



Group Assembly Process (GAP) - Stirring Paper

Children & Degrowth

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Childhood in societies focused on economic growth

Debates on Degrowth, Sustainability or Transition Towns rarely mention the role of children in future world worth living in nor do they suggest paths leading to more sustainable and humane living conditions for children. If so, they mostly deal with the design of schools and working conditions for parents.

Childhood has changed. The elements of an upbringing by socialisation have disappeared, as has participation in work and cultural life of adults and self-determined play outdoors. It is stated, that modern childhood mainly takes place indoors. Childhood is seen to be steered mainly by inputs from adults, whether pedagogically welcomed (as in schools), other day care institutions, or whether criticised through the influence of electronic media and an abundance of toys. Children's lives take place on isolated "islands", designed for them and generally separated from adult life. Children cannot usually travel on their own from one location to another. (1)

In Germany for the last ten years, many former half-day schools and kindergartens have turned into day-care institutions.

The industrial society has generally focused on economic growth with rational and functional land use. This is tied in individual motorized transport (the car) where the adult drives the child from one place to another. Places are not multi-use for work, consumption and play. Children cannot travel autonomously (by walking or cycling) from one place to another. Such aspects of modern childhood are said to have harmful influences, as e.g. lack of physical exercise and obesity or lack of concentration for learning. Remedies offered by the industrial society are: new special professions for adults and new special rooms for children, as well as more and more often medicamentation.

On the other hand, the UN Convention of Children's Rights states: *Parties recognize the right of the child to rest and to leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts. (Article 31 (1)).*

In 2013, Art.31 was brought up in a general debate. Concern over the current state of children's autonomy was expressed. More leisure time, more free space to play and more opportunities to take part freely in cultural life were requested. (2)

Children have an urge to play and to explore their environments. Most young animals, and all mammals, do so. Thus, evolutionary biologists conclude that the urge for play and exploration is very important for wellbeing. Moreover, ethnologists have found that children in hunter-gatherer societies mostly fill their days with play in mixed-age groups, often mimicking adults' activities. Nor was much formal education or were extended chores observed. In societies which might have had a similar structure, mankind developed as a biological being. (3)

Thus, it could be harmful for a child's development to ignore her or his need for autonomous exploration.

Perspectives for a childhood in Degrowth Societies

We believe that experiential learning should play an important part in childhood in a degrowth society. This includes free participation in the work of adults as well as free time and space for self-determined play. In a society moving towards less material consumption, children need more competences which are fostered by autonomous exploration. (4)

This concept does not exclude time for learning structured by adults, which will always be important in a complex and literate society.

Lack of physical exercise, has already been mentioned as one characteristic of modern childhood. It leads to obesity, poor motor skills, postural defects and greatly increases the probability of falling ill from type 2 diabetes, heart disease, osteoporosis and cancer. Kohl and Craig (2012) call it a pandemic of modern society. (5) Many surveys show that physical exercise is strongly intertwined with cognitive skills and mental well-being. Physical and mental well-being are crucial to a child's healthy development.

Pedagogically unregulated play is connected with intensive negotiation about matters, roles and fairness. It is creative, as children find new solutions for their intentions. It is not dependent upon prefabricated consumer goods.

Working towards a society where consumption is organised intelligently in order to improve distributive justice and ecological sustainability, creativity and the ability to fulfil one's needs with less material goods, is crucial. Children are allowed many opportunities to play and act autonomously, to train their creativity and their social skills. They perceive themselves as self-efficient beings, i.e. they consider themselves to be able to implement tasks and plans successfully based on their own abilities and resources.

Children play outdoors and prefer natural surroundings, as many materials and diverse spaces are available. This leads to a sympathetic and realistic attitude towards nature. Good neighbourhoods and a diverse network of relationships would make it easier to keep an eye on children and present an excellent opportunity for socialising. Free and diverse open spaces for children can easily be made available in a society with less motorised transport, a strong neighbourhood community and less specialised working areas.

The implementation of features for an active childhood is an essential first step. This means that, from this day forward, children would have the option to be less dependent on consumption and to be able to organise their lives as adults creatively, healthily and with lots of active socialising.

Realistic steps to open spaces and time for children in today's society are available or feasible without great effort:

First steps toward a childhood in a Degrowth society

Town Planning Interventions

Redefinition and Re-vitalisation of public and private realms

This includes putting into place large, connected community spaces near to living areas. Access from public areas or buildings will be simple and they will be easy to use. Landlords will have a duty to create play and leisure spaces.

- Children can make their daily journeys on their own (to school, courses, friends, etc.)
- Free realms exist so that children can explore their surroundings and learn from them.

This means minimum 5% of a residential area will be left undeveloped as “break-out” space. An aim would be a nature experience area and residential/commercial/cultural/leisure spaces tightly fitted together in village or urban district. Large commercial and out-of-town shopping areas will be closed down.

No barriers

A minimisation of barriers, barring children from their goals will be achieved through involving children in the planning process.

A new form of mobility means greater security

Car-free areas in cities and in villages (with necessary exceptions), public transport will be improved – particularly in the countryside and around small towns, cooperative mobility will be supported (car-sharing), development and support of alternatives which can already be used by older children: Rickshaws, Transport (pedal) bikes, horse and donkey wagons, general reduction of mobility due to a more locally based life

Greater security due to altered spaces

Dangerous and deserted spaces will be minimised or redeveloped with community involvement.

Reducing consumption spaces

Commercial advertising in public spaces will be very limited. In its place, an economy of sufficiency will emerge: Swap- and free- shops; cooperatives; centres for meetings, playing and learning; community gardens; co-sewing spaces; self-help and up-cycling workshops. These will receive just as much footfall as the shopping centres and consumer areas did before them. Children will always be welcome there.

Allowing active participation

Enabled through playgrounds in buildings and adventure playgrounds where children can build themselves, instead of pre-made “play islands” by adults. More space covered in children's farms and gardens.

Social interventions

Making the neighbourhood alive again

Children and parents play an active part in a mixed age neighbourhood where pressure on the nuclear family is relieved and spread outwards, making use of friendly neighbours. Pictograms in shops let children know where they can find comfort and safety. Community wardens in districts and villages only intervene where there are big problems; there is less crime due to a high degree of social control and social cohesion.

De-constructing our image of children

Children are different from adults, however, they should be treated with the same respect and taken seriously. Trust is the basis for all interpersonal relations. Decision processes weigh up everyone's needs. Children are respected as individuals. They serve neither the parents' longing to realise their own dreams, nor pedagogical ideals, nor are they neglected. As members of the community, tasks will be allocated to them appropriate to their age and abilities. Children are not forced into gender roles but are allowed to develop freely, as they wish. There are deconstruction courses for adults.

The right to play

The right to play will be recognised as the most important component of a child's mental, physical and spiritual development. Free play will have priority before other activities required from a child. Children, who have enough time to play, will take on tasks for the community voluntarily and will imitate the activities of working adults.

Democratisation of Childhood

Children of every age will be asked their opinion over important decisions to be taken regarding the village or urban district. This opinion flows into the decision making process. Children are allowed to take part in local council elections. A certain quota of children are incorporated into the local council and their voices count just as much as the adults. For long-term and marked differences of opinion, the council will be called to find a common solution. Questions about the age-to-start to be part of the council have to be discussed and adapted.

Economic interventions

Shortened work schedule for all, but particularly for parents of children under twelve.

Fewer full-day schools or Kindergartens, more time for the main adult responsible/guardians for children to spend time with them without the pressure to fill that time earning money. More time for the neighbourhood, societies, arts and crafts, looking after and maintaining the urban spaces, voluntary work, politics, public relations etc., showing the children the role of an active and participative adult as an example to follow.

Learning workshops in all urban districts and villages

Non-profit art and craft enterprises will be founded, subsidised by (e.g.) the Ministry for Culture (which now saves money in other areas). These serve as experiential and learning environments for the whole community, crossing generational and gender boundaries.

The green belts around villages will consist totally of safe organic materials and will purely employ organic farming methods

Toxic substances, which in the past were exposed by children's play, will be minimised. Subsidies will be available for this and for re-wilding of some areas near to the village for the benefit of the younger generation.

Pedagogical interventions

Re-opening of village/district schools and shorter ways /Re-Vitalisation of an area.

Learning happens everywhere, constantly. Children are seen as contributing, vocal subjects who wish to develop themselves, instead of objects to be schooled. The adults' challenge is the creation of stimulating yet safe surroundings for the both learning and experiential processes. Knowledge is acquired through experience, as much as possible. Children are seen as individuals. "Schools" will be rededicated into open, cross-generational learning spaces through and around which the process of living permeates. On the State level, the compulsory presence of children above six in schools is withdrawn. Learning assistants as well as neighbourhood wardens and children's guardians are responsible for security and for the supply and explanation of learning materials. However, younger children are not always accompanied by adults but profit from the leadership of older ones.

Cross-generational learning

Training centres are planned to be open and interlinked with the neighbourhood community. They are no longer self-contained, exclusive islands.

References:

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