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There is No Plan(et) B: youth activism in the fight against climate change in Cyprus

Policy Brief

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KEY POINTS

- Climate change has emerged as a global challenge and crisis of existential proportions.
- Recently an international movement of school students called 'Fridays for Future' emerged to fight for climate action.
- The role that young people seek to play in climate action is often downplayed, dismissed or marginalized.
- Formal and informal spaces are needed to enable youth political participation and access to information on climate change policies.
- Public policies are needed to address ageism as a phenomenon of systemic discrimination towards not only older adults but also towards children and youth.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This policy brief aims to provide concrete policy suggestions regarding the issue of youth political participation, particularly focusing on the case of youth activism for climate change. The first part of the policy brief provides an overview of the issue of youth activism for climate change. It further describes the methodology employed to investigate how young people organize and mobilize around the cause of climate change and make meaning of their activism looking at Youth for Climate Cyprus as a case in point. The second part of the policy brief provides suggestions that emerge from the findings of this qualitative study and pertain to establishing fora and policies for enabling youth political participation. It is suggested that this can be achieved by adopting a more critical approach to citizenship education and by tackling the issue of ageism as a phenomenon that impacts the rights of children and youth.

Context

In recent years, climate change has emerged as a global challenge and crisis of existential proportions. Scientists predict that rising temperatures around the globe will create multiple problems for human life and wider ecosystems with irreversible consequences in the absence of drastic measures aimed at reducing greenhouse emissions. Scientists' calls for urgent action to curtail the adverse consequences of climate change have not found a satisfactory response from governments. Social movements fighting for climate action have emerged to create more awareness about climate change and to put pressure on governments to take policy measures to address the problem.

Young people have been at the forefront of such initiatives. Following, Greta Thunberg's 'school strike for climate' outside the Swedish parliament in August, 2018, an international movement of school students under the name of 'Fridays for Future' emerged to consolidate the efforts of young people who are engaged in protest and climate action (Wahlström et al. 2019). Inspired by these developments, a group of young people in Cyprus came together to form Youth for Climate Cyprus, a grassroots activist group aligned with the aims and objectives of the international Fridays for Future and calling for policy changes that can effectively address climate change.

Despite the fact that Cyprus is disproportionately affected by climate change and its effects are already visible, there is an absence of public debate and transparency on policies and measures taken on climate change. This contributes to a lack of awareness among the general population about the climate crisis and the need for urgent action. This general lack of awareness and easy access to information on current policies has meant that the question of climate change has yet to become a key issue in social policy discussions. At the same time, the role that young people seek to play in this respect is often downplayed, dismissed or marginalized. In large part, this results in a policy gap which needs to be addressed given the urgency of the climate crisis.

Young people have a right to participate in democratic processes and decisions which affect their lives in the present and the future. Given their frequent exclusion from official political channels, and the current widespread disappointment with established political institutions, youth often seek to achieve social change through participation in social movements (Flesher Fominaya 2012). The activist work of young people who aim to create more awareness and put pressure on the government to take action about climate change needs to be supported by policy measures that provide the necessary space for their perspectives and contributions in public debates. Such measures need to address, among others, the role of education, the media and of governmental agencies in facilitating a more democratic and inclusive public dialogue around climate change.

This policy brief addresses the policy dimension of youth participation in climate action first by exploring the social context of Cyprus and then by outlining the challenges it poses to climate action by young people. It concludes with a set of policy recommendations aimed at addressing these challenges and providing the social space for young people to be heard and contribute to public dialogue on climate change.

Data Sources and Methodology

This policy brief draws on data collected through an ethnographic study of Youth for Climate Cyprus from January 2020 to May 2021. The study included data from ethnographic observation, individual in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with young climate activists, as well as data from the collection and analysis of the group's social media posts and local press coverage. The overall aim of the study was to investigate how young people organize and mobilize around the cause of climate change and make meaning of their activism.

Current Situation and Challenges to Young People's Participation in Climate Action

- Young people in Cyprus and especially minors who are not eligible to vote have very limited opportunities for participating in formal political life and in ways that would allow them to contribute their own perspectives on issues that affect their lives, including climate change. A more general cultural understanding that young people need not participate in political life but focus instead on their education, and that they are citizens in the making rather than present social actors, discourages many children and youth from engaging with political issues. More generally, the limited political existence of the Republic of Cyprus as an independent state, founded only in 1960, has meant that it lacks the maturity and tradition in forming and maintaining processes, mechanisms and practices of democratic participation and operation. As a result, the perspectives of diverse groups, including those of children and young people, are often excluded.
- The Cyprus problem is often used as an alibi to refrain from addressing other social issues which are considered of lesser importance or potentially in conflict with the national interest. Moreover, the expression of dissent to dogmatic positions on the country's political and economic future often becomes highly politicized and branded as anti-patriotic. On the topic of the extraction of natural gas in particular, Youth for Climate Cyprus stand against the exploitation of natural gas in Cyprus and argue instead for policies that support the transitioning to a more sustainable economy with the use of renewable energy sources. Whereas in the public discourse the exploitation of gas (but also of the environment in general) has been rather unproblematic, framed primarily as a means of economic boost and even political leverage in the Cyprus issue. This

obstacle to democratic processes of political participation impedes and curtails the useful and often politically productive role of social movements in raising awareness and helping the public consider alternatives.

- Media coverage of children's and young people's climate activism in Cyprus is very limited. While international protests and activism on climate change receive more attention by mainstream media in Cyprus, the activist work of local young people and their perspectives on climate change receive scant attention, while sometimes they are also misrepresented.
- The curricula of public education in Cyprus do not address the question of climate change satisfactorily. As a result, students do not receive a proper and adequate understanding of climate change through their formal education which would potentially empower them to engage in climate action as critical citizens.
- Public schools do not provide substantive opportunities for students to participate in an informed dialogue about climate change, to express their concerns, fears and anxieties as well as their hopes for the future. This is a democratic deficit given that today's children and young people will be disproportionately affected by climate change.
- Public consultation: Overall, there is a serious lack of an efficient public consultation system for the various governmental policies affecting the broader public, including young people. Usually, consultations are of a tokenistic nature and take place after different policies have been already decided or important development plans have been signed by the various parties. Therefore, they often take the form of presentations to the public of governmental plans, rather than essential consultation in order to co-reach agreement.
- Transparency and awareness-raising: Access to information on the various policies regarding climate change that the government is undertaking is often very hard to reach and there is limited public availability and awareness-raising regarding the measures that the government is undertaking in this matter.

Policy Recommendations

1. Provide training to a) teachers on environmental education, including the issue of climate change and of teaching about climate change in schools, as well as on the teaching of citizenship education and democratic education, and b) to journalists and media professionals on climate change and sensitize them to young people's participation in climate action as well as on youth activism in general.
2. Develop more critical approaches in the national curriculum (along with relevant educational material) with regards to citizenship education to include issues of youth and citizen activism, as well as more critical approaches to the issue of climate change and climate justice. Additionally, adopt formal and informal practices in schools to promote youth participation in politics as well as cultivate skills that support democratic deliberation.

3. Establish formal and informal spaces (physical and online, e.g. conferences, seminars, online spaces etc.) to promote dialogue among political and other entities (i.e. the Parliament, the Commissioner for the Rights of the Child, Law Enforcement Agencies, NGOs, organized and non-organized youth, parents, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports and Youth, educational institutions, the Commissioner for the Environment, political parties, media agents) to discuss their role as enablers of youth political participation rather than as agents who impede it, and to provide opportunities for youth to publicly discuss with them social issues, such as that of climate change, which impact and concern youth in ways that may differ from other social groups.
4. Develop public policies to address ageism as a phenomenon of systemic discrimination towards not only older adults, but also towards children and youth that permeates all facets of society and circumvents basic human rights and the functioning of democratic institutions, especially as it works to impede children and youth political participation.
5. Improve transparency, inclusion and access to information regarding policies related to climate change. This can be achieved, for example, through the development of an online consultation platform by The Environment Department of the Ministry of Agriculture, Rural Development and Environment, which is the responsible body for implementing the Aarhus Convention. The online consultation platform should seek to make information and consultations publicly available by providing: a. An updated list of the ongoing public consultations, b. Relevant policy documents and legislation, c. A notification system for new public consultations, and d. A comment section for citizens' suggestions and replies by officials. Governmental authorities should ensure that all relevant parties, beyond experts on climate issues, are invited and welcomed to such consultations, including civil society members and informal youth groups.

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