

## **Empowering Tomorrow's Guardians: The Impact of Student-Led Activism on Achieving UN Sustainable Development Goals**

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### **Abstract**

*This theoretical paper examines how student-led activism can advance the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and position youth as integral participants in the future, rather than recipients. It integrates the actions of the marginalized through activism (SDG 10), systematic change by praxis-based education (SDG 4 and SDG 12), and cross-national collaboration (SDG 17), as it is based on social movement theory (resource mobilization and framing), critical pedagogy (Freire), intergenerational justice (Rawls extended), ecological citizenship, and cosmopolitanism (Beck). The Activism-SDG Nexus model explains how inputs (education, mobilisation) lead to collective action that results in policy influence, and how feedback loops identify pathways to achieve this by empowering people through iterative empowerment. Nevertheless, despite obstacles such as structural inequalities and scalability challenges, youth activism redefines the implementation of the SDGs as dialogic and youth-focused, thereby adding moral urgency and transformative agency to sustainability.*

**Keywords:** youth activism, student voice, UN SDGs, empowerment theory, intergenerational justice, and critical pedagogy.

### **Introduction**

The urgency of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) stems from their adoption as a global agenda in 2015 to address interrelated challenges, including poverty, inequality, climate change, and environmental degradation. On 25 September 2015, United Nations Member States unanimously adopted the Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which comprises 17 SDGs and 169 targets, with the United Nations expecting them to be achieved by 2030 (United Nations, 2015). This agenda is a radical roadmap for people, planet, and prosperity that underscores that sustainable development must be achieved through an urgent, collective effort to eradicate poverty, safeguard the environment, and guarantee peace and justice to all

(United Nations, n.d.a). The SDGs are based on the Millennium Development Goals but extend to encompass universality, a whole-person approach, and a firm commitment to leaving no one behind (United Nations, 2015).

The urgency at the global scale is heightened by growing evidence that planetary boundaries are being crossed, including rapid climate change, biodiversity loss, and resource depletion, which pose a threat to long-term human well-being. According to progress reports, many targets, including those related to education, hunger, and climate action, are at risk of being overdue without accelerated action, with the most vulnerable population groups disproportionately affected, including children and youth (United Nations, n.d.b). The future generation bears disproportionate weight, as present generations will impose escalating environmental, social, and economic costs on it through decisions about emissions, resource use, and policy inaction. The central element in sustainability discussions has been intergenerational inequity, whereby current actions must protect the rights and opportunities of future generations (United Nations, 2015; see also the intergenerational equity discussion in the sustainability context).

The youth are portrayed here as the world's future custodians, casting them not as passive observers of a fallen world but as active participants responsible for caring for the planet. Such framing emphasises their vested interest in the sustainability outcomes since they will be the inheritors and dwellers on the long-term results of current environmental and developmental paths. Youth are seen as guardians because they promote intergenerational justice, meaning that resources, ecosystems, and opportunities are maintained in ways that are just for future generations, and they also take responsibility for creating avenues to resilience and equity (United Nations, n.d.c).

In the past, the role of the youths in international issues has been modified to allow active involvement. Previous environmental movements tended to regard youth as either beneficiaries of adult decisions or as future stakeholders who require education. Nonetheless, modern patterns demonstrate a deep shift: young people are currently in the vanguard of grassroots movements, utilising digital means and pressurising institutions. Such evolution is also reflected in the Fridays for Future movement, in which students reforming all over the world are demanding bold climate policies, and they refuse to be tokenistically incorporated into the world order but gain influence through real action (see youth activism literature on agency reorientation). This proactive role reinvigorates youth as agents who will co-create sustainable futures, rather than as dependents, and disrupts established power structures, demonstrating their capacity for innovation and ethical urgency in addressing systemic problems.

### **Research Problem and Objectives**

The overarching research question guiding this theoretical paper is: How does student-led activism, in theory, contribute to the realisation of the UN Sustainable Development Goals? Although the concept of youth agency is increasingly being talked about in sustainability circles, little theoretical effort has been devoted to how the three foundations of activism, namely mobilisation, framing and empowerment fit and work in tandem in SDG implementation other than through empirical case studies.

These goals are tri-faceted and they are: (1) to examine the inception of social movement theory, empowerment theories and models of agency to provide theoretical underpinnings of youth activism; (2) to chart the conceptual correspondence between student-led activism and SDGs, especially those related to education (SDG 4), climate action (SDG 13), reduced inequalities (SDG 10), and partnerships (SDG 17); and (3) to present a conceptual model that explains pathways of empowerment of how activism can make a transform.

### **Scope and Theoretical Nature**

The present paper adopts a purely theoretical orientation and synthesises existing theories and conceptual literature, drawing on no primary empirical data or fieldwork. It aims at analysing concepts in order to explain mechanisms of influence, and value abstraction and integration, rather than descriptive case evidence.

Other important terms include: Student-led activism. This can be defined as the collective action initiated and facilitated by students or young people, most often within learning institutions, intended to mobilise social, environmental, or policy change related to sustainability. Empowerment refers to practices that enable individuals or groups to take charge of their circumstances through critical awareness, agency, and participatory action (inspired by critical pedagogy and related frameworks). SDGs are the 17 integrated targets set out in the 2030 Agenda and serve as a global roadmap for sustainable development (United Nations, 2015).

The research methodology will be conceptual analysis and a literature review: an analysis of key theoretical literature on social movements, youth involvement, intergenerational justice, and sustainability education to develop coherent arguments and a new model.

### **Literature Review**

These developments in the history of youth activism in the sustainability area are reflected in a gradual shift from individual participation in larger social movements to more structured, youth-led global campaigns. With the publication of *Silent Spring* (1962) by environmentalist Rachel Carson, which revealed the risks of pesticides, and the subsequent protests of young people against pollution, industrialisation, and countercultural movements in the 1960s, awareness of the environment was on the rise (Carson, as cited in historical reviews; see also BBC Future, 2020). Celebrated in 1970 because of student-led teach-ins, the first Earth Day attracted millions of individuals and made young people a key participant in early environmentalism, as events such as the Cuyahoga River fire and the Santa Barbara oil spill inspired it (History.com, 2020). During this period, environmental issues were associated with civil rights and anti-war movements, and youth formed coalitions and groups, such as Greenpeace.

Activism gave rise to new social movements in the late 20th century that focused on identity, culture, and post-materialist values rather than conventional class struggles (Melucci, 1989). In the theory of new social movements, Alberto Melucci says that actions are symbolic, which is aimed to engage lifestyle shift and identity among groups of people, particularly in ecology, peace, and youth movements, where the participants develop their own meanings opposing the mainstream structures (Melucci, 1996). This model explains how there has been a transition to decentralised, value-based environmental campaigns.

The activism of modern youths reached its zenith with Fridays for Future, the school strike instigated by Greta Thunberg in 2018 that rapidly became widespread with a need to alter the system in accordance with the SDGs (The Conversation, 2020; Council on Foreign Relations, 2025). This movement is also based on the previous experiences and is using digital means to mobilise across international borders. Deliberative democracy has been advanced by figures such as Jürgen Habermas, who argue that sustainable decisions can be justified through rational debate among the masses in inclusive forums and that agreement can be reached on questions of sustainability (Habermas, as used in activist critiques; Young, 2001).

### **Theoretical Approaches to the Student voice and Empowerment.**

The theory of empowerment, particularly Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970/2018), provides a theoretical foundation for studying student voice in sustainability activism. Freire opposes bank-like education, in which knowledge is sent to already passive students, and promotes problem-posing education, praxis: critical pedagogy and action (Freire, 2018). In the context of environmental education, this supports *conscientização* (critical consciousness), enabling youth to understand oppression in ecological degradation and to take action, as in the case of youth-led climate movements' view of activism as liberatory pedagogy (Hennessy, 2024; Spínola, 2023).

Student agency and voice are also theorised using Roger Hart's (1992) Ladder of Children's Participation, which consists of eight rungs with non-participation (manipulation, decoration) at the lowest end and real participation at the highest end. The upper levels consist of child action, which is shared with adults (rung 8), and child-initiated initiatives (rung 7), which encourage real empowerment rather than tokenism (Hart, 1992/1997). This model critiques the superficial inclusion of youth in sustainability policies and suggests shared decision-making in environmental projects to enhance agency and democratic citizenship (Hart, as cited in UNICEF publications).

Such views highlight the way student voice has become more than a peripheral actor to a stronger one, leading to sustainability based on critical cognisance and participatory systems.

### **Intersections with UN SDGs**

Several Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) directly overlap with youth activism, such as SDG 4 (Quality Education), which emphasises inclusive and equitable education that enables lifelong learning, including civic engagement and critical awareness (United Nations, 2015). SDG 13 (Climate Action) requires immediate action to address climate change, as youth-led movements intensify the need for mitigation and adaptation policies. SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals) encourages multi-stakeholder partnerships, which make youth a key stakeholder in global sustainability work (United Nations, n.d.a).

Regardless of these alignments, the SDG framework is criticised for having a lack of focus on youth agency. Although the 2030 Agenda recognises youth as key drivers of change (United Nations, 2015), implementation serves mostly tokenism, which is a mere presence but lacks actual impact, instead of transformative energy, as the core of giving them the power to make actual decisions (United Nations, 2021; see also UNESCO, 2026). This distance maintains shallow participation that cannot affect change in the system, which is why systems require mechanisms that guarantee meaningful and responsible participation beyond rhetoric.

### **Theoretical Framework:**

#### **Basic Theories of Student-Led Activism**

The social movement theory provides valuable answers on how student-led activism functions, especially in the mobilisation of resources and framing. Resource mobilisation theory is based on the notion that successful movements are those which are resource accumulative (of time, skills, networks, and digital resources) and resource mobilising (as opposed to emerging as a result of grievances) (McCarthy and Zald, 1977). Students create education, social media, and peer networks to increase the effects of youth climate movements like Fridays for Future, which makes the resources at the individual level significant by the effect of a large network of people (Jenkins, 1983). This is further supplemented by the processes of framing through which issues are perceived and framed to provide support. Activists build urgent discourses of climate injustice using diagnostic (problem

identification), prognostic (suggestion of solutions), and motivational framing, such as Fridays for Future, which focus on systemic change and intergenerational equity (Svensson and Wahlström, 2021; Buzogany, 2022).

Youth activism is further grounded in ecological citizenship and intergenerational justice. Ecological citizenship extends beyond civic duty to environmental vigilance, which expects individuals to take action beyond national boundaries in the best interests of the planet. The concept of intergenerational justice is based on the veil of ignorance of John Rawls and assumes that all decision-makers might not know what generation they belong to, resulting in a set of principles that ensure the future generations can use the available resources and a livable environment (Rawls, 1999, extended to the context of sustainability; Welburn, 2013). This extension is a critique of the current-day exploitation where the youth are being placed as the representatives of the now, who require equal allocation of time, which would be in line with the long-term sustainability requirements of the activism.

### **Conceptual Model: The Activism-SDG Nexus**

In this paper, I propose a theoretical framework, the Activism-SDG Nexus, that identifies avenues for mobilising student activism toward SDG deliverables. These inputs can be education (critical awareness through SDG 4) and mobilisation (networks and framing). Actions involve mass mobilisation (protests and online campaigns) and deliberative action (communication with institutions). The outputs include policy action (e.g., strengthened climate commitments under SDG 13) and collaboration (SDG 17). The feedback loops represent the activation of institutional responses that strengthen or limit activism and shape loop changes in terms of empowerment. (See figure as flow chart: the inputs go to the processes, the processes go to the outputs, the outputs go to the feedback to the inputs, both way arrows to demonstrate the mutual reinforcement.

### **Barriers and Enablers A Theoretical Analysis**

Structural inequalities are a hindrance, which is conceptualised as the cultural capital introduced by Bourdieu, where access to knowledge, networks, and symbolic resources is uneven and restricts the participation of the marginalised youth (Bourdieu, 1986, as applied in activism studies; Alexander, 2022). Digital affordances are enablers in the network society theory by Castells, in which horizontal and decentralised networks promote fast mobilisation, self-control, and counter-power against hierarchies (Castells, 2015). Virality and connectivity around the world have become possible through social media, and young people have been empowered to circumvent the traditional gatekeepers in climate movements.

### **Theoretical Analysis: Mechanism of Impact**

Individuals who are marginalized need to be amplified so that they can have inclusive SDGs. Student activism contributes to equity, as indicated in SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) by adopting narrative theory and counter-hegemonic narratives to unify the prevailing power systems. Youth activists are building the alternative narratives of climate crises through diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational framing, which focus on marginalised voices, especially those of Global South, Indigenous, and low-income communities, revealing the imbalance of the vulnerable in the face of climate crises (Neas, S., Ward, A., & Bowman, B. 2022). These stories interfere with the mainstream environmental discourses that emphasise technocratic or neoliberal fixes in favour of subaltern environmentalism based on lived experiences of domination and positionality.

These counter-hegemonic behaviours, which are evident in global health and climate activities, create collective agency through the production of knowledge that challenges neoliberal individualism and creates cross-border solidarity (Musolino, C., Baum, F., Freeman, T., Labonté, R., Bodini, C., & Sanders, D. 2020). Activism is able to generate a set of inclusive routes to SDG 10 goals by making individual accounts of experience visible and collective as political statements, so that sustainability results correspond to intersectional inequalities and not their reproduction.

### **Facilitating Systemic Transformation through Educational Integration**

Critical pedagogy conceptualises curriculum change as a strategy to instill activism, and the idea of changing banking education to praxis-focused education incorporating reflection and transformative action (Freire, 2018). The reform efforts in the field indicate that integrating education on sustainability (EfS) into the existing curricular programs, through collaborative autoethnography and interdisciplinary education, provides students with skills in civic action and a critique of the entire system (Wrobel, A., Beasy, K., Fiedler, T., Mann, A., Morrison, B., Towle, N., Wood, G., Doyle, R., Peterson, C., & Bettiol, S., 2026).

This directly aids SDG 4 (Quality Education, Target 4.7) by popularizing sustainable development knowledge and global citizenship. It also has an overlapping connection with SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production, Target 12.8) by creating awareness of sustainable ways of living and lifestyles and making the classroom a place of activism where young people question the systems of consumption and become agents of behavioural and policy change.

### **Developing International Relationships and Scalability**

Transnational youth networks reflect the theory of cosmopolitanism that allows approach to cosmopolitanisation, the acts of local people are linked to the world risk communities (Beck and Sznaider, 2006). The framework presented by Beck also emphasizes the role played by youth who extend methodological nationalism and create solidarities that are fluid and borderless (e.g. through digital platforms) which reinforce SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals).

Scalability challenge, however, is facing decentralised activism. The dynamics of network society enable the quick mobilisation at the expense of fragmentation, short-lived momentum, and unequal influence as horizontal structures are not able to maintain pressure on institutional hierarchies (Castells, 2015). The activism-policy feedback mechanisms are weak unless they have structures in place formalizing the translation of global visibility into long-term, scalable effects.

## **Discussion and Implications:**

### **Theoretical Insights Synthesis**

The theoretical discussion shows that activism led by students transforms the SDG implementation in principle as a dialogic and youth-centered process. With the incorporation of the social movement theory, the realization of critical pedagogy, and the intergenerational justice models, activism transforms the SDGs implementation process into the top-down, technocratic models of SDGs implementation to the communicative action, which is inclusive. Youth activism supports deliberative spaces enabling the marginalized voices to counter the hegemonic narratives supporting equity (SDG 10) using counter-hegemonic discourses and narrative rebuilding (Neas et al., 2022). Activism triggers systemic change by implementing praxis-oriented learning, and it fits SDG 4 and SDG 12 since it brings understanding of critical consciousness and responsible consumption (Freire, 2018; Hennessy, 2024). Transnational networks represent cosmopolitanism, which strengthens partnership (SDG 17),

and presents scalability contradictions in decentralized forms (Castells, 2015; Beck and Sznaider, 2006). Together, these processes help to place youth not as future beneficiaries but as current co-producers of sustainability and make SDGs more of an interactive and intergenerational conversation that focuses more on agency, justice, and efficacy rather than accepting instructions.

### **Educational and Policy Recommendations**

In theory, youth forums and participatory mechanisms, including binding youth quotas in climate and development councils, should be institutionalized by policy-makers in order to have substantive, not tokenistic, inclusion (United Nations, 2021). This institutional embeddedness leads to meaningful interaction, which covers structural remaining and involves intergenerational equity in SDG localization. Teachers are encouraged to implement the models of experiential learning based on critical pedagogy and incorporate the practice of activism into the curricula via dialogic meetings, teach-ins, and community projects where they develop the skills of organizing, advocacy, and justice-oriented action (Trott, 2023; Kowasch, M., Oettel, A., Bauer, S., & Lapin, K. 2021). These can make schools locations of environmental citizenship and prepare students to make transformational contributions to SDGs

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

The theoretical synthesis of this paper has its own biases, one of them being a Western-centric approach that prevails in most social movement and empowerment literature, which may be biased against other epistemologies of the Global South and underserved groups (Neas et al., 2022). The use of conceptual abstraction restrains a contextual sensitivity that lacks empirical support. The next steps should be empirical extensions by longitudinal case studies of the Activism-SDG Nexus model under different socio-cultural situations, especially in non-Western communities, to confirm the pathways and overcome biases. The inclusion of youth voices in mixed-method research would further enhance the model, making it more theory-to-practice aligned to carry out its development in a more inclusive manner.

### **Conclusion**

This theoretical discussion highlights the revolutionary power of student activism as an urgent necessity in the proper implementation of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Quite to the opposite, youth as a core participant in the SDG process, through their self-organised actions, critical framing, and transnational solidarity, reconfigure the SDG process as dialogic, intergenerational, and youth-centred. Based on the social movement theory, critical pedagogy, ecological citizenship, and cosmopolitanism, the analysis shows that student activism functions in a variety of ways: marginalized voices are amplified to promote equity (SDG 10), systemic change becomes possible through praxis-oriented educational reform (SDG 4 and SDG 12), and global partnerships can be scaled, despite structural and decentralisation issues (SDG 17).

The Activism-SDG Nexus model describes the way the inputs of critical awareness and mobilisation can be transmitted through collective action and deliberative interactions to generate the actual policy impact and institutional feedback loops. Such avenues place young people not only as future heirs to the delivery of sustainability, but also as partners in the ongoing construction of the current shift to planetary justice. Student-led activism, hegemonically disrupted, entrenched with transformative learning, and developing borderless networks, helps to create moral urgency, innovativeness, and democratic legitimacy to SDG processes that would otherwise stagnate with traditional top-down strategies.

Finally, empowerment of the youth nowadays is a moral and strategic requirement. This makes students empowered custodians when they are identified as legitimate agents who are now

institutionalised through forums, curriculum integration, and meaningful roles in decision-making and can close the generational divides and speed up the process toward the 2030 Agenda. The theoretical insights integrated in this paper confirm the idea that the issue of youth voice and agency is not an additional improvement but a core necessity of sustainable development. Youth empowerment is a guarantee of sustainable guardianship in the future, which guarantees a vibrant, just, and liveable world to all future generations.

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