

56. Sustainable consumption and lifestyles? Children and youth in cities

by
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This article focuses on one of the world's first online qualitative global surveys of young consumers and their lifestyles. The discussion highlights how the survey has informed subsequent planning for a new mixed-method global study of urban youth, CYCLES for sustainability. This research aims to equip young people, local and national governments to support flourishing young lives and sustainable consumption more effectively.

Understanding young urban consumers and their visions of sustainability

Consumption by urban youth is not well understood. Nor are their diverse aspirations and attitudes to sustainable living. The environmental impacts and consumption behaviour of young people have only recently been scrutinised (e.g. Belk, Ger and Askegaard, 2003; Cohen, 2010; Fondapol, 2011; Mead et al., 2012; Schor, 2011; UNEP, 2011). There is still much to learn about the complex motivations and drivers of youth consumption, including the way consumption is influenced by youth identities, aspirations, relationships, habits and norms as well as by social practices. Further lessons include the opportunities and constraints that the producers of urban environments impose and that the urban environments in which young people live provide (CERG/IRG, 2011; Euromonitor International, 2012). In addition, the richer North has undertaken much of the existing research, which only examines affluent youth. The complex issues confronting nine out of ten young people living in developing countries have been overlooked (UNICEF, 2012).

Many young city residents can exercise significant “agency” (or the ability to imagine and effect desired change), in this case for sustainable outcomes. However, cities are also the sites of some of the most serious experiences of growing inequality. Some youth experience unemployment and severe material deprivation, including food, fuel and financial insecurity, which erodes their agency (Hart, 1997; Hayward, 2012; Jackson, 2009; Nussbaum, 2011; UN Habitat, 2011).

In this light, this article has two functions. First, it briefly summarises the results and insights from one of the first global qualitative surveys of sustainable lifestyles to focus on youth – the United Nations Environment Programme’s (UNEP) Global Survey on Sustainable Lifestyles (GSSL) (UNEP, 2011). It explains why the authors of this survey call for the social sciences to rethink the conditions of youth consumption, and to examine young people’s experiences in their own words and images more effectively. Then it introduces the research aims and approach of a new CYCLES for Sustainability, a mixed-method, repeated cross-sectional global survey focused on children and youth (aged 12 to 24) that builds on the GSSL.

Insights from the Global Survey on Sustainable Lifestyles

In 2011, UNEP and the International Marrakech Task Force on Sustainable Lifestyles, led by Sweden under the Marrakech Process on Sustainable Consumption and Production, published a report called *Visions for Change: Recommendations for Effective Policies on Sustainable Lifestyles* (UNEP, 2011). This publication reported on the results of the GSSL, an online survey based on qualitative research principles, involving 8 000 young urban adults aged 18 to 35 years from 20 countries. The survey, conducted in co-operation with research partners in each country, examined how young people talk about the sustainability of their everyday lifestyles, their expectations, socio-cultural identities and visions for their future. A special partnership was formed with the International Association of Universities and 13 of its members participated in the GSSL.

The GSSL had four secondary aims:

- to investigate how young adults (predominantly tertiary educated, mid- to high-income consumers) evaluated their life satisfaction and the sustainability of their daily mobility, food and home life
- to interrogate young people’s reactions to alternative, animated scenarios of sustainable mobility, food and housekeeping
- to determine young respondents’ self-reported knowledge of the implications of climate change on their lives
- to understand the opportunities, actors and responsibilities for a sustainable future identified by the respondents.

Against the background of the 2008 financial crisis and significant media debate about youth consumption and personal debt, the respondents were questioned about their hopes, fears and dreams. The results of the GSSL revealed surprisingly modest aspirations for material security, closer personal relationships and fulfilling employment. Well-being, agency and meaning-making, often referred to as “making a difference”, were frequently cited as the cornerstones of the respondents’ ideal futures (UNEP, 2011).

Most respondents agreed that poverty and environmental degradation were the world’s “most important global challenges”, but many had difficulties linking these to their local conditions. Self-reported life satisfaction ranged from a median of 6 out of 10 (Ethiopia) to 9 out of 10 (Colombia). The sample median score was 8. However, a significant minority of respondents in industrialised economies also noted stress as a result of exam pressure, long working or commuting hours and concerns about finding a life purpose, a significant relationship or financial security. In developing economies, physical insecurity as a result of drug wars, conflict and poverty were important concerns.

Despite their comparatively high income and education, a significant minority also felt their lives were more stressful than those of their grandparents (although many young

women in particular reported having more education and employment options). When asked to describe the worst way of living they could imagine, many expressed concern about loss of freedom, summed up as a loss of their human rights or personal agency.

The GSSL also tested young people's responses to scenarios for more sustainable living. The results revealed significant gaps between the reactions of respondents to some policies and activities that might be conducive to sustainable living, and the expectations of policymakers and other actors such as businesses and urban planners. The negative reactions in some communities to suggested policy scenarios underscores why we need more research into the complex ways in which young people engage in consumption to achieve their life aspirations in their local communities.

Why CYCLES, why cities?

The GSSL experience has prompted the development of a major mixed-method study of changing consumption and well-being: CYCLES for Sustainability. This is a new global survey developed by UNEP and the Sustainable Lifestyles Research Group (SLRG) at the University of Surrey in the United Kingdom in collaboration with important partner organisations.¹ Youth unemployment is approaching record levels in Europe, Africa and the Middle East, threatening to blight the prospects of young adults (ILO, 2012). Widespread concern has been expressed about a "lost generation" and a broken social contract between the generations and between communities and governments.

As nearly half of the world's population are under the age of 25 and an estimated seven in every ten young people are expected to be living in urban communities by 2050 (UNICEF, 2012), CYCLES will concentrate on young people living in cities. While cities occupy only 2% of the Earth's surface, they consume 75% of its natural resources.

The objective of CYCLES is to understand the consumption experiences and life aspirations of children and young people aged 12 to 24 using cross-sectional, repeated cohort sampling (Bryman, 2012). The first cohort survey will be ready in 2014. The research methodology aims to identify the drivers of sustainable lifestyles, sociocultural identities and habits over time and in local communities. It will also examine the ways in which built infrastructure and policy initiatives help or hinder young citizens to effect lifestyle change.

The GSSL focused on the energy-intensive aspects of mobility, food and housekeeping. The CYCLES survey will examine these areas as well as leisure and communication, which are closely related to fundamental rights, basic needs and social interactions, and which also influence pollution, waste production, greenhouse gas emissions, health and well-being. Analysis of the survey's results, in consultation with an international advisory panel including urban policymakers, youth advocates and social researchers, will help ensure that targeted policy recommendations support more sustainable outcomes for urban youth.

CYCLES for Sustainability will be implemented in 21 cities in 21 countries at five-year intervals to capture public imagination at a grassroots community level. This survey will highlight the significance of Agenda 21, a blueprint for sustainable development, development that promotes economic growth, improved quality of life and environmental protection – adopted by countries at the 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development. The study will be conducted in two parts. First will be discussions with city focus groups, including youth photo diaries about consumer behaviour and perceptions. These will feed into the second part, a global online survey (Barry and Proops, 1999) to

probe attitudes regarding consumption habits, self-reported well-being, material quality of life and people's aspirations and experiences in urban environments.

Rethinking youth consumption in cities

The initial GSSL research indicated that contrary to widely reported media expectations of “selfish me” consumers, many young people approach their aspirations and future prospects with an attitude that could be well aligned with a more sustainable future. This includes modest material hopes and desires, a strongly internalised sense of agency expressed as a desire to “make a difference”, and fear of loss of freedoms such as human rights. Yet younger generations now face ecological and economic challenges that threaten to limit their ability to exercise agency and freedom. And at present, their values and attitudes are not always translated into concrete sustainable behaviours.

In order to live well within the boundaries of the planetary and local ecosystems, we need to understand the youthful visions of more sustainable lives, and the challenges that confront this rising urban generation. We argue that social science research can and must support young people in dealing with the threats and dilemmas of 21st-century urban living, and should identify opportunities for greater co-operation and sustainable and social innovation.

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Note

1. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the Partnership for Education and Research about Responsible Living (PERL), the International Social Science Council (ISSC), Consumers International and the SEEDS Youth Research Group, University of Canterbury, New Zealand.

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