



YOUNG PEOPLE AND CLIMATE CHANGE

“THERE IS NO PLAN(ET) B: YOUTH ACTIVISM IN THE FIGHT AGAINST CLIMATE CHANGE IN CYPRUS AND GREECE”

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Climate change is undeniably here. We are now living through climate change and feeling it in our daily lives. The temperature is rising, the summers in Cyprus are getting longer, the winters are getting shorter and the “dividing lines” between the seasons have deteriorated to a great extent. The Mediterranean, home to half a billion people, is undergoing dramatic changes, while forecasts for the future of the Mediterranean – and the planet – are gloomy.

Changes in the climate involve changes in people's lifestyles, changes in the fauna and flora of areas, changes in resources, water and food production. These in turn bring about other changes and other problems.

The problem is here, and we have pointed it out. What remains now is for the necessary actions to be taken immediately to slow down and – hopefully – avoid rapid climate change, both in the long term and in the short term.

Paradoxes of the problem

Opening the discussion, Kevin Featherstone, Director of the Hellenic Observatory, said: “We are here to discuss the important issue of climate change in the context of the responsibilities that young people in general and young activists have both in Cyprus and in Greece”.

Mr Featherstone said climate change presents a number of paradoxes. “First of all, according to the definition, it is an existential issue that must unite us all around the world. But in reality, it seems to divide us. It divides us into assessments of the nature of climate change and the initiatives we need to take. Not all divisions have been overcome.

Second, climate change is essentially a matter of intergenerational justice, yet we see young protesters calling climate change normal. But what about climate change initiatives, especially here in the Eastern Mediterranean, and how do young people respond?”

Responding to Mr. Featherstone's question, Ms. Kleopatra Kitti, Senior Political Advisor of ELIAMEP (Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy), said that their programme “deals with the connectivity of the region. Climate change, as you said, is an issue that can both unite and divide and is a big part of our programme, namely, how to mitigate climate change in order to deal with the conflict but also to create partnerships.

“We are now living and feeling climate change, it is an indisputable reality. The Mediterranean is a global warming hotspot. The recent union for the Mediterranean reports that the region is warming 20% faster than any other region in the world, meaning that by 2040, the region will face an extreme warming of 2.2 degrees Celsius. What does this mean? Rising temperatures have an impact on access to resources, clean water and food production, which creates migration and conflict”, Ms Kitty stressed.

She added that “Another factor that we forget to estimate is that the Mediterranean

is home to 500 million people, a number as large as the internal market of the European Union but it is the least connected region in the world. Considering how connected Southeast Asia is to China, or North America to South America, the Mediterranean is at the forefront of Africa but is the least connected to the other sides. This means that it becomes a resource border of either conflict or migration. What we see is that we want a Mediterranean Green Plan through which several partnerships and problem solutions will be built”.

Common ground for cooperation

Ms. Kitty said: “There are three recommendations on how we can find partnerships. One aspect relies on the development of funds to build the infrastructure for solar and wind energy. We are in southern Europe, at least let us see how we can use EU infrastructure funds to create more interconnections. The Eastern Mediterranean is an emerging energy market, but we are not there yet. So, the way in which we build institutions to manage common resources is one, whether it is for renewables or gas. Europeans are looking at this model of the Nordic Northern Reservoir, Europeans have built the clean reservoir model, Cyprus or the eastern Mediterranean could look to see how we can replicate this model of infrastructure resources of institutions”.

“The other perspective depends on the common potential for predicting climate change, whether it is fires or floods, food shortages or weather events, or water pollution, or exploring the eastern Mediterranean we might have gas or oil spills, which are things that do not recognise borders. So how will we deal with them if we do not have the institutions and cooperation structures”, Ms. Kitty added.

“The third aspect is capacity building. How we learn together, looking at other areas, not just learning from each other, but how we learn from other areas together. Building our own regional capacity, respecting the specificities of our region. So education, but not just among young people, but among everyone, among society, among policy makers, among businesses”, she said.

“Climate change does not stop and until we understand that because something has worked in the past, it will not work today and that generations now shape the future, they have more say than we have”, Ms. Kitty said.

“Arsinoe” programme

Ms. Lydia Avrami, Scientific Associate of ELIAMEP, said that their presentation “has to do with the Arsinoe programme and the youth assemblies on climate change organised by “ELIAMED” last year and we will organise the next years in Athens”.

“It is a four-year programme, sponsored by the European Commission, coordinated by the University of Thessaly and involving 21 partners from 15 European countries and this programme includes both research and information actions and activities to create pathways for resilience and innovative policy measures and proposals and solutions to climate change across Europe.”

“We organised two youth gathering simulations with the participation of high school

and university students and a training seminar for trainers with the participation of secondary school teachers. We follow a bottom-up and community-based methodology and more specifically provide scientific knowledge and the necessary background adapted to the needs of the target group so that they can do research on their own maps and existing policies identifying local environmental problems and vulnerabilities and then meet so that a saving of local green roads is made at regional level”.

“The aim of this activity is to provide scientific knowledge but mainly to promote dialogue, a social consensus among young people, offering young people the opportunity to gain first-hand experience in participatory decision-making processes and provide all the necessary tools and practical instructions. These simulation techniques can be applied in secondary education”, Ms. Avrami explained.

“The first youth assemblies held in May, it should be noted that they encouraged the participation of students from different regions of Attica with a different socio-economic situation and exposure to the risk of climate change. Participants had the opportunity to participate in preparatory activities, such as carbon footprint measurements, to understand how it contributes to climate change and how all schools are creating environmental teams to identify and map environmental problems, risks, vulnerabilities at the local level. So the proposal for climate change is to capture the consensus of the youth in Athens and now we will be presenting soon with Otto Kaminaris”.

Green Deals

Taking the floor, Mr. Othon Kaminaris, Scientific Associate of ELIAMEP, said that “I will present to you the green agreements that the two youth assemblies produced. So, Lydia has already told you that we had a variety of backgrounds in terms of exposure to the risk of climate change. It was very encouraging that both university students and high school students identified and recognised common challenges. These are the categories of the axis around which the two youth assemblies revolved. We have, for example, perfect overlap with transport and recycling or we have different aspects of the same issues in energy transition and green building. For example, all weather conditions and more specific aspects, fire protection and flood protection and the only difference is the education that stands out in the text of high school students.”

“In order to further disseminate the results of the project, we sent them in groups to the local authorities in Athens. So, we came up with these five pillars, climate neutrality, waste management, green regeneration, resilience and education”, Mr. Kaminaris added.

“Some more specific measures are indicative because in just four days the students put out about 15 pages of recommendations and measures. In energy transitions, the idea revolved around energy autonomy and self-efficacy, especially after Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Thus, some of the policy proposals were the installation of a small-scale renewable energy project, such as land-based and floating solar parks, or the establishment of energy communities or the production of our own energy”.

“Also in the green building we had some larger-scale interventions such as improving the energy efficiency of buildings and photovoltaic panel installations on rooftops and in the transport sectors we had some pretty smart ideas such as installing smart bulbs or lighting public spaces or installing mini photovoltaic panels on the lanterns to not draw energy from the grid lines. In waste management, students proposed a holistic approach and an integrated waste management system with some very innovative ideas for rewarding programmes for recycling, for example “pay as I pollute” is a program they presented to offset pollution and recycle with municipal fees or example “Find my bin” is a proposal to create a mobile application to find the closest waste bins depending on the material we want to throw away”, he explained.

Mr. Kaminaris added that “in green redevelopments, students consider it necessary to reform outdoor public spaces to create more green spaces and for this purpose provide financial incentives to citizens to create small gardens, what we call pocket parks, and green terraces as well as the expropriation of unused spaces for the creation of parks. Regarding resilience to the effects of climate change and other measures, they suggested that we need to strengthen our services and infrastructure in general, such as national fire departments. The first recommendation, for example, is to install smart sensors on trees in the forest to alert fire brigades in case of fire and for early intervention or the use of innovative materials in the construction sector. Also, the operation of public spaces for homeless and stray animals in times of adverse weather conditions or the creation of flood protection works and the systematic cleaning of rubble streams and drains. Of course, in Athens in particular, urban planning is problematic in many ways, so we need to modify it.”

Regarding the issue of education, Mr. Kaminaris said that “they proposed the introduction of environmental awareness and projects in school programmes that are completely absent at the moment and measures to reduce waste by reusing school books that are in good condition and transferring them from student to student instead of each student holding his own.”

“So, these are some of the measures proposed by the students which were very innovative and with a perspective on all these issues, they can capture the areas to which we need to draw attention as they are the common challenges recognised by the youth of Athens”, Mr. Kaminaris concluded.

Youth for Climate Change

For her part, Ms. Eleni Theodorou, Associate Professor at the European University of Cyprus, said: “We will share with you both myself and Spyros points from our research which took place in Cyprus. It was a qualitative project carried out between January 2020 and May 2021 on youth activism for climate change through the case study “Youth for climate change. It was funded by the A. G. Leventis Foundation and the Greek Observatory of the London School of Economic and Political Science”.

“Youth for Climate Change, is a youth movement founded in 2019, organised by young people in Cyprus to fight climate change and inspired by Greta Thunberg. It has maintained ties with the global movement ‘Fridays for the future’”, Ms. Theodorou said.

Subsequently, she said: “we explored how young people (aged 14 to 22) made sense of their activism and the ways and forms in which they organised and operated using qualitative methods such as interviews and observations.”

“Their main goal was to raise awareness and put pressure on politicians and adult-led society, considering themselves catalysts for change. They viewed the climate crisis as an existential issue that disproportionately affects their own and future generations. They attributed the climate crisis to anthropogenic change fuelled by the drive to maximise profit, as a result of the prevalence of a consumerist lifestyle driven by the capitalist economic system and as a result of decisions (or lack thereof) of a political structure prone to corruption by the business world both nationally and globally”, Ms. Theodorou added.

“They framed it as a matter of intergenerational justice as well as a matter of social justice, as it affects disproportionately different generations as well as different social groups,” Ms. Theodorou said.

“While criticising previous generations, they also called for solidarity between generations, recognising the multigenerational, multidisciplinary, multi-annual and diversity of the issue,” she said.

“Youth for Climate Change engages in various forms of social activism, including street protests, role-playing or silent protests, awareness-raising campaigns, gathering and disseminating scientific data, and organising environmental actions. Everyday activism, such as talking to family members and friends about the issue and adopting lifestyle choices they say are more environmentally friendly, such as recycling, veganism, reducing consumerism and energy consumption in their home”, Ms. Theodorou said.

“Youth for Climate Change has defined its discourse on climate change by focusing on environmental change and the challenges facing Cyprus and the region. They also recognised the need to adapt their strategies according to the specificities of the Cypriot socio-cultural context, for example by using the Cypriot dialect in their slogans, appealing to local cultural norms and values for the family”, she said.

At the same time, Ms. Theodorou explained that “it created a space and exposed its deficiency, in order to legitimise the voices of young people and allow youth to draw attention to social and political issues that may have been silenced by certain adult narratives, such as the naturalisation of climate change, the dismissal of youth which are characterised as childhood concerns”.

“She raised the issue of democratic participation and intergenerational alliance as well as moral temporal responsibilities. Although the effectiveness of their action is an open question, the emergence of such a local youth activist movement demonstrates the potential of social youth movements as global and local alliances are forged. Cypriot young people are involved in international initiatives to address the climate issue and want to play an active role in sharing the political future not only of Cyprus but also of the region and the world”, Ms. Theodorou said.

"We are grateful to the young people who participated in our study and would like to acknowledge the contribution of the project researcher, Dr. Georgina Christou", she concluded.

Mr. Featherstone stressed that "there are issues here in terms of the scope of change for policy change and as Cleopatra mentioned these issues here in terms of capacity and constraints. Cleopatra was excellent when she told us about the importance of the issue and the limitations. Let me begin by pushing you a little bit further in terms of thinking about the future and your optimism-pessimism. In particular, you had this wonderful idea that the magnitude of climate change in the region would logically cause something like a green plan. But at the same time, you emphasise the lack of institutions to support the kind of cooperation. There is a capacity issue and there may be a problem finding it. Looking ahead 10 years, you could see reasons for optimism that there could be some kind of progress when it comes to regional cooperation".

Solidarity between the two communities

Taking the floor, Ms. Cleopatra Kitti, ELIAMEP's Senior Political Advisor, said: "There are initial efforts if we look at the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum, which is the beginning of an institutional forum where countries in the region work together to explore or share gas resources or ultimately trade and connect. So, this is the optimistic side. I think from a youth perspective I would really like to see more commitment to working together, in the ways that they know how to work together. I mean, technology knows no borders like climate change knows no borders. So, even if it is from small things like garbage-collecting projects on the shores of Mediterranean cities, whether it is a marine project or a civil society project, it is one thing. I know that we have NGOs in Cyprus that have done a project that worked on the coast of Cyprus. So, there are flashes of optimism and cooperation where there is imagination, leadership and mobilisation. We need more than that."

Addressing the speakers, Mr. Featherstone asked whether they see evidence that such an agenda will be able to build solidarity between the two communities of Cyprus.

Responding to his question, Mr. Spyrou said that "we have not seen any evidence of this. What we are seeing is young people trying to establish intergenerational solidarity to the extent that they are inviting older generations whom they hold partly responsible for what we have today and inviting them to join forces with them. We know that young people are actively trying to establish this kind of solidarity with the older generation because it is part of their agenda."

Mr. Spyrou explained that "this is a youth movement, so they want to preserve part of their identity as young people who have something different to say and who would not normally participate in formal political processes. Many of them, at least minors, do not have the right to vote, so the only way to express their political will is to participate in these social movements. Given also the topic of the forum a big question about the political participation of young people in decision-making that will affect their lives more than perhaps our generation. So even though we are talking about climate change, I think the issue is much bigger and we need to find ways to deal with it here in Cyprus. It happens everywhere, of course, but we have to find ways to involve young people in decision-making processes, especially in crises such as the one that, as you said, are of

an existential dimension. Young people have a lot at stake and have a complex vision and a very different from previous generations of what a sustainable world that is less human-centric and requires a lot would look like.”

Hellenic Observatory Director, Mr. Kevin Featherstone pointed out that there will not be many issues that link domestic youth activism so strongly with an international network, asking if this is important.

Mr. Spyrou said: “it helps Cyprus become less self-centred, I mean obviously there are local realities here and climate change is affecting us locally and we are just talking about the dust storms and all these new phenomena we are experiencing, the rise in temperature, the gradual desertification of the island. So there are local realities, but the issues are of course global and to the extent that young people are looking outward to cooperate with other countries and places. I think it is also a sign that young people are quite mature in understanding a future that is not just about us, only about Cyprus, and I think we need to support that and embrace it in many ways”.

The education system

Mr. Featherstone added: “As far as your own research is concerned, what I found interesting was that you speak very explicitly about intergenerational justice and your fieldwork included teacher discussion and teacher training on how to introduce climate change into the curriculum. It also included many interviews with students in schools”.

“I wonder what kind of contrasts or criticisms you may have received between one group as opposed to the other? In other words, did you get a sense of critical distance on the part of the school students from their teachers in such matters?”, Mr. Featherstone added.

The Scientific Associate of ELIAMEP, Ms. Lydia Avrami, replied that “in Greece it is quite interesting because it is exactly what we had in mind when we organised both activities for both students and teachers. The professors highlighted the socio-economic inequalities and how these even in our region vary both the exposure of students and citizens in general to the effects of climate change”.

“So, we see that they have extremely different perceptions and positions against climate change and how we can address this issue,” Ms. Avrami added.

“One of the main issues that emerged from our discussion with teachers and students is their low trust in local authorities and not just in the central authority. We can propose concrete measures, but what can local authorities do to address the risks of climate change and whether these policies will be effective in practice. So I think that so far it remains a key challenge, the implementation and I mean how citizens perceive the results of the policies implemented in Greece and in the field of climate change. But low trust in public authorities and stakeholder involvement are the main issue and the main obstacle. We must therefore give an incentive to prepare citizens and youth to become more active in this field”, Ms. Avrami concluded.

On his part, the Scientific Associate of ELIAMEP, Mr. Othon Kaminaris, said that “what I wanted to add regarding the teachers and the students is that mainly the students expected that they would be trained and would transfer some knowledge to the students so that they can act but also bring about change”.

“The students felt more connected, and indeed they would be the ones to bring about change. Thus, there was this little difference between them. For me it was a positive point because in Greece we have a clear gap in the participation of young people in decision-making in general. This was one of our most important goals when we had this idea that young people should formulate the decisions and situations in which they will live in the years to come.”