YOUTH ENVIRONMENT SERVICE (YES)

RENEWING DEMOCRACY

IN THE DIGITAL AGE

Berggruen Institute

The Renewing Democracy in the Digital Age report was released by the Berggruen Institute in March 2020. It is the culmination of a three-year effort that involved a robust process of engagement with people from across industries, disciplines, and continents. The result is a set of recommendations in three key areas: (1) renewing social cohesion, (2) rebuilding the public square, and (3) renovating democratic institutions.

The Youth Environmental Service (YES) is one of two key policy recommendations for renewing social cohesion. Originally intended to rebuild social solidarity and faith in democracy among a fragmented and increasingly polarized population, the YES program could also be part of the economic recovery as we emerge from the pandemic.

For a copy of the report, visit www.berggruen.org.

ABOUT THE BERGGRUEN INSTITUTE

The mission of the Berggruen Institute is to understand this era of great transformation and to develop new insights and new ideas for building a thriving, prosperous 21st Century society. The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated many of the changes we have been studying and in places exacerbated the decay of our aging political and economic institutional architecture. The urgency and the opportunity to build a resilient 21st Century democracy and economy has arrived.

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LIST OF MEETINGS

MARCH 25-26, 2019

**Social Cohesion +
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Working Group Meeting**
London, United Kingdom

MAY 1, 2019

**Social Media + Democracy
Working Group Meeting**
Palo Alto, California, USA

MAY 12-14, 2019

**Social Cohesion +
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Working Group Meeting II**
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JUNE 30-JULY 3, 2019

**Future of Democracy
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Bellagio, Italy

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YOUTH ENVIRONMENT SERVICE
(YES)

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Young people today seem ever more disillusioned with democracy, and alienated from mainstream politics. At the same time, youth in every part of the globe are deeply concerned about the climate and ecological crisis currently confronting the planet and all its peoples. In the last two years, they have demonstrated generational leadership in elevating calls for action to contain the crisis in the streets, in boardrooms, and in the halls of power. They are also rightly condemning older generations for "failing" them in developing urgent solutions appropriate to this growing planetary emergency. That failure extends beyond the necessary policy, economic, technological, and social changes necessary.

The governing generations have also failed to provide viable pathways of action for youth that can harness and develop their energy, passion, and skills in pioneering and scaling solutions now. In short, we have an input and an output challenge when it comes to young people, democracy, and the environment.

To meet this challenge, I am proposing to the Berggruen Institute the creation of a Youth Environment Service (YES) programme. This programme is a response to both the climate emergency and the growing fragmentation and alienation of diverse parts of democratic societies from one another. By providing opportunities for young people to work on the most critical crises that confront their generation, they can both transform the environmental landscape and help reforge more cohesive, purpose-driven democratic societies, and thus help restore their own faith in democracy. The program is modeled on national conscription services—which more than 20 democracies currently have—but can be adopted on either an obligatory or voluntary basis. Programmes similarly can be run by governments at the national, international, and local levels in concert with civil society, international organizations, and other key stakeholders. A brief outline of the program and its rationale follows below.

SUMMARY: A YOUTH ENVIRONMENT SERVICE (YES) to provide opportunities for young people to work together across differences to protect the planet from climate catastrophe while furthering their democratic leadership, job skills, and capacity for common purpose.

Sydney, Australia - 15 March 2019. 20,000 Australian students gather in climate change protest rally, School Strike 4 Climate, and demand urgent action on climate change. Holli / Shutterstock.com

SCIENCE DEMANDS ACTION

- There is a global climate emergency. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has advised that unless we take radical action before 2030, temperature change cannot be kept below 1.5C.

- Failure to act decisively will lead to severe disruptions to human society, including region-wide famine and water shortages, dramatic declines in health and wellbeing, economic and social breakdowns, mass climate migrations, and rising threats to international and human security. The predicted loss of life will be greater than in any previous international conflict and will likely accelerate over time.

- The climate crisis is also accelerating a Sixth Global Mass Extinction. The Intergovernmental Panel on Biological and Ecosystems Services (IPBES) advises that more than one million species are on the brink of extinction. We are on the edge of natural tipping points from which we may not soon or easily recover.

YOUTH DEMAND RADICAL ACTION

- Youth understand the crisis and its profound implications for their future. The School Strike for Climate movement has sustained the largest global protest in human history over the past year. Numerous other protests and calls for action increasingly define the younger generation's agenda.

- Gradual political change, encouraged by the Paris 2015 Climate Accord, is not slowing the rate of climate change or ecological decline. Technological and scientific solutions are emerging, but currently with limited effect, and are not being developed fast enough.

- There is rising frustration and anger about the failure of governments to deal decisively with climate change and ecological breakdown, compounding already high distrust of democratic institutions and governance.

YES CAN ADDRESS MULTIPLE OBJECTIVES

- **Environmental goals:** to slow climate change and reverse mass extinctions.

- **Economic goals:** to develop job skills, particularly among disadvantaged youth, and to advance sustainable development, particularly in areas that were left behind in the last era of globalization. Service programs have been shown to have significant long-term positive economic effects.[47]

- **Social goals:** to promote the democratic integration of youth from diverse communities to achieve a common cause.

- **Political goals:** to channel protest, frustration, and anger towards positive and constructive ends and to show that democratic communities are capable of addressing the biggest challenges together.

WHAT IS YES?

- YES is modelled on national conscription programs, re-purposed to protect humans and the natural world from climate and ecological catastrophe.

- YES would offer opportunities for every young person aged between 18-25 years old to complete one year of environmental service; different jurisdictions could choose to make service obligatory or voluntary. Citizens over the age of 25 could also volunteer.

- Each service would be developed nationally but could seek to address national or international environmental problems.

- National governments could manage programs directly or in conjunction with international institutions and civil society.

- Programs would be locally-driven to respond to the needs, decisions, and processes of local communities.

WHAT WOULD PARTICIPANTS IN YES DO?

Participants in the Youth Environment Service would choose to spend their year doing one of five options: protect, restore, explore, sustain, or support (PRESS):

- **Protect:** protecting against environmental damage and danger, including protection from flooding, fires, tornadoes, and tsunamis. This could include building defenses against flood damage, forestry work to protect against fires, insulating homes to protect against energy loss, and working on disaster preparedness.

- **Restore:** restoring land, waterways, and seas, including cleaning of waterways, removing plastic from the seas, and land recovery.

- **Explore:** technological and scientific research and experimentation to develop ways to trap carbon, reduce emissions, and enhance environmental sustainability. This could also include storytelling and journalistic activities to explore and explain the ramifications of the program.

- **Sustain:** planting trees, growing food, regenerative agriculture, recycling waste, and other sustainable activities.

- **Support:** supporting people who are already suffering the effects of climate change and ecological disaster.

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[47] Salamon, Lester M., "Measuring the Economic Value of Volunteer Work Globally: Concepts, Estimates, and a Roadmap to the Future," *The Authors Annals of Public and Cooperative Economics* 82, no. 3 (2011) pp. 217-252.