Immediacy and Sustainable Development: The Perspective of Youth

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Abstract.

International development and in particular the concept of sustainable development have mid to long term time frames. Traditional international development studies have historically focused on macro level economic growth with an emphasis on infrastructure and grand scale public policy formation. It should be noted that the discipline has evolved and notions such as participatory development have entered the theoretical mainstream to complement macro level public policy concerns. Nevertheless, the time frame continues to be mid to long term. A youth perspective helps us explore the poignancy of immediacy for this important demographic group. Development for youth has a much shorter time frame than it does at the public policy level. The present paper explores how the concept of human security, and a youth perspective can help bridge the disconnect between mainstream international development studies, public policy discourse on sustainable development, and short term needs and realities of millions of people all over the world.

Keywords: international development, human security, youth, sustainable development

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1. Introduction

International development as a field has historically focused on economic growth and in practice, in large infrastructure projects (Feigenblatt, 2007, 2009a, 2009b; Solymári, 2018). Public policy has slowly mainstreamed important concepts from the discipline such as sustainable development, human development, and participatory development. Nevertheless, there is a sharp disconnect between international public policy in relation to development and the perspectives and needs of youth as a demographic group. Recent efforts by the United Nations such as the appointment of a Secretary General's Youth Envoy and the subsequent creation of a United Nations Youth Office (UNYO) are signs that global leaders recognize the importance of this demographic group and that it is important for young people to understand the efforts undertaken by nation-states, intergovernmental organizations, and other important stakeholders (Berents & Mollica, 2022).

In order to integrate youth into the global agenda and to empower them to participate in decision-making and agenda setting it is necessary to understand the characteristics of this important demographic group. Youth encompasses a demographic group that plays a central role in economic development, demographic growth, or contraction, and many of the live events that take place during this stage of life have a profound impact on important socio-economic processes. Therefore, it is necessary to explore the socio-cultural aspects of this demographic group and to assess how they fit into prevalent models of development and security.

2. Time Orientation and Indulgence versus Self-Restraint as a Framework of Analysis

Anthropologists have studied time orientation as a cultural trait for many years (Faubion, 2007; Macdonald, 2007). Time is one of the cultural dimensions identified by Geert Hofstede in his seminal study conducted during his time working for IBM (Eldridge & Cranston, 2009). His cultural dimensions theory falls under cross-cultural psychology but is compatible with an anthropological approach. Originally the theory included only four dimensions, namely individualism-collectivism, uncertainty avoidance, power distance and task-orientation versus person-orientation, however the theory was eventually expanded to include two more dimensions, indulgence versus self-restraint and long-term orientation. Even though Hoftede's model was developed to evaluate cultural dimensions based on national cultures, the model has proven to have considerable theoretical traction beyond its intended focus. The model has had a profound impact on a varied array of fields such as communication, psychology, business administration, and even political science.

From the perspective of research on intergenerational cultural differences two dimensions are particularly useful because they focus on some of the characteristics that have been identified in the literature as relevant to understand the general understanding of the different generations in relations to the workplace and to their cosmovision. In other words, a review of the literature on intergenerational differences results in the identification of two main categories which largely coincide with the two previously mentioned cultural dimensions (Torche, 2015). Moreover, the two

dimensions can help us explore the challenges of bridging human security and sustainable development from a youth perspective.

3. Bridging the Gap between sustainable development and human security

One of the main criticisms of the concept of sustainable development is that it tends to be focused on very ambitious, long-term goals, rather than on immediate needs (MacFarlane & Khong, 2006). Moreover, even though certain strands of sustainable development pay attention to local efforts and projects, discourse on sustainable development tends to focus on macro level efforts. On the other hand, human security which can be defined as "freedom from want" and "freedom from fear" focuses on the individual, bridges traditional security concerns with development issues (Hook, Gilson, Hughes, & Dobson, 2005; Peng-Er, 2006; Wongboonsin, Pongsapich, Pongsapich, & Sookkhee, 2006).

Youth is traditionally defined as those between the age of 15 and 29 but some definitions are more inclusive and include everyone from 15 to 35 (Harlan, 2016). From the point of view of generations as units of analysis, the experiences and life events that take place in those two decades of life tend to have a profound impact on the individual development and life chances of young people. Therefore, exploring issues of sustainable development from the perspective of youth is not only fruitful but necessary if the related policies are to have a beneficial effect on their live prospects.

There is a plethora of studies dealing with intergenerational differences (Molly, Laveren, & Jorissen, 2012; Rick & Forward, 1992; Santos & Cox, 2000). Studies focusing on generation Z point to ambition and money as an important goal (Dolot, 2018; Seemiller & Grace, 2015). Members of this generation are digital natives and use their phones as their main hub of communication. Pragmatism is a central characteristic of generation Z and they tend to be prone to questioning authority (Dolot, 2018). Entrepreneurial and concerned about the future, members of this generation have grown up in an insecure world. Generation Z is less idealistic and more focused on short term goals related to basic needs than previous generations. Even though the previous characteristics focus on generation Z, namely people born between 1995-2010, youth in most historical periods has shared some common characteristics richly encompassed by two dimensions of Hofstede's model, time orientation and indulgence versus self-restraint.

Time orientation is a core defining trait of youth as defined by people from 15 to 35 years of age. Young people tend to have a short-term orientation. This is understandable taking into consideration that youth coincide with a period of entering the job force and fighting for a position in society. In general, young people lack the accumulated resources of older people and face a constant struggle to identify opportunities to keep climbing the professional and social ladder. Starting a family also implies immediate economic responsibilities such as providing for young children. Due to the intensity and speed of changes and rites of passage during youth, there is a sharp need for immediacy.

A second dimension, indulgence versus self-restraint is dependent on socio-economic conditions but it is also related to the stage of life. Youth may experience a sharp transition from indulgence to self-restraint when transitioning from dependents living with their parents to independent single adults and then during the process of starting a family. In terms of context, the

ebbs and flows of the global economy and the individual situation of each family influences the poignancy of this particular cultural dimension. Nevertheless, studies of generation Z point to a sharp turn to pragmatism and austerity which may be due to their formative years taking place during a sharp economic downturn and a global pandemic (Ang, Shorey, Lopez, Chew, & Lau, 2022). Thus, self-restraint can be considered to be a central trait to youth in this particular time.

Now that two central cultural dimensions for youth have been identified and the concepts of sustainable development and human security have been introduced, we will turn to the challenge of bridging the gap between sustainable development and human security by integrating a youth perspective. There is a vast literature dealing with the differences between sustainable development and human security (Akaha, 2009; Ashizawa, 2008; Battersby & Siracusa, 2009). Most studies point to the unit of analysis as the main difference between the two concepts. Human Security focuses on the individual while sustainable development tends to focus on the community level or macro level (Battersby & Siracusa, 2009). Nevertheless, bridging the gap between the two concepts requires an understanding of the underlying assumptions of each paradigm. Human Security has an underlying assumption of immediate need and the securitization of the wellbeing of the individual implies the non-negotiable nature of certain basic needs. On the other hand, sustainable development tends to have a longer-term perspective with an emphasis on stability and planning. Therefore, bridging the gap between human security and sustainable development requires the integration of youth perspectives. In particular the immediacy of certain issues and the challenges posed by indulgence versus self-restraint. The next section provides a few recommendations that can be used by policymakers and leaders to bridge the gap between the two concepts.

4. Recommendations

Policymakers should take into consideration that youth perspectives differ from other groups in terms of the important cultural dimension of time-orientation. Sustainable policies must include intermediate steps which clearly connect with short term needs in addition to building up to long term goals. One of the most important challenges faced by statesmen is to gain the buy-in of youth to successfully implement their policies. Nevertheless, the open-ended nature of many policies and the emphasis on long term goals can make them unpalatable and distant to youth. A simple yet effective solution is to divide complex policies with long term time frames into clearly measurable intermediate steps and goals. This simple approach is used by educators when assigning complex projects (Ortiz, Aparicio-Gómez, & von Feigenblatt, 2023; von Feigenblatt, 2023; von Feigenblatt & Ricardo, 2023). Students find it easier to tackle a large project when they focus on smaller steps that lead up to its completion. One of the advantages of this approach is that it ameliorates the challenge of short attention spans, and it also eases the challenge of connecting personal effort to attainable goals. As explored in previous sections of this paper, young people have short term time orientations and thus it is easier to include them and empower them if the projects and goals are presented in a format that is compatible with their perspectives and cultural frameworks.

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