




Young Voices for Sustainability in the Private Sector

A display of opinions

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January 2021

1. Introduction

In today's world there are many obstacles to overcome. Many problems are sustainability related and one of the most urgent issues is climate change. The World Economic Forum (2020a) declared climate action failure next to extreme weather, natural disasters, biodiversity loss and human-made environmental disasters to the top five global risks in terms of likelihood. To tackle the issues and to keep the target set in the Paris Agreement different areas like transportation, agriculture, business models etc. must be transformed. The Paris Agreement is a legally binding international treaty on climate change with the target to limit global warming to 2.0 degrees but ideally to 1.5 degrees in rise of temperatures compared to pre industrialisation temperatures (UNFCCC, w. y.). To achieve this goal, businesses in the private sector have to take action and implement a sustainability strategy. Without the cooperation of companies it is impossible to achieve the 1.5 degree target.

Looking back at the last two to three years it is noticeable that the younger generation is getting more vocal about environmental concerns. The Fridays for Future movement which started in August 2018 grew a lot and by now over 14 million people in 7,500 cities joined (Fridays For Future, 2021). This is a good example which shows that the young generation wants their opinion to be heard and be taken seriously.

Climate change issues and the motivation of young people made us at Festa think of a project which would create a platform for the opinion and ideas of the younger generation in Iceland. Inside the project 'Young Voices for Sustainability in the Private Sector' interviews were conducted to create a final report which displays different, young and interesting opinions. Companies in the private sector can get an understanding of what young people from different organisations classify as important these days, when it comes to sustainability in the private sector. Maybe through this, higher efforts concerning sustainability issues can be achieved within the private sector.

2. Methodology

For this report 14 interviews were conducted. The participants were between 16 and 30 years old of which 9 were female and 5 were male. Different backgrounds and ages are supporting the presentation of a broader perspective. The interviewees were asked similar questions and the duration of the interviews were about 30 minutes to one hour and ten minutes depending on the participant. All interviews were conducted over Zoom. To create comparability different topics were identified to rank the different answers of the participants. The different topics are now the different paragraphs under the chapter '3. Outcome'.

3. Outcome

3.1 Sustainability

To get an understanding what sustainability means for each participant, the interview started with a question regarding their own idea and definition of sustainability. The main statement that can be worked out is that sustainability means that processes and operations in today's world should not have a negative impact on the environment, communities, individuals and wildlife. Negative repercussions should be avoided. Resources are meant to be used wisely and no over exploitation should take place. Furthermore, the possibilities of future generations should not be diminished. This definition is similar to the definition of sustainability development which was defined in the Brundtland report in 1987 as 'development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs' (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987, p.41). Furthermore, the triple bottom line approach was being addressed four times. The triple bottom line explains that sustainable development can only take place when the social, environmental and economical spheres are addressed equally (Wilson, 2015).

In conclusion the participants had a similar understanding of sustainability. Nevertheless, for some participants there were different focus areas like human rights, gender equality or environmental wellbeing. But also, a critical voice was being heard. The participant criticised the general usage of the term 'sustainability' because it is overused which subsequently dilutes the meaning.

3.2 Purpose led working

To get to know what the younger generation wants from a (future) workplace, we asked about their values and how they want those to be reflected in the businesses they (would like to) work in. The participants were asked if they had any requirements when it comes to their (future) workplace.

For many of the interviewees, sustainability aspects are playing an important role when it comes to their workplace. Furthermore, the younger generation is seeking for shared values. They want to make a positive impact on humans and the environment. It was stated that also the supply chain should be integrated when creating a sustainability strategy. Companies sometimes tend to analyse just its own operations without including processes inside their supply chain.

Vigdís Fríða Þorvaldsdóttir held a presentation about the Icelandic alcohol store 'Vínbúðin' which has good measures in place to increase their sustainability e.g. recycling waste (current share 90.3%) and stating the environmental footprint of their products on their website (Vínbúðin, 2021). After the presentation listeners came up to her because they were interested in working at the company. This is a good example on how a sustainability strategy can increase the number of candidates for a job which can therefore bring an advantage to a company in terms of attracting well educated, qualified and sustainability interested staff.

But for some of the participants a company does not need to be the perfect example in terms of sustainability. If the willingness of a company to integrate a sustainability strategy is existing, they could imagine working for the company. Some participants were keen to develop a sustainability strategy and sustainability department with a business. As Hjördis Sveinsdóttir said 'I am willing to be part of the change, if the company shows interest'.

Some participants stated that the sustainability strategy of a future employer would play a secondary role. It was said that other aspects like being acknowledged, working in a safe work environment, getting support to pay for public transport and ethical practices would be important to them. Hlökkver Stefán Þorgeirsson who is working at Veitur for the wastewater team explained that before starting at his current workplace he did not realize how much impact it can have to work at a company where sustainability is of much importance and making profit is not the number one priority. After starting to work for Veitur he recognized how fulfilling and motivating it is to work in such an organization. Hlökkvers case shows that working for a company with sustainability efforts can have a positive impact on an employee.

3.3 Operations

Considering the future issues linked to climate change e.g. rising sea levels, droughts, flooding etc. (European Commission, w.y.), companies should integrate a sustainability strategy to work against global warming. Because of these consequences, companies could lose the foundation they operate with which could lead to companies being unable to operate and subsequently going bankrupt. Therefore, we asked the young people in this project what they think should be included into the sustainability strategy of a company and what kind of future companies without such a strategy would have and furthermore, which actions they would take if being in a leadership position.

The participants saw great importance in measuring the carbon footprint and in doing a materiality analysis. Through such an assessment a company can measure which negative and positive impact they have. Subsequently, changes made in a company strategy can be measured clearly and improvements as well as deteriorations can be identified. Furthermore, tier one, two and three suppliers should be included and both aspects concerning social and environmental issues should be taken into account. Another measure for companies to take is to disclose their information about corporate social responsibility inside their annual- or sustainability report. In addition, transparency and honesty of a company is significant. Greenwashing was criticised as well. Practices named were usage of certain numbers which look good at first glance but when taking a closer look the real effect is questionable. Advertisement of green practices when in reality these are required by law, advertising the packaging of a product as environmentally sustainable (e.g. usage of recycled plastic) but containing a product that itself is unsustainable, general greening of advertisement without further sustainability measures in place, publishing of sustainable lines (e.g. fashion, food chains) and stating themselves sustainable when the rest of the products sold are produced the conventional way are only a few examples of greenwashing.

Moreover, social aspects were important to our participants which included a diverse workforce also in the higher management levels, gender equality, work-life-balance and usage of their possibilities to create improvements inside the community they operate in.

Regarding the chances of companies without a sustainability strategy in the future business world the participants were divided. Although a lot thought or at least hoped that in the long run companies have to adapt in order to stay competitive, the others said that there will always be companies which will survive without a sustainability strategy. Companies are getting more and more pressure from society to adapt to sustainability issues, the next generations to come will most likely be even more aware about these issues than the current. Subsequently it would have an advantage for business to stay competitive. Another possibility is that the government establishes rules and policies which forces

businesses to act. Already, There are certain regulations in place but with increasing environmental problems, governments have to act and introduce new laws such as a carbon tax. In a developing world companies should develop with it.

Answers regarding the question of what the participant would do if being in the position of a CEO is similar to the above mentioned contents of a sustainability strategy which includes transparency, calculation of the carbon footprint, electrification of the car fleet, gender equality, offset carbon emissions produced, analyse supply chain to identify harmful practices, making long term sustainable investments, making realistic decisions which do not endanger the ability to act, being interested in employees and create a good work environment, diversity in management and company board and ethical practices. But also 'easy' changes like serving sustainable food in the canteen, decrease the number of business trips, enhance usage of public transport were being named. Some of the interviewees want to change the whole business model and create a business which sustains itself and not having the need to grow exponentially. Jökull Ingi Þorvaldsson commented: 'Slow down the endless need for growth, resources are lost too much.' The young generation wants to see improvement in businesses as the current state we are in will not be enough to fight against the heating of the atmosphere.

3.4 Needed changes

For companies to take more effort concerning sustainability, different instruments can be set in place. Many of the interviewees proposed incentives because they think this would motivate companies the most in changing their operations. Companies tend to do the things that are economically advantageous. It would make sense to make it economically advantageous to be sustainable. The quote by Emelía Thorgil makes it perfectly clear: 'It needs to be more expensive to be unsustainable than to be sustainable.'. For example, when a company pollutes the environment with wastewater, trash etc. the fine set by the government has to be so high that it would be unprofitable to pollute and instead it would make more sense to dispose the waste in a sustainable way or recycle it. Also, it was vocalized that companies should internalize their external costs. If the production of a product causes harm in the supply chain the whole costs should be accounted for to balance out the committed damage.

Throughout the younger generation it is been seen difficult to establish strict laws and policies because of unintended consequences and the possibility that people at subsistence level would be hit the hardest. Nevertheless, the majority thinks that a carbon dioxide tax could help to increase environmental protection. Another issue which was displayed several times was the waste management in Iceland. Some participants have the opinion that there is a lot of room to grow.

3.5 The last chance

The young people in our project were asked if they think that the targets in the Paris Agreement can still be kept and which role Icelandic companies play in keeping the target. To meet the targets set in the Paris Agreement all countries have to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions. The target is ambitious and without enhancing our actions the 1.5-degree target will not be met. The young voices in our project were optimistic that it can still be managed but only if changes really start to appear. The business world has to set more ambitious measures. Also, Iceland can play an important role, although being small. Iceland managed to almost use 100% of renewable energy. The project carbfix

(carbfix, w.y.) showed which abilities the island has. The interviewees agreed that Iceland could lead by example through technology and knowledge transfer. Furthermore, the small community allows that policies and other measures can be installed more easily than in bigger countries. This can be an advantage to show other countries what is possible. Still a lot must happen to become greener especially in the transport sector. Conclusively Iceland with its small community has the chance to lead by example. Iceland is already a role model when it comes to the topic of gender equality which is a perfect example for the abilities Iceland has. (World Economic Forum, 2020b)

4. Conclusion

Several participants stated that as a consumer we daily vote, so through our decisions we can support the fight against climate change. Every individual can choose through their daily choices. Let us all take responsibility and exploit the possibilities we have as businesses and as individuals. The interviews showed that young people are worried about the future and want businesses to take more action and to rethink their business models. Furthermore, sustainability should not be addressed as a marketing campaign but more as a foundation to create a company which can operate long-term and create value for the environment and society.

5. The Young Voices



Ásdís Nína Magnúsdóttir (27)

- MSc in International Sustainability Management (ESCP)
- internship at the UNFCCC (summer 2019)
- Currently works for the Environment Agency of Iceland



Esther Hallsdóttir (25)

- BA Anthropology (University of Iceland)
- worked as a Campaign Manager at UNICEF Iceland
- Currently:**
- Iceland's Youth Delegate to the United Nations in the field of Human Rights
- Project Manager for the international NGO Girls4Girls, which empowers young girls to lead
- is starting her Master in the fall semester of 2021 in Public Policy at the Harvard Kennedy School



Eyþór Máni Steinarsson (22)

- COO of Hopp
- Background in IT
- Co developer of the 'Climate-pulse' for Festa



Gunnhildur Fríða Hallgrímsdóttir (18)

- Part of the Fridays for Future movement
- Board member of the Youth Arctic Council
- is starting her study at the Harvard University in fall semester 2021



Hjördís Sveinsdóttir (23)

- BSc Business Administration
- currently is undergoing a diploma program in Environment and Natural Resources (University of Iceland)
- Managing Director of the Student Council of the University of Iceland



Hlöðver Stefán Þorgeirsson (27)

- BSc Civil and Environmental Engineering (University of Iceland)
- MSc Engineering Fluid Mechanics for the Offshore, Coastal and Urban Environment (Imperial College London)
- currently works in the Research and Development Lead for the Wastewater team at Veitur



Jóhanna Ásgeirsdóttir (27)

- President of The National Union of Icelandic Students (LÍS)
- BA Visual Arts (New York University)
- MA Art Education (Iceland University of the Arts)



Vigdís Fríða Þorvaldsdóttir (25)

- Works for Landvernd
- Project Manager for the Young Reporters for the environment
- Sociologist with a master's degree in public administration

Hannes Árni Hanesson

- studying Mechatronics (BSc)
- is working at Hopp
- Co developer of the 'Climate-pulse' for Festa



Eva Dröfn Hassell Guðmundsdóttir (22)

- interdisciplinary BSc in Politics, Psychology, Law and Economics (PPLE) with a specialization in law + minor in Gender and Sexuality studies (University of Amsterdam)
- Currently:**
- Master student in the Public International Law LLM program (University of Amsterdam)
- November 2020: elected as Iceland's United Nations Youth Delegate on Gender Equality



Jökull Ingi Þorvaldsson(19)

- UN youth delegate for children and youth
- former Chair of the Unicef Youth Council Iceland
- doing the secondary school diploma



Júlíus Viggó Ólafsson (19)

- President of the Secondary School Student Union (SÍF) (since September)
- graduating from school (secondary school diploma)
- currently works as a customer service representative in the banking sector



Marta Magnúsdóttir (27)

- Bachelor: Education studies with business as a minor (University of Iceland)
- President of the Icelandic Scout Association



Emelía Thorgil (16)

- doing the secondary school diploma (first year)
- Active in the Fridays for Future movement
- works for Kronan

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