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Higher Education Taking Action towards the Sustainable Development Goals:
Perspectives from Asia and Europe

Opinion | Ana Dimitrov

Building a community spirit for sustainability

"Alone we can do so little, together we can do so much." – Helen Keller

As the saying of this American author, political activist, lecturer and first deaf-blind person to earn a Bachelor of Arts degree states, teamwork and collaboration is what makes the most effective changes in communities. I believe that this also applies to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals. The way I see it, universities have a great potential in motivating individuals to gather communities and work together on a common goal. Universities are one of the leading institutions of a country and because of this they are vital to any change and transformation. Therefore, I believe that universities should make extra effort in supporting and developing a community spirit among students. One of the ways to do this is to enable and support student volunteering opportunities which are directly linked to promotion and achieving the SDGs.

As an example on how the youth and its community spirit can be motivated towards fulfilling a certain goal, I would like to briefly explain one very successful youth movement which was based on volunteering: Youth work actions. They were a widespread movement in the former Yugoslavia, dating back to WW2, and were especially common after the war was over. The youth were the strength that built up the damaged country and their main goal was aimed at restoring and building up economy, infrastructure, scientific, sports, cultural and entertainment facilities in Yugoslavia. The youth were divided into brigades, consisting from approximately 50 people and named after the place they came from. One youth work action lasted 3 months during the summer and one shift lasted for one month. During that month there were 6-7 brigades working on the field. In the morning and noon, the youth were working on the field and in the afternoon and night they had a variety of activities: concerts, sport and cultural activities, lessons and courses, which helped the youth expand their skills and knowledge. While reading about this topic I noticed that the ex-participants talked about youth work actions with great nostalgia; for them it is a memory of new friendships and a strong youth movement. It gave them a sense

of community and purpose in a work movement and amused them with the cultural program in the evening. The movement was massive, and the number of participants rose over time. The ones that were involved were motivated not only by having the opportunity to build up their own country but also by the activities and new friendships they made. The results of these actions were astonishing, and the youth left a big mark in their own country.

So how can we contribute to creating such a spirit among the youth now? Student volunteering is a common thing, but very often it is self-motivated. Universities should use the existing volunteering spirit and try to enlarge it. Universities should motivate and enable students to get engaged in their local community and the more people get involved, the greater the movement would be. Universities should be the link between the community and sustainability; they should be an “anchor” institution. They should inform and teach, enable, give instruction, and at the end, reward. I think that the model of youth work actions should be used as an inspiration. We might not build infrastructure, but planting trees, setting up and arranging green areas, cleaning quays and parks, maintaining forests etc. is something which would be very easily achievable. Many other projects could be developed linked to promoting the SDGs, not only connected to SDG15: Life on Land. Although I am a strong believer in satisfaction from volunteering which is a prize enough, in order to motivate the ones who aren't keen on volunteering, there should be an extra benefit. Just like the cultural program the youth had during youth work actions, universities could offer students a variety of activities and workshops as a symbolic reward. Workshops on time-management and other soft skills, Photoshop etc. would be something that could be very appealing to the modern youth. Most of the actions could be done in the local area, but I think the youth work actions were so powerful and effective because the youth travelled to a specific place and spent one month there, working together towards a common goal. Therefore, I believe that building up a community spirit in the working group is crucial. One working group should work on a specific goal; this way the individuals feel connected to each other and the thought of working together on a common goal keeps them motivated. Such working groups support sustainability directly and indirectly. They directly contribute to a more sustainable environment, green and clean planet, but they also support the community's spirit, reduce inequalities and promote unity.

To sum up my article I would like to go back to the very beginning and saying that alone we can just do little, but as a team we can do so much. This is the idea that universities should spread among the students regarding the SDGs. The youth should work connected and together in fighting all the crisis the world is facing right now and this way success is guaranteed.

Literature

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