

## **Beyond consumer-citizenship:**

### **How concepts of “Well-Living” can support youth in a changing world**

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#### **Abstract**

Understanding the issues facing young people in rapidly urbanising, high consumption societies is crucial as we strive to achieve both the Sustainable Development Goals and the ambitions of the Paris Climate Agreement. In this presentation I will reflect on initial insights from CYCLES, the Children and Youth in Cities Lifestyle evaluation, a study I led with colleagues from CUSP the Centre for Understanding Sustainable Prosperity in the UK, directed by economist Prof Tim Jackson, and 6 other partner nations, and supported from New Zealand by Post-doc fellow, Dr Kate Prendergast. CYCLES or the Children and youth in cities lifestyle evaluation and sustainability study, examines the every-day aspirations, energy and consumption experiences of children and young people aged 12 to 24 years who are growing up in seven world cities: Christchurch, New Zealand; Delhi, India; Dhaka in Bangladesh; Makhanda in South Africa; London, England; São Paulo, Brazil; and Yokohama in Japan. I want to talk today about some of very initial insights from CYCLES and to discuss how concepts of “well-living”, which range from Hauora here in Aotearoa New Zealand; to buen vivir in South America, can also help move us beyond thinking about wellbeing as an individual responsibility to supporting young citizens to live well collectively, within communities, in low-carbon, more sustainable ways.

#### **Introduction**

As a very lapsed Presbyterian it is quite a daunting honour to give a Sir Lloyd Geering inaugural address. However I take heart that the Lloyd Geering I grew up aware of, was a man who wrestled with God, and was famously tried for heresy. Even as a teen I was aware of his work and I recognised his debates with institutional power were creating space for new ways of thinking about social justice and spirituality in an increasingly secular society. I hope Sir Lloyd, who so inspired my own parents, including my late father, will forgive and perhaps even welcome tonight's talk, and what maybe a contentious and certainly very secular rethinking of our tendency to moralise on youth consumerism. My aim is to help us understand how we can better support young citizens growing up in urban communities. At a time when youth suicide remains persistently high, and young people are burdened with unprecedented debt, and soaring levels of loneliness, it is deeply moving to me that teens are also leading a highly effective climate protest globally. It is up to us, to lighten their load.

Why focus on urban teens? In this the century of the city, by 2050, 7 out of 10 young people on the planet will live in an urbanising area. Cities are also the sites of consumption. Covering about 2% of total land area, cities are sites of approximately 70% of all resource use and carbon dioxide production. Understanding how to support young people to live well in in this context helps us to understand how we can all live well within limits in rapidly urbanising world.

In tonight's discussion I will draw on very early insights from analysis of our Cycles study which asks how do young people see their urban world? This data has been gathered by research and literature reviews, focus groups in 7 cities, photo elicitations and drawing exercises followed next year by online or face to face questionnaires.

In this research process we have been listening to young people aged 12-24 as they talk about their everyday lives, including what they like about where they live and what they might like to change.

We wanted to understand the possibilities for young people to live flourishing urban lives in sustainable ways. To do this, we asked them to tell us some everyday consumption behaviours across 5 high energy use domains- that is we asked them to talk about the kind of food they eat and where they get it from and who they eat it with. We asked about how they get around their city and get away, We talked about how they spend their leisure time, what their

home life is like, and about their work, school or unemployed and volunteer time. We also asked focus group participants to photos of a “day in my life” across these energy domains or to make drawings to illustrate their everyday experiences and we will be sharing these images in the form of a travelling exhibition which opened last year in London as part of the ESRC Festival of Social Science and will come to Christchurch in early 2010.

In the privileged position of conducting this study we are gradually starting to understand our participants’ hopes and aspirations for the future and what the ‘good life’ mean for teens and young adults in an age of environmental and social limits?

While CYCLES focuses in particular on the lives of young urban citizens living in very different contexts and situations, each youthful community faces some strikingly shared challenges: Accessing clean drinking water, ensuring good nutrition; and finding affordable, safe efficient transport. In all our communities young people spoke of enormous pressure to get a good education and their hopes, often thwarted of long term decent employment. Spending time with family, and friends and enjoying pets were strikingly similar simple and important experiences.

Between the ages of 12 and 24, young people develop values as citizens in a fast-changing world together with footprints for energy use and habits of consumption.. Their desire for and confidence in social agency, acting with others to achieve shared goals is also fostered in this time

Our aim in this study is not just to understand these phenomena but to identify pragmatic ways to help young people across our cities to achieve their full potential—within the limits of a finite planet. As my colleague Tim Jackson argues, our hope with this study is to engage in a vital conversation about young people’s prospects for the future. To improve those prospects is to improve our own lives.

This discussion tonight also presents a critical assessment of the literature on sustainable consumption in the global North and South, in the context of accelerated and mega-scale transitions that are needed across all human activities, in ways that “leave no one behind,” as envisaged in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). I want to challenge two dominant, related assumptions: an emphasis on the individual and individual aspirations of the good life, and the policy of incrementalism rational ecological modernization. I accept that individuals must act consciously to advance sustainability, but argue that nuanced interpretations of collective sustainable living, an appreciation of the meanings youth gain in consumer behaviour, and the pressure of debt they experience as we privatize costs of educating our democracies to individuals is rarely well debated

## Conclusions

Discussion will highlight what young people are doing and achieving in current consumption patterns and how they are maintaining diverse values of extended family, tribe and community solidarity, and human and non-human interrelationships in ways often poorly understood by adults who I argue are often too swift to judgement and moral panic.

I think it is vital we notice and support the space being maintained and created by young citizens for harmonious, peaceful, spiritual, and material coexistence. Concepts such as Ahimsa (India), Buen Vivir (South America), Ubuntu (Africa), Hauora (New Zealand), or Shiwase and Ikigai (Japan), and Va-Pacific for example can enrich our understandings of sustainable living as long-term collective action for sustainable development in a time of immense upheaval and social and environmental pressure.

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