or of their country – instead of providing an honest answer. This can also apply to questions describing realities and practices of youth work or youth policy.

Also, the fact that almost half of the ministerial representatives did not answer a short questionnaire, can be interpreted as information. Maybe those who did not reply felt that youth climate activism and school strikes were not considered relevant, interesting or a proper way of

expressing oneself – something outside the main scope of youth work. Or, perhaps the respondents or the governments did not perceive climate warming as a serious or urgent issue. Whatever the reasons for non-response were, the data probably is underrepresented by those who hesitate to see climate change as a youth field concern or to accept the political urgency around climate warming. Consequently, the amount and share of those who were critical at the significance of climate activism and who regarded it more or less irrelevant to youth work, is more significant than the figures of the survey suggest.

As to the validity of the replies it is essential how well the respondents actually know what their youth work organisations are doing in practice. To explore this, following question was presented:

**Table 1. “Youth work is known for its variety of organisations – voluntary, public and of different sizes - working with young people. How challenging is it for the Ministry to be informed on the diversity of practices in the field? Choose only one option.”**



The most frequent answer was that they have “a good general idea what the youth work organisations are doing” (43%) and at least the activities of the biggest organisations (36%). This fairly good self-reported knowledge of the national youth work increases the confidence in data validity. Respondents know about the reality they are asked about.

It remains unknown whether the social desirability effect has produced sugar-coating in the answers. However, the fact that most (79%) have had the courage to admit that they have not reached the ideal situation of having “broad up-dated knowledge of the youth work practices in the field” suggests the respondents have also been straightforward in answering the other questions.

## 2. HOW HAS CLIMATE CHANGE AFFECTED YOUTH WORK?

Youth work has a fairly long history dating back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It has developed its own theory, approaches, methodology, professional codes, training and curricula. History of youth work in Europe has described, explained and problematized the development of youth work (see the CoE and EU Partnership volumes “The History of Youth Work in Europe”). Some have argued that the field is so intimately linked to its history and well-established working methods that it has had problems to adapt to new challenges (Siurala et al. 2014, CoE, Committee of Ministers Resolution CM/Res(2020)2, 14 & 17). Climate change is a major societal challenge, which also tests the ability of youth work to react and contribute. Is it symptomatic that youth concern of climate

change has taken the form of spectacular youth climate strikes which took place totally outside the established youth work structures?

## 2.1. Has climate change emerged on youth work agendas?

Most, almost two thirds (64%), of the responding government representatives on youth affairs thought that *"Some youth work organisations have taken it on their agenda"* and 36% said *"Many organisations have it on their agenda"* (table 3). By the time of data gathering of this study (summer 2021), climate change seems to be emerging on youth work agendas, but still, it is not yet a mainstream youth work topic. In fact, nobody said that *"Most youth work organisations are working on climate change"*. Further data is needed to know whether this is because NGOs and municipal youth services have not yet related their work to climate change or because they feel that it is not their task to deal with climate issues.

**Table 3. "Considering the novelty of climate change as a topic in youth work, how widely is it taken into account in youth work organisations in your country? Choose only one option."**

	n	Percent
Climate change is not so far seen as a part of youth work	0	0 %
Some youth work organisations have taken it on their agenda	9	64 %
Many youth work organisations have taken it on their agenda	5	36 %
Most youth work organisations are working on climate change	0	0 %

Typically, the respondents thought that climate change has gotten on the agenda of "some youth work organisations", while nobody said that "most youth work organisations" are working on it. The respondents were not asked to specify which the above youth work organisations were or to clarify the exact sources of their replies, but a rough conclusion is that climate change is emerging on the youth work agenda.

The study wanted to elaborate a little further how climate change has appeared on the youth work and youth policy agenda. For this purpose, the respondents were asked to react to following questions:

- Is responding to climate warming a priority?
- Is the government strengthening youth work to face the challenge?
- Have there been development of respective working methods?
- Has there been demand for training?
- Have there been cross-sectoral activities or programs on climate change?

**Table 4. “Has climate change appeared on the youth work and youth policy agenda in your country? To what extent do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements? One answer per line. In my country...”**

In my country...	<u>totally agree</u>	<u>tend to agree</u>	<u>tend to disagree</u>	<u>totally disagree</u>	<u>don't know</u>	N
Youth work has taken climate change as one of their priority	0 %	57 %	29 %	7 %	7 %	14
The government has strengthened the capacity of youth work to respond to climate change	0 %	50 %	29 %	14 %	7 %	14
Youth work methods have been developed to combat climate change	14 %	29 %	14 %	14 %	29 %	14
Youth workers have asked for training in climate change	0 %	21 %	29 %	14 %	36 %	14
There are cross-sectoral projects, activities or programs with young people on climate change on national or local level	36 %	36 %	7 %	0 %	21 %	14

The first finding is that, overall, the respondents were divided into three groups, to those who agreed, disagreed and to those who “don’t know”. For example, the respondents were asked whether “*Youth work methods have been developed to combat climate change*”; 43% agreed, 28% disagreed and 29% did not know. This response pattern suggests two possible interpretations. One is that the different answers mean that Member States are changing with different pace; some states have reacted quickly to climate warming as a challenge to youth work, some are taking their first steps, and some hesitate; they either do not yet know what should be done or they think that youth work has other priorities than combatting climate change. This can be called a ‘*transitory period*’ hypothesis. Another interpretation could be that youth policy makers are more or less permanently divided into two groups; to those who want to integrate climate change into youth work and to those who ignore or even deny climate change. This may be called a ‘*division of perceptions*’ hypothesis. Take as an example the statement “*Youth workers have asked for training in climate change*”. As much as 79% of the respondents said that such inquiries have not been made or they were not aware of them. This can mean that at this early transitory period training need has not yet arrived in most of the Member States, or it can also mean that most are not interested in climate change to the extent that they would need additional training. Further studies are needed to verify and explain the hypotheses.

A second finding is that relatively many reported a variety of activities which indicate emerging interest of youth work in climate change. The most popular answer was to agree that climate change has become a priority (50%), youth work methods have been accordingly developed (43%), the government has strengthened capacity building (50%) and cross-sectoral projects have been carried out (72%). In sum, climate change has emerged in youth work in various forms. Things seem to be happening.

A third finding is the cumulation of responses to “tend to agree” and “tend to disagree” (as indicated by an oval circle in table 4 above). According to this response pattern it seemed to be difficult to “totally agree” or “totally disagree”. According to dictionaries the expression “tend to agree/disagree” can mean three things; first, an experienced probability such as “usually”, “most of the time” or “in general”, second, ambivalence, such as “uncertainty” or “vagueness” and third, a positive or negative inclination such as “favourable/unfavourable disposition”, “support”, “wish” or

“fear”. It would require further analysis to find out to what extent responding “tend to agree/disagree” reflected “probability”, “ambivalence” or “hope/fear” that youth work took action on climate change. Towards this ambiguity it seems understandable that very many (every fifth in average) said they “don’t know”. All this means that we cannot be sure what exactly the respondents have been thinking when they said they “tended to agree/disagree”. It would require further qualitative research to explore this response pattern.

## Conclusions

*Despite the above reservations about the ambiguity of responses, **climate change has appeared on youth work agenda**. In some youth work organisations in some countries it even has become a priority and working methods have been developed. There is indication that some governments have strengthened the capacity of youth work to combat climate warming. Still, very few countries report demand of training needs to meet climate change in youth work.*

*Overall, together with the finding of **a clear hesitancy** of the answers (few “totally agree/disagree” and many “tend to agree/disagree” or “don’t know”), it seems that climate change is either at its initial transitory phase or simply is divided into countries which perceive the threat of climate change and its relation to youth work differently. Further studies are again needed.*

*To conclude, **at the moment, climate change has not yet become a universally adopted or a determinately accepted priority in youth work.***

## 2.2. Why should the society respond to the youth climate concern?

The questionnaire tried to have a general look at the role of youth work in climate change soon after global youth protests. Youth work and youth policy have been relatively slow to react to climate change. The topic barely appears in EUYS (European Union Youth Strategies 2019-2027). As Gorman notes, “It does not reflect the clearly articulated wishes of the youth climate strike movement for wider structural change” (Gorman 2021, 31). There are some strong youth work actors which seem to ignore climate change. As a Council of Europe report admits: “It is important to recognise that the youth climate mobilisations represent broadly unconventional form of political participation which position them somewhat in contrast to conventional participation which is favoured in youth policy” (Bárta et al, 2021). In a similar manner youth work practice seems isolated from climate change: “... right now youth work practitioners are neither widely connected to climate policy debates nor are their unique skills well recognised by policy makers planning the transition” (Gorman 2021, 37).

Bearing this in mind and admitting that the youth field cannot just stay outside climate change, in the opinion of the Government representatives, why should the society respond to the youth climate concern? The study asked, “*How important are the following reasons for the society to respond to the youth climate concern?*” How does the society orient itself to non-hierarchical, spontaneous youth movements? are the movements a threat or a possibility? Do young people have a right to protest?



**Table 5. “How important are the following reasons for the society to respond to the youth climate concern? Reply to each statement.”**

	Very important	Of some importance	Not very important	don't know	N
To acknowledge that young people have the right to a safe future and well-being devoid of risks, dangers and inequalities caused by climate change	100 %	0 %	0 %	0 %	14
To show the young people that society trusts in them	93 %	7 %	0 %	0 %	14
To strengthen the active citizenship of young people	86 %	14 %	0 %	0 %	14
To safeguard the inter-generational right of young people to a non-polluted future	86 %	14 %	0 %	0 %	14
To hinder young people from becoming frustrated with the capacity of the society to solve its problems	57 %	22 %	21 %	0 %	14
To minimize the threat that young people radicalize	36 %	29 %	28 %	7 %	14

The respondents were given seven possible reasons for the society to respond to youth climate concern. Most of the reasons were considered “very important”. In addition, in all seven statement a majority thought they were “very important” or “of some importance”. Everybody said that it is “very important” for the society to respond to youth climate concern *“to acknowledge that young people have the right to a safe future and well-being devoid of risks, dangers and inequalities caused by climate change”*. Second, 93% of the respondents said it is “very important” to support climate activists *“to show the young people that society trusts in them”*. Third, 86% said that the society should respond *“to strengthen the active citizenship of young people”* and *“to safeguard the inter-generational right of young people to a non-polluted future”*. These four statements had in common the trust in youth, in their active citizenship and in their rights. This echoes the historically old “emancipation” -rhetoric in youth (see Coussée et al. 2014: 253-262).

Clearly the expression “youth climate concern” referred to the school strikes movement and the demonstrations, where young people made strong claims to politicians to take immediate action to stop climate warming. People perhaps were worried that if the society did not respond, negative consequences, such as frustration or radicalization, might follow. Often the school administration, the headmasters, in particular, have often denied the right of school children to strike for climate. Youth climate activist groups like the Extinction Rebellion have been quite visible and often regarded as “radical” and “not acceptable”. Furthermore, research recognizes the possibility of serious marginalization: “If there are no constructive outlets for dissent, there is a risk of moving toward withdrawal, inaction, or angry violence (O’Brien et al. 2018, 9).

Majority of the government representatives thought that frustration and radicalization of youth climate activism is a reason for the society to respond to the current youth climate concern. More than half (57%) said that it is “very important” and 79% said it is “very important” or “of some importance” for the society to respond, *“to hinder young people from becoming frustrated with the capacity of the society to solve its problems”*. Frustration may lead to radicalization and 36% said it is “very important” for society to react to climate demonstrations *“to minimize the threat that young people radicalize”*. A majority (65%) felt that this is either “very important” or “of some importance”.

This, again, echoes the “integration” -rhetoric of youth work, according to which the priority is to support young people to become integrated in the (existing) society and its structures with particular emphasis on the integration of vulnerable youth.

## Conclusions

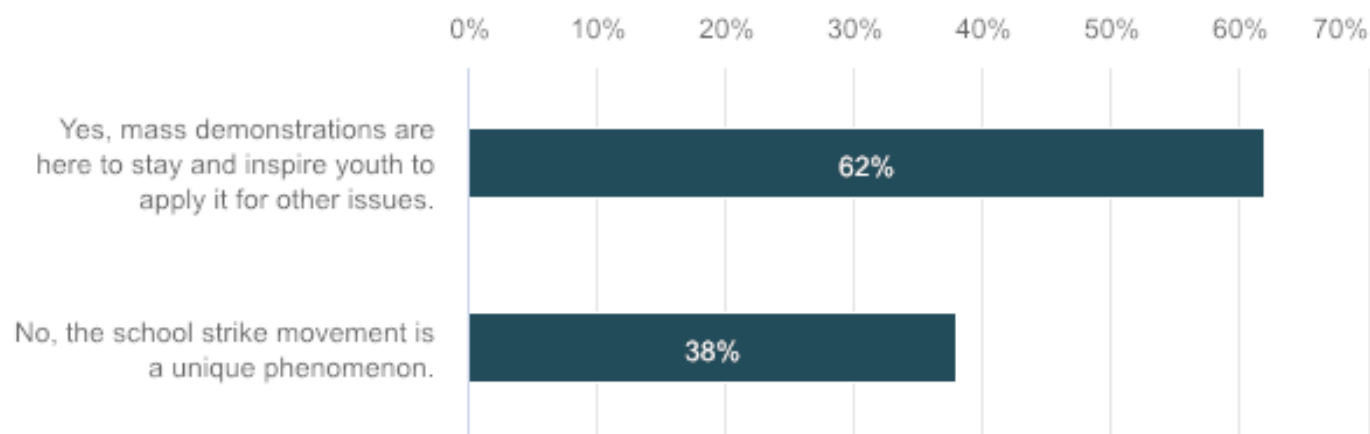
*The government youth policy makers were quite clear that society had many reasons to respond to youth climate concern. The government representatives responded through the established youth work orientations of “young work as emancipation” and of “youth work as integration” according to which it seemed proper for the society to support young people’s rights and their agency as well as, to keep them from becoming frustrated and radicalized.*

*But what does this responsibility of “society” mean to youth work and to youth policy? As youth participation and active citizenship are at the heart of youth work and youth policy, the first thing would be responding to this particular mode of participation of the youth climate movement, the mass school strikes. Could that mean a change of participation paradigm?*

### 3. Youth participation paradigm in the grip of change?

The respondents from the ministries of the Member States were asked if the school strike movement was a sign of changing forms of youth participation.

**Table 5. “Do you think that the youth climate movement, like the school strike, is a sign of changing forms of youth participation?”**



The replies were divided into two groups; to a majority of 62% which thought that “Yes, *mass demonstrations are here to stay and inspire youth to apply it for other issues*” and to 38%, which thought that “No, *the school strike movement is a unique phenomenon*”. There is a break-up to seemingly controversial ways of thinking of today’s youth participation. The question of the preceding chapter (table 4): “How important are the following reasons for the society to respond to the youth climate concern?” also included following statement “to support new forms of youth participation”. Two thirds (65%) said it is “very important”, 21% “of some importance” and 14% “not important”. Thus, about a same share of respondents considered youth climate strikes as a new form of youth participation. Taking into account the non-responding 48% who might be more critical to youth climate activism than those responding to the survey, it is possible that the division to proponents and opponents of changing youth participation is more even than the figures above suggest.

What kind of arguments support these two (opposing) views on changes in youth participation?



### 3.1. Youth climate demonstrations as non-sustainable

*There is so far no proof of the sustainability of Fridays for Future, nor of mass demonstrations used for other youth concerns.*

Interpreting school strike movement as a unique by-passing phenomenon could be correct if the youth climate demonstrations just wither away – because of the pandemic, because young people just get tired or frustrated of the activity or because climate change policies suddenly activate and convince young people that the imminent danger is over. Furthermore, if school strikes or similar expressions of dissent simply disappear without becoming an enduring inspiration for young people to act on climate change or other emergent issues, it does not much concern the youth work that we know. It is one youth phenomenon among countless others which come and go. According to this line of thinking, youth work and youth policy should concentrate on its current priorities, structures and ways of action, and leave climate change for the specialised youth organisations.

*Youth demonstrations lack coherent strategy, recognition and means to impact decision-making.*

The established youth organisations tend to ignore youth movements. Their interpretation is that the spontaneous and non-hierarchical and less institutional format of the movements is their crucial weakness. A study close to European Youth Forum (Dezelan and Yurttaguler 2020a, see also Dezelan et al. 2020b) discusses movements and argues that "Young people's most widely accepted and suitable form of engagement rests on unsystematic survival/guerrilla strategies, that disable any sustained and coherent defence of their interest" (Dezelan and Yurttaguler 2020a, 9). They will not have coherent means or sustainable relations nor recognition to affect or impact societal decision-making structures. The conclusion is that it is more efficient and proper for young people to express their concerns through the existing hierarchically organised and institutionally embedded youth organisation<sup>1</sup>.

*Most leaders of the most powerful countries have criticised youth climate demonstrations.*

Despite the massive visibility, successful networking and occasional positive political response, Greta Thunberg and the FFF movement have been openly criticised and neglected. "The world leaders of the countries with the highest levels of emissions, for instance, simply dismissed the youth climate activists, including Thunberg" (Han & Ahn 2020: 16). Vladimir Putin, Donald Trump and Jair Bolsonaro have all ridiculed Greta Thunberg. The Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison demanded FFF school children not to strike calling for "more learning and less activism". In July 2020, the website of the Indian collective of Fridays for Future groups was blocked by the Government of India. Han & Ahn (2020: 16) conclude "youth activist groups have been simply brushed aside as immature."

*The Imperium strikes back – political power structures are rigid to change.*

Massive youth demonstrations in Australia in 2018 and 2019 against the government's climate policies – or rather the lack of it – led the government to publicly attack the young people. The Prime Minister demanded "more learning and less activism" and the demonstrators reacted with a banderol "Activism is learning". A representative national poll in March 2019 showed that 54% of Australians supported the view of the young people and expected the PM to abide. Elections were approaching and the respondent were asked: "Thinking about your vote at the next federal election, how important is it to you that political leaders commit to immediately taking serious

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<sup>1</sup> A newly born youth umbrella organization *Generation Climate Europe* can be seen as a response of the established youth structures to Fridays for Future. It claims to "represent young Europeans as truly climate agenda setters" (Tenti 2019: 31). The organization aims to work through the establishment actively advocating for the climate in the European Parliament and in the European Commission.

*action to tackle climate change?*”, 49% said it is “very important” and 14% “important”. Thus, a few months before the actual elections in May, 63% of the voters objected the government policies and demanded drastic changes to climate policies. Altogether 79% of Labour voters said that as voters it is ‘very important’ that “political leaders commit to immediately taking serious action to tackle climate change” and 93% of them said it was ‘very important’ or ‘important’. The elections were to change the course on climate policies, but, at the last minute, Scott Morrison was able to turn the heads of the voters and his government remained in power. In addition to mobilizing his base of older, suburban economic conservatives to back him up, he succeeded to frighten Labour voters of the immediate costs and job losses that a change in climate policies would bring to ordinary workers’ lives. Before the elections, Labour voters said that it is important that “political leaders commit to immediately taking serious action to tackle climate change” – but still they voted for conservatives.

It seems that school strikers can make people aware of long-term societal challenges like climate change, but if the politicians manage to threaten voters that their personal near future and their everyday living standard are in danger, people withdraw back.

### 3.2. Youth climate action is changing the participation paradigm

*There is no conclusive research on the impact of youth climate activism*

In the absence of research, we do not yet know what exactly are the effects of the movements on media, public opinion and political debates and political programs. We do not know how the experience of global striking affects the entire youth generation. More research is needed on the effects of climate activism on personal growth, awareness raising, identity development and the motivation to be an active citizen of – for example those 8 million young climate demonstrators and their supporters in 2019 only.

*According to youth policy makers youth climate demonstrations have had a broad impact*

The Australian example above shows that youth climate demonstrations can have an impact on public opinion, but it does not automatically trickle down to changes in climate policies. However, the effects of youth climate action can be very diverse, and we lack research on them. The survey to youth policymakers of the Member States asked, “*What has been the effect of youth climate activism, like the school strike demonstrations, in your country?*”.

**Table 6. “What has been the effect of youth climate activism, like the school strike demonstrations, in your country? To what extent do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements? One answer per line.”**

In my country...	totally agree	tend to agree	tend to disagree	totally disagree	don't know	N
The public image of youth as active citizens improved	21 %	79 %	0 %	0 %	0 %	14
Youth Demonstrations increased public awareness of climate change	43 %	36 %	14 %	0 %	7 %	14
Decision makers engaged in dialogue with young people on climate change	14 %	57 %	22 %	0 %	7 %	14
It received large media visibility	23 %	46 %	31 %	0 %	0 %	13

School strikes led youth work to reflect what they could learn about mobilizing young people to take action	7 %	36 %	36 %	0 %	21 %	14
Youth demonstrations did not have any serious effect on climate policies	7 %	29 %	36 %	7 %	21 %	14
Demonstrations prompted negative reactions in public debate	0 %	14 %	57 %	22 %	7 %	14

All the respondents of the Member States “totally agreed” or “tended to agree” with the statement “*The public image of youth as active citizens improved*”. Even if the respondents have a vested interest in supporting young people, their unanimity does indicate that FFF has contributed to a ‘collateral benefit’ of raising the profile of an entire youth cohort – something youth work has always wanted to do. Any marketing department would be extremely satisfied with such a successful branding.

The respondents were also quite unanimous (79%) that “*Youth demonstrations increased public awareness of climate change*”. It is worth noting that this was the statement, which gathered most replies on the option “totally agree”. In addition to the demonstrations, Greta Thunberg was widely mediated talking in numerous public political forums, National Parliaments, European Parliament, the UN General Assembly, The World Economic Forum and other important international meetings. As a result, it is an incontestable impact of the youth climate movement that citizens have started to realize the seriousness of climate change. Young people have also been able to turn the public on their side, such as in the case of Australia. The nation-wide, very popular and well mediated youth climate strikes vehemently contradicted the Prime Minister on the lack of the government’s climate policies and national polls showed that citizens demanded Prime Minister Morrison to change the government’s climate policies. Even if the process hit the rigidity of the political structure, it showed the impressive potential of a Fridays for Future -type of youth agency.

Most of the respondents (71%) said that decision makers have discussed with the climate activists. Typically, activism appeared visible and serious enough for politicians and decision makers to contact the activists and invite them to private and public discussions and hearings. This study does not, however, tell about the exact motivations of the adults; was it curiosity, obligation, opportunity to get into the same picture with Greta or genuine interest and offer of support. Neither do we have data on the contents of the dialogue, nor their actual results.

Most respondents (69%) said the young climate activists received “*large media visibility*”, which seems to confirm the general impression of the media success of youth climate activism. Still, it should be noted that only 23% “totally agreed” and, at the same time, almost a third (31%) “tended to disagree”. These figures indicate that contrary to the general belief, media visibility varied across Europe. Even if the Fridays for Future spread over Europe there were national differences. The different media coverage can have many explanations. One reason can be national differences in the public and political perception of the importance of climate warming. A commonness of national suspicion, disinterest and even denialism of climate change may be reflected in national media coverage. This reserved attitude is linked with another statement: “*Demonstrations prompted negative reactions in public debate*”. Only a couple of respondents “tended to agree” with it. This suggests that negative reactions at climate activism exists but are relatively rare. More needs to be known about the reasons why media visibility of youth climate activists varied over Europe.

Youth strategies of European organisations (such as the Committee of Ministers Resolution CM/Res(2020)2) have urged youth work organisations to broaden their reach to new youth groups. One of the most amazing elements of the Fridays for Future movement has been its very

quick and globally spread mobilization of young people to become active climate change citizens – essentially without respective tradition, without organizational structures, without leadership and management bodies, without sweeping strategic multiannual plans, without funds – and totally outside the existing youth work and youth policy structures. All that should be relevant for the established youth field to reflect; based on that experience, what could be learned? The survey statement (table 6, above) suggested that *“School strikes led youth work to reflect what they could learn about mobilizing young people to take action”*. The responses were divided to 43% of those who agreed, to 36% of those disagreed and of 21% who did not know. It seems that the learning impact varied across Europe. In some countries climate activism apparently prompted internal discussion to develop method for better reach of young people (43%), while in other countries this impact was not noted (57%). More needs to be known about the European realities and practices.

A final example of division is the replies to the statement *“Youth demonstrations did not have any serious effect on climate policies”*; 36% agreed, 43% disagreed and 21% did not know. The share of those (36%) who think that youth demonstrations did not have any serious effect on climate policies coincides with those who thought that the school demonstration movement is a (by-passing) unique phenomenon. Youth climate activism seems to have faced some of the obstacles and problems also known to the established forms of youth work; tokenistic participation and adultism<sup>2</sup> - neglect of the youth voice.

*In conclusion, according to the youth policy makers of the Member States youth climate activism has had a broad impact; it received large media visibility, increased public awareness of climate warming, improved public image of young people as active citizens, increased dialogue with decision makers and led to internal reflection of youth work methods. At the same time, the Member States were constantly divided into also those who disagreed with the above and who thought that climate strikes did not have any serious impact on climate policies. More research is needed to find the reasons for these differences<sup>3</sup>.*

#### *Paradigm change of youth agency – research views*

Shrinking civic space has been in 2021 a frequent topic in many research publications and international conferences (such as the European child and welfare Conference in Germany 18-20 May). The shrinking has been well-documented to have happened during the last 15 – 20 years. This, however, concerns mainly the established hierarchically organised civil society organisations (CSOs). The Spanish Indignados, the Arab Spring, the Occupy Wall Street, the Yellow Umbrella uprising in Hongkong and Fridays for Future signify a new type of non-hierarchical, non-institutional and topic-oriented movements with a conspicuous engagement of young people. These have inspired millions of young people to express themselves - 8 million young climate demonstrators in 2019. At the same time volunteering, cultural and digital protesting have been increasing in many countries: “Young people tend to engage more on digitalisation and the environment, they are less committed to organisational contexts, are less institutional, and more political.” (Hummel 2021, 16). Far from being apathetic, young people are more involved in other forms of engagement. These forms are ad hoc, issue-oriented, non-electoral, and personalized (Vromen, Loader, Xenos, & Bailo, 2016).

Within the light of these changes, the civic space is also transforming and expanding. As an example of this change also youth agency is changing - maybe a paradigm change. The

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<sup>2</sup> **Tokenism** is the practice of making only a symbolic effort to be to members of minority groups, especially by recruiting people from underrepresented groups in order to give the appearance of age, gender or racial equality. **Adultism** refers to attitudes and behaviours of adults that are based on the assumption that adults know what is in the best interests of youth and are thus entitled to act upon them without their agreement (Ceasar: 2014: 169)

<sup>3</sup> In countries like Italy, where youth work is oriented to youth integration into working life, climate activism can be seen as slightly peripheral to the pragmatic essence of youth work, the development of working life competences.

spontaneous, non-hierarchical and non-institutional format of mass demonstrations undoubtedly appeal to today's young people who appreciate expressing one's opinion through marching, cultivating togetherness, light form of communality, singing, holding a banderol, carnivalistic public action, fun, dedication to clear and urgent messages ("our house is burning") and who are fluent with new communication technology. They might be skeptical about representative democracy, politics, politicians, voting, meetings and tokenistic hearings and youth councils.

Young people are developing new forms of expressing their dissent (Gorman 2021, O'Brien et al. 2018). O'Brien et al. (2018) have categorised dissent in four types: dutiful, disruptive and dangerous dissent. **Dutiful dissent** refers to activists work through and within the existing political and economic institutions like YNGOs, youth councils, parties and representative democratic processes, which may suggest changes, but do not question the legitimacy of political and economic systems, nor even necessarily the causes of climate change. **Disruptive dissent** means activism which seeks to modify and change existing political and economic structures including their norms, regulations and institutions, also challenging existing power relations. Collective protest and action is preferred. This is to trigger reflection, awareness, debate and strategies for desired change. **Dangerous dissent** means initiating, developing and actualizing alternatives that inspire long-term transformations. It generates new and alternative systems, ways of doing things or living, new types of economic relationships and organisations. Gorman (2021) has elaborated how these categories apply to youth climate activism. The new forms of dissent are complementary to the established youth organisations (O'Brien et al. 2018).

Recent empirical research on the impact of FFF concludes that youth mobilisations have aroused a sense of urgency and immediacy, have provided an alternative discourse, and cultivated youth leadership and commitment to civic action (Han and Ahn, 2020)<sup>i</sup>. Piispa *et al.* (2020: 13) argue that activism which falls in the category of dangerous dissent is particularly important: "[They] have much to contribute to political debate because they have 'imagined the future in new and sometimes radically alternative ways'. Oliver Lewis Hall (2021) call these "new democratic imaginaries" through which young people elaborate and experiment with new socio-political forms of life, alternative ways out of the looming climate change catastrophe<sup>ii</sup>.

### *Implications to the youth field*

The above signs of paradigm change of youth agency has implications to the youth field: youth policy should make every effort to include the voices of young people who are engaging in climate politics through unconventional participation, including all forms of dissent (Gorman 2021).

## **4. Climate change and identity of youth work**

We noted earlier in ch 2.2 that the government youth policy makers were quite clear that society had many reasons to respond to youth climate concern. They were quite clear that young people had the right<sup>4</sup> to be active citizens to stop climate warming (the emancipation rhetoric). Many also felt that it was important to keep young people from becoming frustrated and to hinder their radicalization (the integration rhetoric). The policy makers seemed to be on the side of young climate activists.

The youth field dedication to the emancipation and integration agenda has long historical roots. Young people, their actions, expectations and conditions are the basis of youth work and youth policy. The task of youth workers, youth organisations, public youth services and youth policymakers is to defend this basis. However, the youth field has many other solidarities and dependences. In addition to represent young people and defend their interests vis-à-vis "the society"; adults, the media, organizations, Municipality, City Hall, the government or the political

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<sup>4</sup> see for example Education, Youth, Culture and Sport Council Meeting, 17-18 May 2021



decision-makers, youth work organisations are embedded in public organisations and typically funded by public sources or external sources. Sometimes these linkages and funders define aims to youth work or expect it to apply certain working methods or to reach certain groups of young people and so on. In this sense youth work has to elaborate its profile and identity between different and sometimes contradictory pressures. Climate change and youth work is a challenging topic, because young activists tend to have quite different views of it than funders, the public sector and different political parties. This can become an identity issue<sup>5</sup>.

The survey wanted to better understand how these contradictions manifested itself. How determined are the youth policy decisionmakers? Where are the solidarities of the youth policy makers and the youth work organisations between demonstrating young people and the society? These answers could throw some light on the identity issue.

#### 4.1. Plans for the future: how do the future priorities construct the identity of youth work?

What should the government do to help young people be active in their rightful cause – stopping climate warming? The six questions outline some of the key approaches, which at the same time can provide us some idea of the respondents' climate policy framework and of their general role in supporting youth agency.

**Table 7. “In the near future, are you planning to support youth action on climate change?** To what extent do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements? One answer per line. In my country, we are planning to...”

In my country, we are planning to...	totally agree	tend to agree	tend to disagree	totally disagree	don't know
Prioritise activities, which reduce carbon emissions through daily youth work	14 %	50 %	22 %	0 %	14 %
Cooperate with civil society organisations, public sectors and “green” -minded private companies on climate issues	36 %	50 %	14 %	0 %	0 %
Improve the competences of youth workers to engage youth in climate issues	7 %	79 %	7 %	0 %	7 %
Provide resources to youth organisations, youth centres and youth groups to combat climate change	14 %	65 %	0 %	7 %	14 %
Take the initiative to create a dialogue between decision-makers and young people active in climate change issues	36 %	57 %	0 %	0 %	7 %

Four out of the six suggested measures (table 7) were approved by at least 79% of the respondents. These measures well resonated with the existing youth policy aims; improving dialogue with the decision-makers (93% agreed “totally” or “tended to agree”), supporting cross-

<sup>5</sup> History of youth work has observed the contradictory expectations within youth work and has suggested that this leads to identity crises, to “youth work as oxymoronic practice” (Coussée et al. 2014: 253-262).

agency cooperation (86%), improving (climate) competences of youth workers (86%) and providing resources for youth to combat climate change (79%). But the two remaining suggested measures indicated that not everything was equally wholeheartedly acceptable. While about two thirds (64%) agreed with “*prioritizing activities, which reduce carbon emissions through daily youth work*”, there still were a third (34%) which “tended to disagree” or “did not know” – a hesitancy, perhaps even resistance to see climate warming as a youth work/youth policy priority. Another suggested measure “*Give moral support to the school strike movement*” showed that only 21% of the respondents agreed with it, twice as many (43%) disagreed with it and a third (36%) “did not know”. Thus, almost 80% of the government representatives either “did not know” or thought that school strikers should not be supported to use their right to strike. The answers reveal a contradiction - a role conflict - between the strong dedication to support young people’s own agency; to boldly speak for them and to support them, and the administrative solidarity to the other public sector institutions, like the school. Climate change is a political issue and a controversial topic, to which the millions of demonstrating school children have taken a stand, a political stand. The youth field appears an oxymoronic practice<sup>6</sup>: it proclaims to stand behind the young people, to support them, but at the same time declines or at least hesitates to give moral support to their initiative (the school strikes). The youth field needs to clarify where does it stand, what are its aims, practices and solidarities - its identity – in climate warming and youth work.

### *“The hesitantly favourable”*

*To conclude, the respondents were overall in favour of supporting youth action on climate change, but not unequivocally. The majority which agreed with supporting youth climate action, chose the option “tend to agree”. As discussed earlier (Ch 2.1.), this can reflect, not only a positive inclination, but also ambivalence, uncertainty and contradictory feelings. The youth policymakers are “hesitantly favourable”; they tend to support youth climate action but hesitate to wholeheartedly agree. There is, either an ongoing process to elaborate more clearly how exactly youth work should orient to climate change, or there exist different youth work identities within the Member States.*

*The positive approach in favour of support to youth climate activities was strongest in the areas of existing youth policy priorities, promoting youth dialogue, inter-sectoral cooperation, youth worker competences and resource building. The respondents orient to youth climate activism through the established structures and procedures. However, through the acknowledgement of youth climate activism, one may promote established goals of European youth policy, such as the visibility and recognition of youth work: “Connecting youth workers with climate policy debates and amplifying the stories of good practice youth work innovations in transition planning is an important task for youth policy” (Gorman 2021, 37).*

*A more difficult nut to crack to public or publicly supported youth work was a moral dilemma – showing solidarity with the young people vis-à-vis with the society, that is, with the other parts of the public sector (such as the school denying the right of students to strike). This is an emerging issue as youth agency is increasingly about different forms of dissent; alternative cultures, lifestyles and ideologies, youth groups in the margins of the society, protest and civil disobedience. How will youth policy and youth work define its identity between advocacy of the youth right to express one’s active citizenship and the administrative and political solidarities to those who tend to deny this right?*

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<sup>6</sup> An internally contradictory practice. History of youth work has observed the contradictory expectations and practices within youth work and has suggested that this leads to identity crisis, to “youth work as oxymoronic practice” (Coussée et al. 2014: 253-262).

## 4.2. Relation to European climate policies and funds for climate action

Climate change is an EU priority which is essentially cross-departmental and cross-agency in nature. The respondents were asked how and to what extent youth work should be engaged in European climate policies. The governmental youth policy respondents unanimously supported European cooperation (table 8).

<b>Table 8. How should the youth field relate to the EU European climate programs, like the Climate Pact? Do you agree or disagree with following options?</b>	<b>totally agree</b>	<b>tend to agree</b>
Youth work should co-develop complementary non-formal learning material with EU's respective educational programs	43 %	57 %
Youth work should develop digital youth work in collaboration with the Pact's respective digital initiatives	50 %	50 %
We must see to it that Erasmus+ includes opportunities for exchange of youth work initiatives and practices for climate change	50 %	50 %
It is important to develop structures for dialogue with decision makers on climate issues	64 %	36 %

The youth field Ethos of youth participation was clearly the most strongly supported action to be taken in European level climate policies. Also, collaboration with the EU Climate Pact was to be endorsed. The opinion was voiced that measures had to be taken to enable the use of Erasmus+ for youth work on climate issues. Finally, collaboration with formal education authorities on non-formal education was supported but not as strongly as, for example, youth participation in EU.

However, considering that cooperation with other sectors has been a main youth policy priority for decades, why are the policymakers hesitating to “totally agree” with the proposed cooperation? About half of them merely “tended to agree”. Again, an indication of being “hesitantly favourable” – as if the identity of the youth field would be unclear or in danger?

Youth participation, cross-sectoral cooperation and promotion of non-formal learning are not new policy aims, but what is new, is that now there are concrete topics and concrete cooperating partners and institutions, even invitations to collaborate (like in the case of Climate Pact) – instead of the somewhat abstract aims and objectives and nonspecific cooperation partners. As youth work probably is the smallest of those partners and institutions, it is definitely up to the youth field to take the initiative; developing and proposing formats of youth agency with identified partners, creating activities and services to be further designed and implemented with given sectors and drafting process descriptions and project concepts. Such an example would be elaboration of a non-formal education program for and with young people to be co-developed with the respective formal education institutions and authorities to combat climate warming. European climate policies open a window of opportunity for the European youth field to transform its decades old rhetoric of youth policy goals into concrete action.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

This survey targets at European Union government representatives of youth affairs about the impact of youth climate demonstrations. This seems appropriate as the main message of Fridays for Future movement, for example, has been: "... to call on political representatives and states to respond to the climate crisis in a just way with the urgency that science requires" (cited in Gorman 2021: 4). The government representatives are the key persons in driving European youth policies

and promoting the interests of young people. They also are in a challenging position between public youth administration, established forms of youth work *and* those young people who choose to express themselves through unconventional ways, like the school strikes. The survey tries to identify how the governments orient themselves in this important and difficult space created by youth climate demonstrations.

### **Climate change in youth work – a transitory period or a division of perspectives?**

Clearly climate change is emerging on youth work agenda, but it is accompanied with hesitancy, ambivalence and differences of opinion. The survey data showed a constant distribution of responses by orientation to the role of climate change in youth work. There are two explanations for this. One is that the different answers mean that Member States are changing with different pace; some have reacted quickly and see climate warming as a challenge to youth work, some are taking their first steps and some still hesitate. This can be called a *‘transitory period’ hypothesis*. Another interpretation is that youth policy makers are permanently divided into two groups; to those who want to integrate climate change into youth work and to those who ignore it or even deny climate change. This may be called a *‘division of perceptions’ hypothesis*. It would be useful to replicate this study and explore these hypotheses.

However, so far, climate change has not become a universally adopted or a determinately accepted priority in youth work. As climate change is no longer a new social issue and as we have witnessed school strikes for climate for years, one fundamental question arises: is youth work and youth policy agile enough to respond to emerging youth themes and action such as climate change and climate strikes?

### **The society should support youth rights to strike for climate.**

The government youth policy makers were quite clear that society had many reasons to respond to youth climate concern. The government representatives responded through the established youth work orientations of “young work as emancipation” and of “youth work as integration”: It seemed proper for the society to support young people’s rights and their agency as well as, to keep them from becoming frustrated and radicalized.

But what does this responsibility of “society” mean to youth work and to youth policy? As youth participation and active citizenship are at the heart of youth work and youth policy, the first thing would be to respond to the particular mode of participation of the youth climate movement, the mass school strikes. Could that mean a change of participation paradigm?

### **Youth climate activism – a collision between established forms of youth participation?**

The respondents were divided into two groups; to a majority of 62% which thought that “*Yes, mass demonstrations are here to stay and inspire youth to apply it for other issues*” and to 38%, which thought that “*No, the school strike movement is a unique phenomenon*”. This controversy begs the question: Is youth participation changing? The report looked at both arguments.

*Youth climate demonstrations can be seen as a non-sustainable and inefficient means of participation* for following reasons:

- There is so far no proof of the sustainability of Fridays for Future, nor of mass demonstrations used as means for other youth concerns.
- Spontaneous, non-hierarchical and noninstitutional movements (such as FFF) will not have coherent means or sustainable relations nor recognition to affect or impact societal decision-making structures.
- Decision-makers around the world have disregarded or criticized FFF
- There is not much proof of its real impact
- There are examples of political regimes suppressing youth climate action (such as in Australia in 2018-19)

*Youth climate movement has also been seen to have a versatile impact and to represent a new paradigm of youth agency:*

- in the absence of research so far, it cannot be ruled out that the youth climate movement had/will have a versatile societal, generational and personal impact.
- Youth policymakers of the Member States said the movements have had a broad impact; they received large media visibility, increased public awareness of climate warming, improved public image of young people as active citizens, increased dialogue with decision makers and led to internal reflection of youth work methods.
- Researchers widely think that the format of young peoples' agency is changing. The variety of dissent cherishes alternative imaginaries of social life beyond climate change.
- Current forms of tokenistic and adultist youth representation need reform: The youth field should make every effort to include the voices of young people who are engaging in climate politics through unconventional participation, including all forms of dissent.

Youth participation paradigm may be changing. The youth field should carefully and in an open mind follow the youth agency scene, not least the research around it.

### **Tokenism and adultism – existing forms of agency to be modified**

International organisations such as the UN have established structures which include young people in climate change decision-making. However, as empirical studies show, young people “continue to regard themselves as observers on the side-lines rather than occupying a central role at the heart of the post-Paris regime” (Thew *et al.* 2021: 17). The conclusion is similar to studies on local youth councils and parliaments (Malone and Hartung 2010: 36, McGinley and Grieve 2010: 258, Kallio and Häkli 2011). This kind of youth participation is often called “adultism”, “tokenism” and, in relation to climate participation, “subaltern environmentalism” (Bowman 2020). These disappointments are one of the reasons for young people’s search for more direct ways of expressing themselves. Another reason is the experience of demonstrations to speak for themselves, which has encouraged youth to find new ways of ‘speaking’ (Gorman 2021).

Supposing that this is the direction that youth agency is taking, one may also critically reflect the existing youth NGO –based legitimacy and mandates to function as sole representatives of young people. New voices with new forms of agency are emerging and both should be recognised. This is also an opportunity for existing youth work structures (youth NGOs and public youth work) to renew and modify approaches and working methods. As the responses of the government representatives in this study indicated, most youth policy makers are open to new forms of youth agency. However, at the same time, there is a good third of governments which hesitate to see youth climate demonstrations as a sign of changing youth agency.

### **Resilience of youth work – reflecting the agility of today’s youth work**

One trademark of youth work has been that it is “flexible to act quickly” on youth issues. The YNGOs operate in the civic space and are not restricted by bureaucratic procedures and have an amount of freedom to act. In a similar manner, public youth services are not limited by legislation to operate in a certain way and can relatively independently decide on their working methods. The largest youth event during 2018 and 2019 has been youth climate demonstrations which have taken place totally outside the established youth work organisations and structures. Is the long-praised ability of youth work to flexibly take quick action on emergent youth issues a myth? Has youth work become hidebound due to institutionalisation, bureaucratisation, closeness to the state apparatus and in its focus on preserving existing modes of action? Youth climate change invites youth work to critically reflect itself and to imagine alternative ways of working. New opportunities can emerge. As an example, studies on youth climate strikes show class bias. De Moor *et al* (2020: 14) reported that ‘a very large number’ of youth demonstrators had parents with university education. To engage a broader range of young people in action against climate warming, special attention should be on working class/lower class young people. Municipal youth work, such as



youth centres, and many youth organisations reach very well working-class young people, youth from non-academic families and vulnerable young people. These youth work organisations would be in an ideal position to equalise class-based awareness and action on climate change. Of course, to mobilise this target group would require extra effort and innovative methods, but youth workers have the competence to develop new working methods together with young people. This approach would be strongly endorsed by Jamie Gorman in his study on youth climate activism: “right now youth work practitioners are neither widely connected to climate policy debates nor are their unique skills well recognised by policy makers planning the transition. Connecting youth workers with climate policy debates and amplifying the stories of good practice youth work innovations in transition planning is an important task for youth policy” (Gorman 2021: 37).

### **Linking youth climate movements with youth work organisations – eating the cake and keeping it?**

The debates around youth work and youth climate activism seem to avoid the question: “should there be a link between youth climate movements and the established youth work organisations?” One cannot simply merge the two. Movements have a specificity and a logic of their own. They are non-hierarchical and non-institutional, based on spontaneity and independence. It might not be reasonable for the public sector, the established and organized youth structures to create, support or govern them. Public support, linking them to non-governmental, governmental or semi-governmental youth work organisations, or their institutional structures can only destroy their spontaneity and independence. On the other hand, it might not be possible for the established youth work organisations to step outside their established and ‘politically proper’ modes of operation and become a dissenting movement. You can't have your cake and eat it too. Perhaps, the only possibility is to provide separate space for both. Still, the task remains to define what “defining space for both” means – tolerance, open partnership, exchange of experiences, understanding of complementarity or the like?

### **Youth work and climate change – an identity issue?**

“Youth work is a very diverse field of practice” (Coussée et al. 2014: 260) and has historically struggled between contradictory tensions. The main tension is between “emancipation” and “integration”: supporting young people to express themselves, even critically, or helping young people and the vulnerable young people, in particular to integrate into the existing society? These historical tensions manifest themselves in the relationship of youth work between youth climate activists and the society. The youth field appears an oxymoronic practice: it proclaims to stand behind the young people, to support them, but at the same time refuses to or at least hesitates to give moral support to their initiative as it feels it should also support the society - the school, the administration and conservative politics. However, all these actors are inextricably linked, and the youth field is facing the difficult task of negotiating the youth interests, concerns and rights with the different societal demands and interests. This difficulty is reflected in the ambivalence and hesitation of the government youth representatives to give or not to give “moral support to the school strike movement”. The youth field needs to negotiate these tensions and to clarify its position, whereby it clarifies and constructs its youth work identity.

Of course, it is possible to avoid these oxymoronic identity issues defining that climate issues do not belong to youth work. They are issues to be solved by other societal actors. However, climate change is a global crisis. It threatens democracy and can only be solved through democratically driven climate policies. The question is “On a planet in crises, does democracy have what it takes to save the environment?” (Council of Europe 2021: 3) Active citizenship and democracy is at the heart of all youth policies, so, *if climate change is about democracy, youth work should be about climate change*. Furthermore, climate warming is essentially an equality issue (as it is treating unequally different parts of the earth) and it is about human rights and justice (between generations, for example). *Thus, if human rights are at the core of youth work, climate change should be a youth work priority.*

Finally, climate change is an identity issue of youth workers. In this regard Gorman (2021: 42) makes following explicit recommendations: “Youth work should recognise that young people are taking the lead when it comes to addressing the climate crisis. Youth workers should amplify the voices of young activists, respect their political agency and find ways to act in solidarity with them. Young people’s climate activism is not simply a dress-rehearsal for citizens-in-the-making but is ‘a world building project’ (Bowman, 2019: 296) in which young people are agents in constructing and prefiguring a world beyond crisis.” (Bolding and references by Gorman)

The reference above can sound a lofty promise of youth work and youth workers standing by youth climate activists and becoming a conscious part of those societal forces which combat one of the most serious global challenge of today. The problem is that youth policy has recently kept many pressing and emergent global issues, such as climate change and digitalisation, at arm’s length:

- climate change and digitalization barely appear in EUYS (European Union Youth Strategies 2019-2027). “Climate change occupies a marginal role in the strategy” (Tenti 2019: 21) and “It does not reflect the clearly articulated wishes of the youth climate strike movement for wider structural change” (Gorman 2021, 31).
- The EU Youth Dialogues since 1<sup>st</sup> January 2019 until now (2021) have not included climate change as thematic priorities
- The 20 pages Final Declaration of the 3rd European Youth Work Convention (2020) includes 3 full lines on “Making youth work green”.
- A recent Youth Partnership publication thoroughly evaluates European youth strategies, but finds only marginal references to climate (Hofmann-van de Poll and Williamson 2021)

European youth policies have rather limited themselves to focus on predominantly existing goals with existing youth NGO driven structures.

There even are some strong youth work actors which seem to ignore climate change. As a Council of Europe report admits: “It is important to recognise that the youth climate mobilisations represent broadly unconventional form of political participation which position them somewhat in contrast to conventional participation which is favoured in youth policy” (Bárta et al, 2021). In a similar manner youth work practice seems isolated from climate change: “... right now youth work practitioners are neither widely connected to climate policy debates nor are their unique skills well recognised by policy makers planning the transition” (Gorman 2021, 37).

But the new global issues are complex and unexpected still penetrating into our everyday lives. To meet them, awareness, reflection and collaborative action is needed from youth policy makers, youth workers and young people. Otherwise, the youth field risks becoming encapsulated and hidebound – falling into a “splendid isolation”<sup>7</sup> as Howard Williamson would have said it (2020).

### **A second follow-up study**

The responses of the Member States were clearly divided. This suggested two hypotheses; a ‘*transitory period*’ hypothesis, according to which the Member States developed in this matter in different pace, and a ‘*division of perceptions*’ hypothesis, according to which youth policy makers are more or less permanently divided into two groups - to those who want to integrate climate change into youth work and to those who ignore it or even deny climate change. Replicating the study would allow comparative insight, testing the hypotheses above and to reach the 2021 non-respondents.

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<sup>7</sup> “ Splendid isolation” is a term originally used to describe the 19<sup>th</sup>-century British diplomatic practice of avoiding permanent alliances with other countries, because the British empire was thought to be such omnipotent and self-sufficient. “Splendid isolation” in youth work refers to its perception that it is unique and perpetually valid that it does not need to collaborate with others or to care for societal changes.

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## Appendix: The Questionnaire

### Youth work and climate change – A follow up on the 2019 Finnish Presidency Council debate

At the time of its EU Presidency in 2019, Finland had already established climate change as the Government's priority, also a key priority for the European Union. The Education, Youth, Culture and Sport Council meeting on 21-22 November 2019 held a policy debate on "*A vision for youth work in Europe – climate change, young people and youth work*". (The discussion paper available at: <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-13398-2019-INIT/en/pdf>)

A Special Eurobarometer on 'Future of Europe' gathered its data October-November 2020 and showed that out of 11 challenges *climate change and environmental issues* was the most often mentioned as a 'main global challenge for the future of the EU'. A 2019 Eurobarometer on 'Climate Change' corroborated that citizens thought that climate change was a "very serious" problem. Young people - 15 to 24 years of age - were more worried about it than older people.

The European Climate Pact (9.12.2020 COM(2020)788 final) following the EU Green Deal (2019) focused "*on spreading awareness and supporting action*". It appreciated the young climate activists, who "*have captured the world's attention and shaped the discussion on climate change*" and concluded: "*We invite young people to use the Pact to drive systemic and inter-generational change for society as a whole*".

The youth field can also be involved with the implementation of the *Education for Climate Coalition* (An EU initiative December 2020).

In this context, Finland with the consent of Portugal as the current EU President find it reasonable to follow up on the Finnish Presidency Council debate on "youth work and climate change". The aim is to map the current situation in Member States and to profit from your understanding of the possible role of youth work.

This is a confidential study. The results will be described statistically and no individual or country specific answers cannot be identified from the report.

**Please provide your answers to the webropol questionnaire at <https://link.webropol-surveys.com/S/276F51B2A11B66A6> by 21 June 2021. You can also fill in the attached questionnaire and email it as a Word to Lasse Siurala or Seija Astala.**

For any further questions or clarifications, do not hesitate to consult Adjunct Professor Lasse Siurala (researcher; [lasse.siurala@welho.com](mailto:lasse.siurala@welho.com)) or Seija Astala (Finnish Ministry of Education, Youth Unit; [seija.astala@minedu.fi](mailto:seija.astala@minedu.fi)).

#### Background information:

The country you represent \_\_\_\_\_

Your position at the Ministry? \_\_\_\_\_

Considering the novelty of climate change as a topic in youth work, how widely is it taken into account in youth work organisations in your country? Choose only one option.

1. Climate change is not so far seen as a part of youth work
2. Some youth work organisations have taken it on their agenda
3. Many youth work organisations have taken it on their agenda
4. Most youth work organisations are working on climate change

Youth work is known for its variety of organisations – voluntary, public and of different sizes - working with young people. How challenging is it for the Ministry to be informed on the diversity of practices in the field? Choose only one option.

1. We only have patchy knowledge of what the youth work organisations are doing
2. We know the activities of the biggest organisations.
3. We have a good general idea what the youth work organisations are doing
4. We have a broad updated knowledge of the youth work practices in the field.

**Question 1. What has been the effect of youth climate activism, like the school strike demonstrations, in your country?** To what extent do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements? One answer per line.

	<b>In my country...</b>	totally agree	tend to agree	tend to disagree	totally disagree	don't know
1	It received large media visibility					
2	Youth demonstrations increased public awareness of climate change					
3	Demonstrations prompted negative reactions in public debate					
4	Decision makers engaged in dialogue with young people on climate change					
5	The public image of youth as active citizens improved					
6	Youth demonstrations did not have any serious effect on climate policies					
7	School strikes led youth work to reflect what they could learn about mobilizing young people to take action					

**Question 2. Has climate change appeared on the youth work and youth policy agenda in your country?** To what extent do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements? One answer per line.

	<b>In my country...</b>	totally agree	tend to agree	tend to disagree	totally disagree	don't know
1	Youth work has taken climate change as one of their priority					
2	The government has strengthened the capacity of youth work to respond to climate change					
3	Youth work methods have been developed to combat climate change					
4	Youth workers have asked for training in climate change					
5	There are cross-sectoral projects, activities or programs with young people on climate change on national or local level					

**Question 3. How should the youth field relate to the EU European Climate Pact?** Do you agree or disagree with following options? One answer per line.

	<b>At an european level...</b>	totally agree	tend to agree	tend to disagree	totally disagree	don't know
1	Youth work should co-develop complementary non-formal learning material with EU's respective educational programs.					
2	Youth work should develop digital youth work in collaboration with the Pact's respective digital initiatives					
3	We must see to it that Erasmus+ includes opportunities for exchange of youth work initiatives and practices for climate change					
4	It is important to develop structures for dialogue with decision makers on climate issues.					

**Question 4. Do you think that the youth climate movement, like the school strike, is a sign of changing forms of youth participation?**

- Yes, mass demonstrations are here to stay and inspire youth to apply it for other issues.
- No, the school strike movement is a unique phenomenon.

**Question 5. Climate change is a contradictory political issue. How do you think the youth field actors will cope with the political pressures?** Click all the options that can be realistically expected.

- To keep politics at arm's length, Youth organisations avoid engaging in climate change.
- Despite political disputes, Youth organisations agree on a common climate change strategy
- Local government youth work will be on the side of young people even under political pressures be it right-wing conservatism, denialism or other parties.
- If schools tell young people not to strike for climate, municipal youth work will not either encourage them.

**Question 6. How important are the following reasons for the society to respond to the youth climate concern?** Reply to each statement.

		Very important	Of some importance	Not very important	don't know
1	To hinder young people from becoming frustrated with the capacity of the society to solve its problems				
2	To minimize the threat that young people radicalize				
3	To acknowledge that young people have the right to a safe future and well-being devoid of risks, dangers and inequalities caused by climate change				
4	To strengthen the active citizenship of young people				
5	To show the young people that society trusts in them				
6	To support new forms of youth participation				
7	To safeguard the inter-generational right of young people to a non-polluted future.				

**Question 7. In the near future, are you planning to support youth action on climate change?** To what extent do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements? One answer per line.

	In my country, we are planning to...	totally agree	tend to agree	tend to disagree	totally disagree	don't know
1	Prioritise activities, which reduce carbon emissions through daily youth work					
2	Cooperate with civil society organisations, public sectors and "green" -minded private companies on climate issues					
3	Improve the competences of youth workers to engage youth in climate issues					
4	Give moral support to the school strike movement					
5	Provide resources to youth organisations, youth centres and youth groups to combat climate change					
6	Take the initiative to create a dialogue between decision-makers and young people active in climate change issues					

<sup>i</sup> "Our house is burning"

Han & Ahn (2020) have carried out qualitative narrative analyses of the messaging of Greta Thunberg and the other climate change activists in 2018-2019. The data of the narratives consist of speeches, interviews, declarations, and online communications of the activists. The overall narrative highlights *urgency and immediacy – not slow, conflicting and long political and administrative processes*. This feeling of urgency flows from the following experience:

"What we do or don't do right now will affect my entire life and the lives of my children and grandchildren. What we do or don't do right now, me and my generation can't undo in the future."

Greta Thunberg 2018

Greta Thunberg together with her colleagues addressed World Economic Forum and demanded immediate action on fossil fuel production and consumption, and said:

"We don't want these things done by 2050 or 2030 or even 2021.

We want this done now."

Thunberg et al. 2020

This and other narratives highlight urgency and immediacy – as opposed to slow, conflicting and long political and administrative processes.

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<sup>ii</sup> American philosopher William E Connolly (2013, 2017, 2019) notes that the world today is increasingly complex, ambivalent, changing, interdependent, unexpected and global. At the same time, these changes penetrate in our everyday life, even if the citizens are not always able to recognize and analyze them. Often the processes are driven by neoliberal capitalism not always under control of democracies and citizens. According to Connolly the key problem is that humans think that they can control both the human created world, and also the physical, geological and biological world (nature). Climate change has proved that to be wrong. Connolly sees two ways out.

First, in order to understand what happens to us in everyday life, whether that is weather changes and storms or digital tracking and exploitation through social media, it is vital to comprehend global phenomena, such as climate warming or the business logic of the technology industry. Key elements of such understanding of the world today are *awareness raising* and *imagining alternative futures* (Connolly 2013: 156, Siurala 2020). Second, people are realizing that anthropocentrism is not working anymore and, as a result, existing forms of agency through representative democracy, political parties and the administration are not necessarily trusted and will be replaced by wide-ranging movements, “critical pluralist assemblage” or “political swarming”, as Connolly calls them. These refer to any *loose combination of actors which create activism, ecological consciousness, freedom and hope*.

Youth climate demonstrations represent both of these elements. They are forms of ‘dangerous dissent’, which are essentially motivated by awareness of a global future threat (“*We wouldn’t be marching if it wasn’t about the future*”) and it is about imagining alternative futures, as researchers O’Brien et al. (2018) and Piispa et al. (2020) have pointed out. The demonstrations are also a loose movement attracting a diverse combination of actors, such as media, social media, workers’ unions, environmental organisations and groups, artists, Teachers’ Unions (like Education International with 30 million members), diverse groups of fans, even public opinion – a “critical pluralist assemblage” – aiming at ecological consciousness, freedom from global consumption capitalism, fossil industry and from unequal effects of climate warming. *Youth climate activism has not arisen totally out of blue – rather, it is a movement, which today’s challenges have necessitated.*

On the level of general perceptions of climate change there seem to be two kinds of main interpretations. One is the faith in governments’ climate policies and technological development, which will produce innovations (probably in energy production and consumption) which cut down atmospheric emissions and eventually reverses climate warming and biodiversity damage. The other is the pessimism that climate change and the processes in non-human world (geological and biological) probably cannot be reversed this late. The former perception is the ‘official’ climate policy based on the implementation of the Paris climate agreement and the latter is the one suggested by philosophers and scientists like William E Connolly. Perhaps it would be useful for us, the youth field alike, to be aware of the various interpretations.