

BEING ENGAGED WHEN YOUNG

Qualitative study about the engagement of youngsters between 15 and 19 years old in Belgium.



*Cause I, I'm in love
With my future
Can't wait to meet her
And I, I'm in love
But not with anybody else
Just wanna get to know myself*
Billie Eilish, My Future

*On nous inflige
Des désirs qui nous affligent
On nous prend faut pas déconner dès qu'on est né
Pour des cons alors qu'on est
Foules sentimentales
Avec soif d'idéal
Attirées par les étoiles, les voiles*
Alain Souchon, Foule Sentimentale

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Introduction

Commissioned by Kruit and Annoncer La Couleur, the programmes for global citizenship education within the Belgian development agency Enabel, Méthos opened a dialogue with 33 young people between the ages of 15 and 19 on the subject of social engagement. The recent quantitative studies by Kruit and Annoncer La Couleur on the personal and social values of young people highlighted a generally passive attitude on the part of young people towards people and society¹. This picture is reinforced when they are asked about their intensive and long-term engagement. On the other hand, Kruit and Annoncer La Couleur heard a lot about the strong social awareness of young people. How can these apparent contradictions be reconciled? Kruit and Annoncer La Couleur decided to give young people the floor to talk about their social engagement. This is the only way we can get a direct and unfiltered picture of what it means to be engaged today.²

Hence the decision to enter into dialogue with young people, in small online groups, about their activities and initiatives, but also about their values and convictions, their experiences and perspectives, in connection with social issues.

Because as Kruit and Annoncer La Couleur discovered, there's a lot going on in this regard. Not only in Belgium but around the world, recent years have been marked by a strong social awakening in which young people have played a prominent role, often prompted by social media. Climate marches, *#metoo* and the *Black Lives Matter* movement are recent examples of such social awareness. But less visible forms of voluntary engagement also continue to grow. The fact that thousands of young people get involved every week through youth work or civil society organisations is remarkable, to say the least.

In contrast to this are the doom and gloom stories, as well as the empirical studies such as the one by Kruit and Annoncer La Couleur. Young people are thought to be less engaged with

1 The studies can be consulted on the websites of Kruit and Annoncer La Couleur.

2 In a similar study for Plan International Belgium, conducted simultaneously by Méthos, we delve deeper into the theme of social engagement and ask the question about how young people mobilise for international solidarity today.

social issues than they used to be. This worries academics, policy-makers, youth workers, NGOs, etc. The concern in this regard stems from the fact that social engagement among young people is seen as a fertile environment for political and democratic awareness^{3,4}. The reason for the concern: empirical studies have shown time and again the low levels of trust young people have in the political system and its actors⁵. The recent study by Annoncer la Couleur and Kruit also highlights a total lack of trust between young people, the government and politicians⁶.

This research project attempts to move away from this paradoxical situation whereby young people are either considered engaged and active, or non-engaged and passive and suspicious, and to observe in all openness the social engagement of young people, beyond success stories or doom and gloom scenarios. The aim is to get young people themselves to talk about their engagement (or lack thereof) and to listen to their narrative, to the meaning they give to their actions and convictions. We discuss motivations but also barriers. We take a closer look at the role of the digital world. We identify the conditions that make engagement possible and explore the link between social engagement and the traditional political arena. In this way, we will have a better idea of how the new manifestations of engagement should be interpreted, and we will get a better understanding and insight into the “involvement” of young people as regards social issues.

The social engagement of young people is difficult to grasp. It is situated in a specific part of the living environment of young people, outside the professional world, commercial and leisure time contexts, but is also linked to these. Moreover, social engagement has many visible forms, for example a protest or volunteer work. At the same time, less visible manifestations can also show a strong form of engagement, such as vegetarianism for instance. As such, in defining engagement, we not only emphasise the public or visible manifestations of engagement but also individual initiatives. We define social engagement among young people as the *individual and collective actions aimed at raising or addressing social issues*⁷.

3 Cahill, H. & Babak, D. (2018). Re-conceptualising youth participation: A framework to inform action. *Children and Youth Services Review*, (95), 243-253. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2018.11.001>

4 Hooghe, M., & Boonen, J. (2015). Youth Engagement in Politics: Generational Differences and Participation Inequalities. In: Thijssen, P., Siongers, J., Van Laer, J., Haers, J., & Mels, S. (2015). *Political Engagement of the Young in Europe. Youth in the crucible* (pp. 13-28). Abingdon: Routledge.

5 Voor een overzicht, zie Siongers, J., Keppens, G., Spruyt, B., & Van Droogenbroeck, F. (2019). On the digital lane to citizenship? Patterns of internet use and civic engagement amongst Flemish adolescents and young adults. *Journal of Social Science Education*, 18(2), 67-86. <https://doi.org/10.4119/J SSE-90>

6 See Annoncer la Couleur (2019). Ce qui mobilise les jeunes. Valeurs, centres d'intérêt et positionnements des jeunes en Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles. Résultats du sondage effectué auprès de 500 jeunes de 14 à 19 ans. Sondage effectué par institut d'études Dedicated commandée par Annoncer la Couleur (Enabel). Bruxelles: Enabel. 63% of the young people surveyed have little or no confidence in the government, 69% have little or no confidence in politicians.

7 Delli Carpini, M. "Civic Engagement". APA.Org. American Psychological Association, n.d. Web 17 November 2020.

Methodology

Qualitative research design

Following the quantitative studies of Annoncer la Couleur and Kruit on the engagement and values of young people in Belgium, a qualitative study is called for, in order to go into the issue in more depth. A qualitative research approach is the best way of listening to the target group (here: young people between the ages of 15 and 19 years old) about their engagement and the meaning they attach to it. It creates the space to also observe their lifestyles, interactions, and interests up close. It gives young people a platform to talk about their experiences, motivations, barriers and opinions in all openness and confidence.

In small groups

Given the subject matter, we have opted for an open dialogue with the young people in small groups (4 to 5 participants). We have created a safe place where they can learn about each other's opinions without distraction and actively contribute to the questions they are asked.

With friends or acquaintances

To lower barriers even further and make the discussion run as smoothly as possible, the debate groups are also groups of friends. The young people know each other. The group dynamic does not have to be built from scratch. The young people can also fall back on shared experiences and at the same time have other experiences. This animates the discussion.

Corona-proof via Zoom

The debates went ahead online given the corona measures in place at the time. One debate group took place physically (in open air). We structured the online debate in such a way that there was enough space for getting to know each other, interaction and exercises. Given young people's experience of online platforms, there was no unfamiliarity or difficulties. A discussion guide moderated the discussions. Each debate lasted around two hours.

Recruitment

The selection of the participating young people was gradually put together. A literature review formed the basis for compiling the broad universe of social engagement into seven overarching forms of engagement.

Within these forms of engagement, organisations and/or young people were contacted via our networks, via the networks of the youth core team, or via the networks of Annoncer la Couleur and Kruit. As such, a selection of young people was made that reflects a wide variety of engagement. Moreover, we also opened dialogue with two groups of young people who, at first glance, do not show active engagement with any social issues (see box). Besides the specific forms of engagement, we also took into account four other selection criteria: age, gender, place of residence (both young people from big cities and small urban areas) and socio-cultural background.

Nine debate groups:

Group 1: Engagement via school/school projects

Group 2: Engagement via youth work

Group 3: Engagement via civil society organisations

Group 4: Engagement via youth welfare work

Group 5: Engagement via bottom-up civic initiatives

Group 6: Engagement via online channels

Group 7: Engagement via individual initiatives

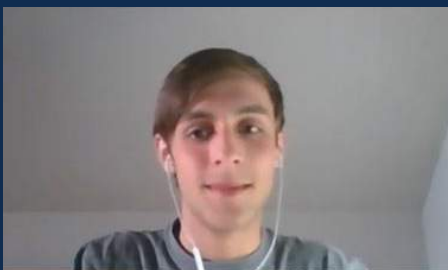
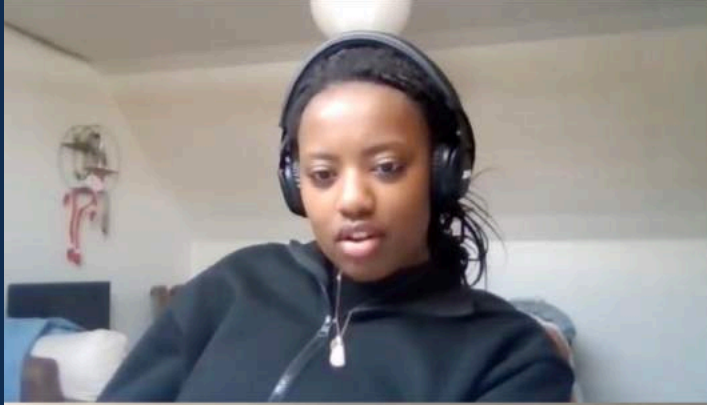
Group 8 and 9: No apparent active engagement in social issues at first glance.

The debates took place between 12 April and 16 May.

Le groupe de 4

A project involving young people requires close cooperation with young people. Méthos takes a participatory approach and believes it is important to hear the voice of young people, not

only during debates but also in the decisions made 'behind the scenes'. A core team of four young people ("le groupe de 4") discussed with us all the steps during the course of the study.



1

Values & beliefs

Awareness of the world in which they are growing up

Climate protests, Greta Thunberg, Black Lives Matter, the migrant crisis, the #Metoo movement: all these events are familiar to young people. They have grown up with them. The widespread media coverage of these movements has had a profound effect on their lives.

They look up the information on these topics through a variety of media: social networks (Instagram and Facebook in particular), TV, radio, etc. Social network users refer to a “trending” effect when these topics take over networks at any given moment, and which de facto become talking points (even for people who are less active on social networks): the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the wildfires in Australia, the murder of George Floyd, etc. These topical issues may prompt an urge to learn and find out more, by subscribing to specific accounts on Instagram, for example feminist channels (Coucoulesgirls, Shera Kerienski), channels about defending culture (Charlie Rano and the occupation of cultural sites in France during the lockdown), etc.

The development of their understanding of current political and societal issues is also bolstered by courses in history and geography, philosophy and citizenship. For example, global warming is part of the secondary school geography curriculum, the topic of harassment is covered in philosophy and citizenship classes, wars and conflicts are covered in history classes, and bioethics issues are covered at university.

“I learned thanks to social networks: following good people, who made me aware of certain things.” Xénia, 17 years old, Mons

Many of the young people interviewed trace the awakening of their interest in social issues back to their school or university courses. Their opinions and what they have to say about the world take shape as they discuss, discover and learn on social networks.

All have strong opinions

Regardless of their level of engagement, the young people interviewed all claimed to have been outraged by at least one or more social issues. They express this through personal judgements, in which their position is asserted and which show that it is not only subjects that are distant and remote from them but that they feel concerned: They have their "own opinion", they "disagree", certain things "affect" them. As they become aware of certain realities and their judgements become more acute, strong emotions well up in them: disgust, anger or sadness, when it comes to racism, for example, or sexual harassment: "I find it unbelievable", "I find it disgusting", "I feel it in my core, it hurts me." These emotions are often the result of incomprehension, incomprehension in the face of what they are learning: wars and violence in various parts of the world and history, destruction, torture, assassinations driven by power or hatred.

They may then develop a critical view of what we have inherited from the past, which is integral to their education but is not the fault of their generation, and against which they take a stand: Christian charity, for example, is seen as an institution that perpetuates inequalities, or schools as elitist and normative institutions that exclude people who "don't fit into the box".

Others take a position regarding current paradoxes highlighted by the media in statements that condemn the situation: the exacerbation of inequalities during the coronavirus crisis, the shuttering of cultural sites, the lack of support for artists.

The young people interviewed said they were going through a time of "awareness" in their lives. As their opinions become more established, they feel concerned about aspects of society that trouble them, and they feel driven by a desire to get involved and "do something". Symptomatic of this need: the climate protests are portrayed after the fact as the expression of a fed-up and angry youth, on a subject that has not been sufficiently tackled by the previous generation.

A difference compared to their parents' generation

The different groups interviewed expressed the feeling that they are a generation more oriented towards change, and more aware of the world's problems than their parents' generation. They feel more responsible and see themselves as the ones who will change their parents' actions and perceptions: they will be the ones to encourage them to sort waste, to use

their cars less, they are the ones who will educate their parents on global warming, feminism and gender theory. Some of them find the differences in opinion in their household entertaining: on the one hand, their own rigour in protecting the planet on a daily basis, contrasted with their parents' comparative indifference.

“It was me who explained feminism to my parents.”

Léa, 16 years old, Mons

Issues they are sensitive to and that make them change their way of life

The desire to defend certain values is sometimes triggered by highly specific, lived experiences. One young girl talked about her difficulty in coming to terms with her homosexuality at school, another talked about the harassment she experienced at the age of 12-13 and the comments that overly feminised her body while she was still a teenager. Another girl talked about an impossible love between her, a black woman, and a white classmate, an experience of latent racism. The young people interviewed are, to varying degrees, all faced with issues of acceptance and affirmation at school, or within the groups they are part of. They talk with indignation or sadness about these effects of separation, which put people in boxes, generate inequalities and unhappiness, and upset the ideal of equality, tolerance, sharing, solidarity and inclusion.

These events do not remain at the awareness level: they translate into changes in behaviour, sometimes at the individual level, sometimes at a more collective level. In all cases, they have a knock-on effect and make the young people take a fresh look at their daily life and the world around them.

All the young people interviewed are universally concerned by the issue of ecology, and put their conviction into practice in a highly "logical" way: sorting waste "like everyone else", eating less meat, limiting plastic use, riding a bike.

Mutual aid, sharing and donations (donating used computers, giving away clothing, adopting animals) are valued practices which they witness in their teachers, in their associative or family environment, and which they gladly emulate.

The day-to-day actions and habits are also impacted and transformed for young people who feel concerned about feminism or gender issues: they make a point of getting informed and learning about the subject, or defending expressions of gender such as the possibility of dressing how you want (the possibility for a boy to wear a skirt for example).

“I'd rather influence people close to me. If I have white friends, I'll be more friendly to them. So they see not every black man is the same. Even in the metro I'm super friendly just to show not every black person is the same. To show not every black man does drugs or is a criminal or whatever.”

Tshami, 19 years old, Anderlecht

“It's at our age that we start to realise the inequalities facing people.”

Léa, 16 years old, Mons

“It's a subject that really infuriates me because I realise that even I sometimes look at someone and think 'she must have some baggage, I wonder what', and those aren't questions we should be asking! That doesn't change anything! [racism], it affects me too and not in a good way.” Maëlle, 15 years old, Mons

“The solution could be to help each other. Not thinking about the misfortune of others is selfish. We might end up in the same situation one day. No one will help us if we don't help others.” Audrey, 17 years old, Charleroi

Outrage does not necessarily lead to engagement

Although certain aspects of society can represent a major source of frustration for young people, their accompanying indignation and outrage do not necessarily lead to specific engagement.

Faced with inequalities, the polarisation of society, racism, sexism, discrimination, homophobia (all these

issues were raised in the debates), the young people interviewed do not always know how to act or what to do. There are so many problems that are so vast in scale, they are therefore also difficult to get a handle on “at their level”.



Young people can change the world

Faced with the issues that outrage them, the need for change is general affirmation: the world has to change and young people have an important role to play in this regard. The young people interviewed feel they are part of a generation that can demonstrate strength and determination (the climate marches proved this), they have confidence in themselves and their ability to get things done, “who’s going to do it otherwise?”

“All it takes is one little spark,” explains H el ene (17 years old, from Li ege), after her experience of a sit-in at her high school to protest against the curfew. Young people are full of energy, eager for change, ready to seize the opportunities for engagement that are opening up to them.

The belief in the power of youth is fuelled by the fact that changes have indeed taken place. The change that they have witnessed at their level, especially at school, where information on harassment is accessible, where it becomes possible to express a gender difference or sexual preference. Change at the political level as well, with the feeling that young people may be listened to more following the climate protests, among other things.

Their optimism as regards their ability to change the world comes from a belief that their generation will not educate its children in the way the previous generation did. Some of them look to the future and know that the education they will provide will be different, with respect for gender equality or ecology, for example. Education is a way to “fix the mistakes”.

However, this belief in youth should be nuanced and contrasted with what young people decry as a structural and permanent lack of consideration for the opinions of young people on the part of political decision makers. While young people have a key role to play in changing the world, and even if there is more attention for their concerns than before, being heard remains a challenge. The climate protests are again cited as an example: the political decision makers, with Charles Michel as the figurehead, have “done nothing” following the protests. The coronavirus crisis is also cited as an example of the difficulties experienced by young people being taken into consideration far too late.

“I know I’m a bit more of an environmentalist than a socialist. I say all the time that we need to change the world.” Keren, 19 years old, Jette

“The poor are getting poorer, and the rich are getting richer. You can’t remain indifferent to that.” Eléonore, 17, Liège

“I make comments to my parents about money-related inequality, but at the end of the day, I try to do things for ecology and I would almost let others suffer.”
Keren, 19, Jette

“It’s the indifference that has been increasingly outraging me as I’ve grown up. (...) We know about it, but nothing gets done. The indifference we can have to the suffering of others is shocking.”
Rachel, 17 years old, Charleroi

LOVE
OUR
PLANET

THE WORLD
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WHEN
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OBAMA

2

Collective and individual: the drivers of engagement

The major social issues for which the young people are engaged (e.g. gender equality or discrimination) form the philosophical framework within which they reflect on society and its challenges. The young people do not really form their engagement from these major issues. It comes from specific events that affect them on a personal level. An impulsive and/or emotional reaction to a specific event is often the result. They have a feeling of outrage. They don't shy away from sensationalism and are receptive to concise, provocative assertions or quotes (which are then shared via social media).

The discourse that young people draw on to explain their engagement goes past the concept of altruism. Young people do not suffer from the *housewife syndrome* whereby they are always ready to help others in silence and for free⁸. The discourse used by young people today to frame their engagement can best be described as reflexive action. Whatever actions they take, follow or support, the engagement has been thought through. This does not mean that the underlying conceptual framework is always anchored in grand social theories; superficial reasons can also form the basis for engagement. It does mean, however, that in most cases explicit choices are made based on reasoning.

When we look at what drives young people in their engagement, we see a strong urge to leave a mark on others,

no matter how small. "Doing good" is therefore not enough or even irrelevant, as it is too vague or gratuitous. There must be more to it: there must be meaning and relevance in what they do. Some examples: Being noncommittal doesn't work. Some examples:

- Knowledge, going deeper, raising awareness in others and providing arguments. Often by sharing and posting information on social media.
- Providing meaningful free time for others.
- Setting up initiatives and actions with explicit objectives.
- Convincing other young people through specific actions (e.g. sit -ins).

Apart from what the young people want to achieve in other people, they also want to experience growth *themselves*. The engagement they have should

"When I heard about that man who was murdered by a group of young people I thought that was awful, I shared it straightaway." Justine, 17 years old, Maldegem

(ideally) help them to develop themselves further. The knowledge and skills they gain help them in their self-development and contribute to who they are.

In this sense, they see their

engagement as a fully fledged learning process that can help them in other areas of engagement and even in their further (professional) lives. The urge to experience growth and what young people want to bring about in others must be understood as two secondary aspects. In other words, one is not more important than the other.

The skills that young people (ideally) want to develop and that they think are part of an engagement process are the following:

- **Social skills:** skills to work in a group,

“The opinion pieces I write don’t get many likes, sometimes 1 or 2. But that’s fine, because I have changed as a result.”

Hamsa, 22 years old

establish social relations outside the family setting and friend group, knowledge of group dynamics.

- **Cultural skills:** knowledge of other peoples, cultural awareness, questioning beliefs.
- **Personal skills:** becoming a well-rounded person, self-confidence, satisfaction with oneself.
- **Cognitive skills:** organisational and communication skills.
- **Political skills:** understanding the functioning of the democratic system, critical consciousness.



3

*Context, relationships
and life experience*

Social engagement and the commitment of young people is often considered as a binary choice: either you are engaged or you are not; either you volunteer or you don't. By looking at engagement in this binary way, we fail to notice the *living* dimension of engagement. Young people are engaged between studies, hobbies, friends and other responsibilities. What is more, their engagement is often linked to these aspects and not demarcated from how they live, party, work and study.

We should therefore regard social engagement among young people as a *process* that is situated in a certain context, which is relational and linked to the individual's life experience⁹.

Situated in a specific context

Engagement does not exist in a vacuum, it is strongly linked to what is on the social agenda or what existing structures (school, youth work, associations, etc.) are providing. For example, the protests following the murder of George Floyd and the Black Lives Matter movement prompted Natalia, Justine and Zuri to deepen their understanding of issues such as structural racism. Wannes, Lotte, Emma, Tess and Ella gave us an account of their immersion trip to Senegal, through a partnership between Broederlijk Delen and their school. In Senegal, a Youth Forum was organised with local young people in which the climate crisis was one of the topics of discussion. Another example is that of Driss, Aleksander and Wim. They are engaged with LAMA. This organisation works with children and young people from vulnerable domestic

situations. The motivations, dedication and working method of the young volunteers are strongly determined by the objectives and the operations of the organisation.

Relational

Engagement is never in isolation but builds on existing and/or new social relationships. These relationships may be deep and go far back in time, but they can also be established through superficial social connections, for example through social media. It can be observed time and again that being surrounded by *like-minded* people stimulates engagement. Engagement therefore does not necessarily develop in close-knit groups of friends. It is more important that a group is on the same wavelength as regards social issues. The information bubbles on social media are a rewarding aspect in this regard, which young people are not only aware of but also use to develop their engagement.

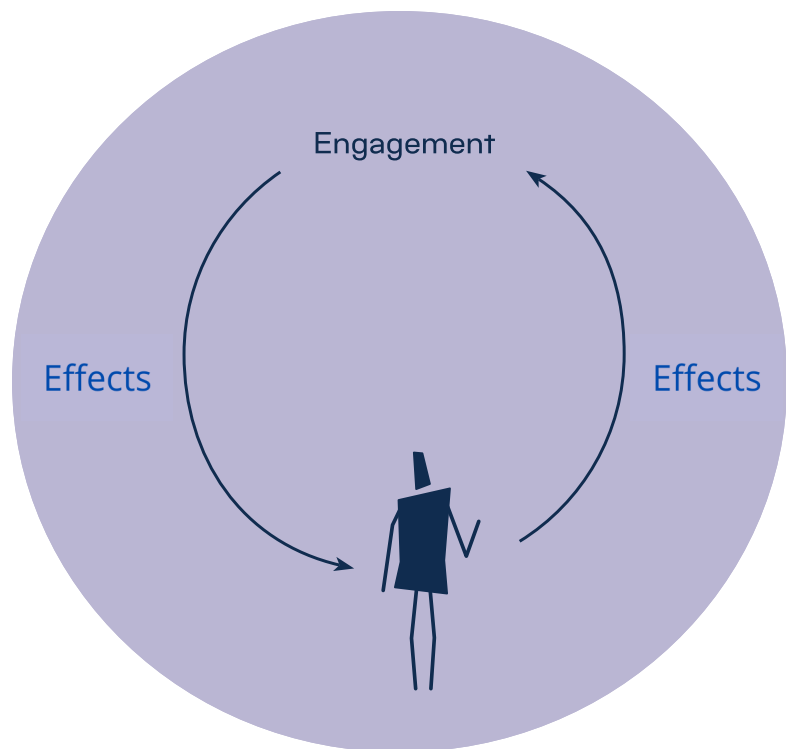
Linked to the individual's life experience

Engagement doesn't just happen. It stems from the everyday life of young people: the place where they live, their school, what they do in their free time... these are examples of elements that can influence their engagement. But also on a personal level, challenges, difficult moments, international experiences or religion can influence engagement. Indeed, activities, ideas and initiatives also grow partly out of individual experiences (small or large) and whatever life throws at them.

⁹ Zie ook Cahill, H. & Babak, D. (2018). Re-conceptualising youth participation: A framework to inform action. *Children and Youth Services Review*. (95), 243-253. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chilcyouth.2018.11.001>

Engagement is therefore always embedded and never develops in isolation. It stems from everyday life and is strongly linked to the life experiences of young people. Yet it is not only the life experiences of young people that shape their engagement: the relationship is often reciprocal. This implies that young people's engagement also often influences their subsequent life course.

For example, school choices, study choices, friend groups, leisure time, but also other commitments and personal consumption behaviour (e.g. buying second-hand, locally and ecologically) are in some cases driven by previous engagement. Engagement gives direction to a certain extent, has an orienting effect and strengthens young people.



Engagement as a part of identity construction

Besides this reciprocal relationship between engagement and the individual lives of young people, social engagement also has a strong identity-forming aspect. Young people – who are already in an important identity-forming phase – use their engagement to make their mark, to develop themselves and stand out from others. Social engagement makes it clear to young people that they have individual choices but also rights, goals and responsibilities.

More than was the case a few decades ago, today young people have the possibility to forge their own life course¹⁰. Traditional structures (such as religion, the nuclear family, the rigid labour market, etc.) that until recently determined (social) life to a significant extent, have made way for a more individual interpretation of an individual's life course, with young people being able to make their own choices and forge their own pathways. Young people are therefore (partly) writing their own biography,

based on elements from digital culture, leisure activities, studies and commercial cultures. **Social engagement is also a part of this. In the *do-it-yourself-biography*¹¹ young people make choices, with direct consequences for their individual identity constructions.** Throughout the interviews, it became evident how strongly young people “use” their engagement to make their mark as individuals, as people. Their engagement confirms and acknowledges their individuality, and provides meaning and purpose. It reflects their individual values, choices and individuality.

This does not mean that engagement is always deep and serious. Young people do what they do with a lot of humour, with tongue in cheek or sometimes for superficial reasons or for reasons that at first glance have little to do with engagement.

¹⁰ This does not imply that the individual can suddenly make completely “free” choices; structuring mechanisms such as education and income level still largely determine our life possibilities and opportunities.

¹¹ Beck, U. & Beck-Gernsheim, E.(1996). Individualization and 'precarious freedoms': perspectives and controversies of a subject-orientated sociology, pp. 23-48 in: HEELAS, P., S. LASH & P. MORRIS (eds.), *Detraditionalization*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers

“Actually, it’s the cool kids who are in the working group for social issues. Since the third grade we’ve been thinking, okay, we need to be there. All the nice people are in the group, all the people we consider popular.” Roos, 17 years old, Maldegem

“LAMA has helped me build my life. I wouldn’t be where I am today without LAMA.” Driss, 15 years old, Antwerp

“We have status in school because of it. People know who you are. Some are even intimidated by it.” Emily, 18 years old, Maldegem

“I will try everything and see what is for me. What are the options? What can I contribute? Then I’ll see what big steps I can take.” Mina, 20 years old, Antwerp

Information and learning as a form of engagement

Given the complexity of social issues, young people feel the need to be well informed. In this way, they want to (partly) unravel and understand a given topic. This is often the start of a more significant engagement on a topic. They have a big urge to know and understand. A lack of knowledge often results in uncertainty and therefore inertia.

We observe three ways in which young people deal with information:

- **Active information gathering:** searching for information on given topics themselves, posting on digital channels, via search engines. In-depth in nature.
- **Receptive information gathering:** receiving and sharing information, via social media profiles. Superficial in nature.
- **Creative information gathering:** organising activities themselves with the aim of gaining more knowledge about a given topic. For example, through debates, discussion evenings, conversations. In-depth in nature.

Difficult and complex concepts and themes are not avoided. Discussion groups, debates, youth forums, online sharing of articles in the class group chat, etc. There is a search for more depth on the topics that concern them.

Information gathering is therefore a necessary step. Here, too, the information gathering is not always in-depth in nature and does not (always) take place via traditional or conventional channels. With their neutral and detached reporting styles, mainstream news media are becoming less relevant. Instead, young people opt for media that make them feel closer to the action. Sensational and hard-hitting images are all part of this.

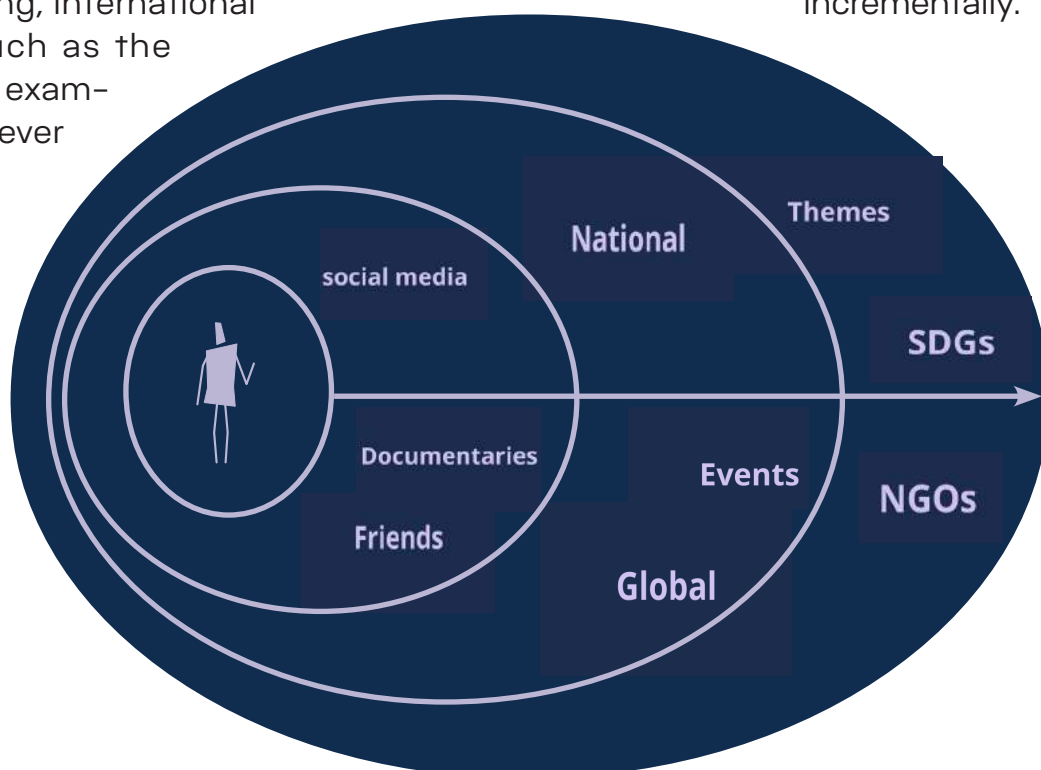
From local to global

Engagement starts in the immediate vicinity of the young people themselves: in their living environment, linked to their life course and in relation to others (online or offline). Engagement therefore starts locally, and rarely departs from the major issues. It is generally more about experiences close to home: a friend who participates in a campaign, a video on TikTok, a documentary on a particular theme, the murder of George Floyd, etc. Interests arise in the immediate vicinity of the young people themselves and from the moment that interest is aroused, their attention and attentiveness increase, often stimulated by information streams on social media. Major issues, campaigns or overarching, international goals (such as the SDGs, for example) are never

the starting points for engagement. Young people feel little in the way of direct affinity with such issues, and are rarely drawn to these grand, abstract stories.

Strikingly, we did not encounter much in the way of fiery words or confrontational statements during the debates. Most young people are not climbing on barricades. Low-level realism is also evident in the activities, events and initiatives they are involved in, follow or undertake. This orientation towards action, close to their living environment and local in nature, is what drives them.

Through action, the reasoning goes, change is brought about incrementally.



18 as the turning point

In everything undertaken by young people in terms of social engagement, the age of 18 appears to be crucial. Before the age of 18, the living environment of young people is strongly correlated to what goes on in the family and what they are exposed to at school (and through membership of youth organisations). As such, access to and the opportunities for engagement depend to a significant extent on the openness of family and school to social engagement. Much of what is called engagement is ascribed to as a learning process: learning to cooperate, learning to form opinions, learning to organise. Young people are much more likely to be taken in tow by others.

It is often a question of experiencing possibilities during adolescence, and the more concrete these are, the better. Schools and youth work are the perfect environments for getting acquainted with engagement, social topics and voluntary work.

After the age of 18, and primarily at the start of higher studies, the subsequent phase involves more independence and possibilities to spread their wings. It is therefore also the moment when engagement is taken more seriously and justified.

15-18 years old	19 and older
<p>Family life and the influence of family, school and friends is significant. Gradual discovery of topics linked to engagement, critical consciousness and critical thinking.</p>	<p>Better knowledge of themselves. Interests are more well rounded. Confidence in their own abilities, autonomy, the desire to express themselves, an extensive network, contact with like-minded people.</p>
<p>Engagement is facilitated by support.</p>	<p>Individual initiatives linked to existing engagement</p>

4

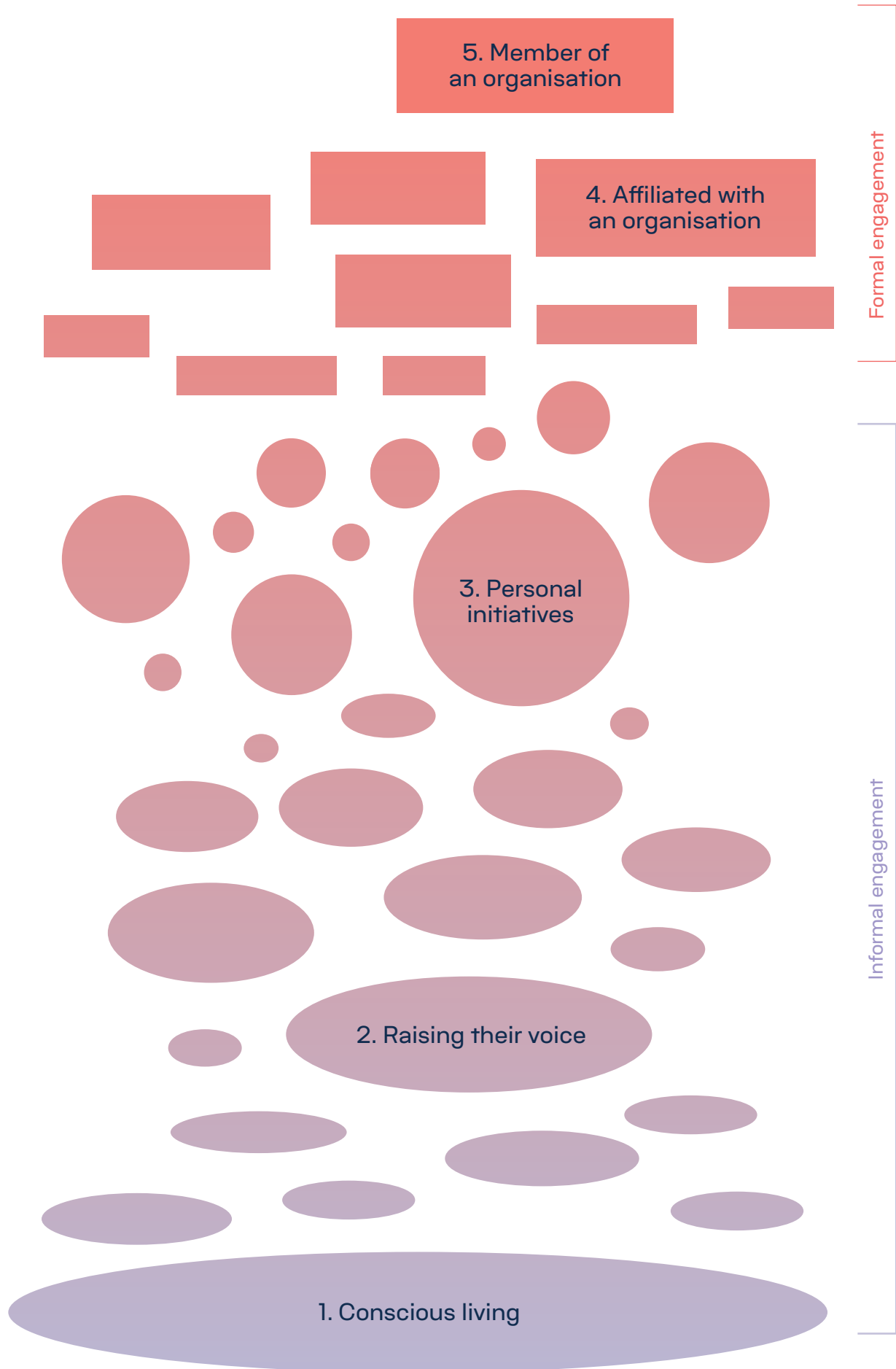
*The forms of
engagement*

Being engaged is not just about being part of an organisation or a movement

The wide variety of initiatives and attitudes related to the subject of engagement among young people blurs the binary dichotomy between, on the one hand, young people who are “engaged” and those who aren’t, on the other. For the young people interviewed, there are various forms of engagement, the boundary between “engagement” and “non-engagement” is not marked or identifiable by an event or an act that would make a young person fall on one side or the other.

For a young person, being engaged does not only, nor necessarily, mean being part of an organisation. **For many, engagement means embodying values at the individual level, and making the choice to spread these around, to communicate them in the world, through words and deeds. Within an organisation or outside as an individual, it doesn’t really matter.**

“We apply what we learn in the Scouts to everyday life. For example, don’t pollute, protect nature, be careful with what you consume. One example among many!” Lisa, 16 years old, Mons



There are diverse and varied forms of engagement

Literature¹² suggests that many young people become engaged in unconventional ways. Some authors consider, for example, that consumer choices are a form of consumer activism, or that networking on social networks is a form of engagement. Traditionally, a distinction can be made between so-called formal forms of engagement, i.e. linked to organisations (NGOs, non-profit organisations, political parties) and so-called informal forms of engagement, outside existing conventional structures. Within these two broad categories, and given the diversity and proliferation of engagement practices reported in this study, we propose new subcategories as possible forms of engagement among young people.

1. “Conscious living”

The young people interviewed have lifestyle habits that they want to justify in terms of ecological issues. All of them make conscious choices on a daily basis. The mere mention of global warming is enough to trigger them, as being self-evident, a new type of obli-

“It’s a commitment because in a way we educate all these children.” Sophie, 15 years old, Mons

gation, not dictated by political decisions but directly required by the state of the world. Reusing things, reducing waste, and consuming locally do not need any particular justification for young people: these things are self-evident and constitute for them a new standard to aim for at the level of society. While this represents veritable engagement for the most active, for others it is a collective effort to which they try to contribute at their “level”, to “do their little bit”.

¹² Bennett, W. L. (2008). Changing citizenship in the digital age. In W. L. Bennett (Ed.), *Civic life online: Learning how digital media can engage youth* (pp. 1-24). Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press.;

Elchardus, M., & Herbots, S. (2010). Jongeren en democratisch burgerschap. Conventionele, alternatieve en aanvullende participatie. In N. Vettenburg, J. Deklerck & J. Siongers (Eds.), *Jongeren in cijfers en letters. Bevindingen van de JOP-monitor 2*, (pp. 181-212). Leuven: Acco.;

Harris, A., Wyn, J., & Younes, S. (2010). *Beyond apathetic or activist youth:*

‘Ordinary’ young people and contemporary forms of participation.

Young, 18(1), 9-32.; Hooghe, M., & Boonen, J. (2015). Youth Engagement in Politics: Generational Differences and Participation Inequalities. In: Thijssen, P., Siongers, J., Van Laer, J., Haers, J., & Mels, S. (2015). *Political Engagement of the Young in Europe. Youth in the crucible* (pp. 13-28). Abingdon: Routledge.;

Thijssen, P., Siongers, J., Van Laer, J., Haers, J., & Mels, S. (Eds.) (2015). *Political Engagement of the Young in Europe. Youth in the crucible*. Abingdon: Routledge.

For many, these lifestyle choices are all the easier as they do not constrain their tastes or things they want to consume, which are also in line with their values and convictions: the second-hand market, “do it yourself”, organic food, etc.

Examples cited buying locally, growing a garden, making your own yoghurt and jam, buying second-hand, sewing, limiting your meat consumption, limiting your car journeys, reducing the volume of waste, etc.

2. Raising their voice

For young people, being engaged also means expressing themselves, making their voice and opinion heard on social networks, but also and more simply in their immediate environment, with friends and family, not necessarily or not only with the objective of convincing them, but at least to talk about a topic, spread a word or an idea and by this act, to defend it. “Raising awareness”, “talking about things so that people are simply aware”, “raising consciousness” are all things that motivate young people to speak out on a subject.

The majority of the young people interviewed are active on social networks, all the more so since the beginning of the coronavirus crisis, as social networks have become the only window to the world for many people, the only place to socialise, thereby focusing everyone’s attention on the information shared on these media.

From simple information sharing to online discussion, to the creation of

new content, the level and intensity of positioning varies from person to person. Even if not everyone “dares” to “share” or “repost” (this requires a certain amount of courage in asserting yourself and your opinions), this medium is the easiest way to express yourself: posting blue screens as a sign of solidarity with the Uyghurs; sharing posts from the Black Lives Matter movement, actions that they say to their network, “something we can do”. Others go further, creating dedicated posts or stories (on Instagram) on topics (conflicts in Africa, harassment), and do not hesitate to engage in discussion with those who leave comments. This way of grasping the importance of speaking out on issues is not limited to networks and extends to discussions and exchanges between young people, within their families or with their teachers, for example on the subjects of racism or feminism.

3. Personal initiatives

Being engaged also means undertaking actions that have meaning. Starting from nothing, simply from a strong conviction, with often effusive energy, young people launch themselves into initiatives which are the fruit of their own initiative. Some are purely individual and not proselytising, such as visiting elderly people in care homes or offering time on TikTok to listen to depressed people during the lockdown period (examples cited). Others aim to raise consciousness, such as (examples cited): developing a feminist collage project in the urban space, sending postcards to residents from neighbourhoods to ask about their wants during the lockdown period, and organising conferences on



CO₂ ON

every little ACT RESPECT YOUR MOTHER
MILKCS & DIFFERENC

Solar Power
Cheaper Than
Fossil Fuels

OCEANS RISE
&
OVERFLOW
IT AIN'T RIGHT
&
IT AIN'T NATURAL

SEE HOW THE
COULD BE IN SP
OF THE WAY TH
IT IS

NEW LOOK

LOVE

“I also watch what I eat. Being vegetarian is too difficult here at home, I only do it at the student flat. I also see where the products have come from, I’m concerned by that.” Lotte, 18 years old, Mol

“For the environment: I recycle and reuse. I don’t just throw things away. That’s something I’m committed to. I’ll be around for a while, and maybe my kids too. I don’t want future generations to be left in the lurch. Because one day it’s all going to run out.” Driss, 15 years old, Antwerp

“Whatever the cause is, one of the ways to help is always to raise people’s awareness.” Maëlle, 15 years old, Mons

“For example, for the Black Lives Matter movement, a lot of people thought it was pointless to communicate information or posts to raise awareness because they thought it wouldn’t change anything in concrete terms. So at least we are raising awareness, we are informing people. That’s still something we can do. I did. I shared things when I could.” Regg, 18 years old, Charleroi

social justice issues. Others aim at protesting and asserting disagreement: organising a sit-in in opposition to the curfew measures; organising a happening in the school where boys wear skirts (in support of a student who was reprimanded for doing this).

Other examples of initiatives organised by the young people interviewed: organising debates on culture, organising a solidarity initiative to welcome refugees, developing humanitarian aid to Afghanistan, etc.

4. Affiliated with an organisation

Involvement in an organisation can be done in more distant ways, in the form of affiliation rather than long-term membership. In this category, we find young people who show an interest in a specific project and for which they are temporarily engaged. The main gateway to engagement is the project or the issue, the organisation is just the vehicle. This type of engagement is similar to individual initiatives, but is realised in the context of a formal organisation.

Examples cited: Immersion trip to Senegal with the NGO Broederlijk Delen, being Ambassador of the NGO Youca (Youth for change and action), participating in an awareness campaign for the Red Cross.

5. Member of an organisation

Being a member of an organisation implies long-term engagement. Young people are engaged in this way as long as they see the added value of this type of engagement. Being part of a large organisation allows them to learn and take ambitious actions. Being a member of an organisation also means agreeing to adopt the goals, values and image of the organisation.

Examples cited: volunteering for the NGO Broederlijk Delen, helping with the organisation (preparing and delivering parcels), being part of a youth movement, such as the scouts or the guides.

Informal engagement – *characteristics*

The so-called informal forms of engagement are the result of personal and often spontaneous initiatives. They are motivated by taking strong positions, opinions that are often formed in reaction to current issues and/or events that affect young people more directly in their daily lives. These forms are totally free, they start from a reflection of the young people on the most suitable way of passing on a message or defending a cause, and they develop from the creativity of each individual. The forms of engagement correlate with the desires and personalities: some of them value violent action and radicalism, others value humour, while others value personal and intimate experiences. Some of them are comfortable with public exposure or participation in group activities, while others prefer the context of social networks, etc.

Young people move freely from one form to another. Some of them choose to leave the structured framework of NGOs to launch their own more radical action, while others seek to institutionalise their engagement by setting up a non-profit organisation. Others disengage without pursuing engagement elsewhere: for example, many have quit their youth movement without joining another movement. It's about "finding your place", explains Anne (17, Mons), who returned to the

Scouts after feeling that the spirit of adventure she was looking for was once again present.

The informal forms of engagement often involve a high degree of personal investment, due to the very reflection on the form of the message and the action it requires. Perhaps even more so than so-called formal engagement, whereby some young people only have to participate in a pre-existing structure that is responsible for thinking about the type of action to be carried out, its organisation, etc. In the case of informal engagement, these are activities and initiatives that fully engage young people. Many enthusiastically recount how their viewpoints came about, involving a process of individual search and discovery, through readings, discussions, viewing documentaries, etc., and often leading each person to develop a new and more precise critical opinion on the themes of their engagement, thereby also participating in the construction of their values and their identity.

Formal engagement – *characteristics*

The so-called formal forms of engagement correspond to what is traditionally known as the possibilities available to young people wishing to “be engaged”: joining an organisation or movement that defends values and collectively sets up initiatives. The act of engagement for the young person is therefore, first of all, that of making the choice to join this or that organisation (this choice is sometimes made by their parents before them). In this type of engagement, the issues and subjects defended are determined by the structures and not by the young people, who choose to join them.

For all the young people interviewed, who do not fit into these forms of engagement, they don’t “try them out”, as the issues do not seem to correspond to the desires, personalities or preferences of young people. For some, the causes they defend are generic and often immutable, appearing to be too far removed from their daily lives (events in Africa) or too abstract (global warming), overlooking current issues such as police violence, racism, #metoo, etc. Moreover, the organisations have their own way of structuring themselves, with codes, norms, and timetables, and one must first agree to join up and become part of these before touching on the subject of engagement itself.

Being engaged in this context means committing to a structure before committing *for* or *against* an issue.

That being said, for all the young people who are part of an organisation and thus have so-called formal engagement, this is valued and respected. The motivation to be engaged can even come from the context, the atmosphere, the sociability created within the organisations. This is the case for youth movements where collective experience, as well as the values of sharing and inclusion (less than the religious aspect, which is secondary) are highlighted as strong motivators. It is also the case with school projects, where the group’s collective experience in setting up a project is key as regards the decision to participate or not. Finally, it is also the case with NGOs which offer a unique opportunity to open up and discover different cultures.

THERE IS NO
PLANET B



her
NA
VET



“You can join any day but if you don’t have the basic knowledge to contribute in order to back up an opinion, then it’s pointless. So you first have to do things yourself.” Natalia, 19 years old, Tervuren

“I came here as a refugee from Afghanistan and am currently setting up a non-profit organisation that provides humanitarian aid to Afghanistan. I looked for an existing organisation but couldn’t find one. So I’m going to start one myself.”

Haroun, 17 years old, Deurne

“The three of us did the NGO thing: Amnesty International and Oxfam. After a while it was no longer our thing. We wanted to express our engagement in a different way. It’s not that it wasn’t necessary, but it was no longer the way we wanted to do it.” Anne, 17 years old, Liège

“There are videos on Instagram, but because they are long, people can’t be bothered. I look at them and I rewrite them (...) and every Friday night, I announce that I’m launching a story about Senegal, for example, and people then pay attention.” Rachel, 17 years old, Charleroi

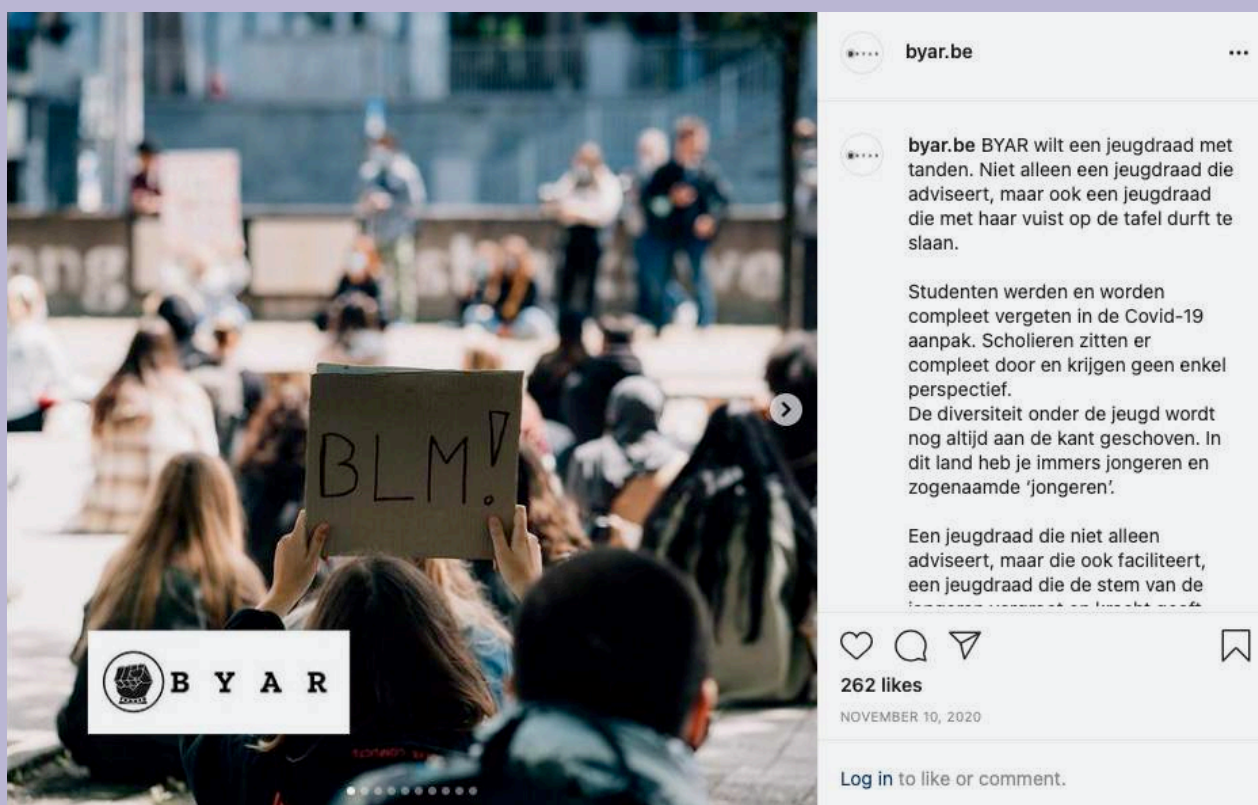
5

The ambivalent relationship with digital engagement

Social media as a window to the world

Young people curate their social media with a specific approach when they want to show their social engagement. Indeed, through social media, you show what topics, themes, and problems you are concerned by. You show your network what moves you, what you are committed to, in short: what you stand for. Despite the importance of social media, the digital aspect of engagement should be treated with caution. In the first instance, social media remains a place to stay in the loop, follow events and themes, gather information and gain knowledge.

Young people discover topics that are trending, what others are sharing, what new information is bubbling up. The relationship between social media and engagement appears to be less active than one might expect. The examples of young people who are particularly active in connection with their engagement **and prompt reactions to it are very limited**. Moreover, they share things much more than they post; they read much more than they comment.



Not everyone dares/is willing to post things connected to social engagement

Where does this rather passive attitude come from? There is often a feeling of trepidation and hesitation about sharing and posting information on social media. There is a big fear of being found out, because one does not know much about the subject. Posting about social issues is regarded as self-exposure, showing your network what you stand for and what you think. Doing this at a young age, especially for the under-18s, takes courage and is only for the self-confident or those who have specialist knowledge on a specific issue.

There is also an important strategic aspect to posting. Young people reflect on their social media image. Posts about social engagement are therefore not always straightforward. What can you post? How many times? When is it too much? How do I come across when I post about a certain topic? Moreover, young people also look at what is happening in their digital networks with an analytical eye, and are especially critical of acquiescence and superficiality among many people on trending topics.



“I don't have racist friends so I don't really post anything about BLM. There is also the feeling that it is kinda corny. If I see someone posting about BLM I think oh he is one of us. But it can be too much. I don't want people to think that about me.” Tshami, 19 jaar, Anderlecht

“About Black Lives Matter, for example, I'm afraid people will ask me something about it and I won't know the answer.”
Emily, 18 years old, Maldegem

“I find it interesting to read debates on Twitter but I don't get involved. I'm not going to stick my neck out and say anything, though, I find that too scary.”
Ella, 18 years old, Mol

“Every now and then there is a major issue. There is a hype and then everyone thinks: I need to get involved, I need to post something, while half of them have absolutely no idea what it's all about. But there's the sense of having to share what's trending.” Emma, 19 years old, Deurne

Digital engagement does not replace offline engagement

The core of young people's engagement is in their mindset, in their critical consciousness, in the organisations they are involved in, in the initiatives they set up. The digital world primarily has a supporting function: it ensures a better and faster spread of information, is responsible for more social

awareness, puts matters on the social agenda, facilitates the gathering of information and the sharing/showing of opinions. Young people see digital engagement not as an alternative but as a complement to offline engagement.

Polished versus raw, Instagram versus TikTok

The use and popularity of social media channels are constantly changing. Moreover, it is difficult to make grand statements about social media use in the context of this qualitative study. Nevertheless, we will make an attempt to provide the broad outlines based on the interviews, namely that we do not make any assertions about which channel is the most suitable for demonstrating social engagement.

Facebook has been off the radar of young people for some time. That's not the case for Instagram. It is the social media channel of choice on which young people share things. In the 'Stories', they share quotes, texts and videos. On their feed, they don't post about social

engagement very often. Twitter is used by individuals who are most engaged in politics. Having a Twitter account doesn't automatically mean that someone is involved in the debate (see quote above).

TikTok is a relative newcomer, an important channel for the youngest participants in the debates. Although TikTok is mostly pure entertainment, young people recognise that there is a lot going on in terms of social engagement (although they are aware that they are often in an echo chamber). TikTok is characterised by the direct, unfiltered and raw nature of the videos posted there, with a strong focus on the international community.



6

*Socially aware but
not political*

The question of the role of young people in social change is pretty much the only time during the debates where young people really see things big. Young people will be the drivers of social change. Every debate shows the conviction that young generations want to and will organise society differently. At the same time, there is a clear sense of pragmatism: the world will change because older generations will no longer be around.

Expectations towards government, politics or political institutions when it comes to social change are low. There is very little faith in political (world) leaders, party politics, politicians, the utility of voting, etc. The democratic system itself is sometimes even called into question. Keywords: disappointment, distrust and incomprehension.

This observation has not come out of the blue. In recent decades, (quantitative) studies have shown time after time the decline in trust on the part of young people in the traditional political arena. The recent study by Annoncer la Couleur and Kruit¹³ on young people's values also show a particularly low level of trust in government and politics. Incidentally, this observation is not specific to the Belgian context. Trust in government is also falling among young people around the world¹⁴.

The debates show that this mistrust is not a cover for apathy. On the contrary, young people keep abreast of current affairs, including at the international

level. They take positions, have opinions, share and post things relating to social issues, in short they have strong social awareness. In other words, young people are highly politicised and not apolitical.

It sounds paradoxical, taking a clear position on social issues and in that sense being highly politicised, but having lost all faith in traditional politics (and in some cases even the democratic system). The literature on social engagement offers an explanation¹⁵ and it is linked to the fact that today we are expected to write our own life biography (see also chapter 3). The traditional model of citizenship is becoming less and less relevant to young people, on account of there being too much one-way traffic. Young people are asked to fulfil their obligations towards society: vote every few years, be informed (preferably by the mass media), be involved in public affairs, agree to be represented by elected representatives, participate in civil society, etc. This one-way traffic, based on a rights and obligations model, is found to be lacking for those growing up in a context of globalisation and postmodern values, where self-realisation, personal expression and individuality, among other things, are central.

Young people are expected to construct their own biography, on the basis of personal values, their own life choices and individual expression. There is therefore a growing mismatch between what is traditionally expected of

13 Kruit (2021). Wat beweegt jongeren? Waarden, leefwereld en engagement van jongeren in Vlaanderen en in Brussel. Resultaten van een peiling uitgevoerd bij 500 jongeren tussen 14 en 19 jaar. Peiling uitgevoerd door onderzoeksbureau Dedicated in opdracht van Kruit (Enabel). Brussel: Enabel.

Annoncer la Couleur (2019). Ce qui mobilise les jeunes. Valeurs, centres d'intérêt et positionnements des jeunes en Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles. Résultats du sondage effectué auprès de 500 jeunes de 14 à 19 ans. Sondage effectué par institut d'études Dedicated commandée par Annoncer la Couleur (Enabel). Bruxelles: Enabel.

14 For an overview, see Siongers, J., Keppens, G., Spruyt, B., & Van Droogenbroeck, F. (2019). On the digital lane to citizenship? Patterns of internet use and civic engagement amongst Flemish adolescents and young adults. *Journal of Social Science Education*, 18(2), 67–86. <https://doi.org/10.4119/JSSSE-901>

15 Bennett, W. L. (2008). Changing citizenship in the digital age. In W. L. Bennett (Ed.), *Civic life online: Learning how digital media can engage youth* (pp. 1–24). Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press.

citizens, on the one hand, and young people who develop their citizenship on the basis of personal values on the other. This explains why organisations sometimes find it difficult to attract young people. Indeed, young people prefer to get involved in issues that accentuate their individuality, which are closely related to their values and

convictions, in an alternative way, via loose networks, aimed at concrete actions close to their own living environment, together with friends or people from their online network.

Their engagement influences and reinforces their beliefs, not the other way around

Through actions, initiatives and engagement, by acquiring knowledge, by exposure to social issues, young people (re)form their opinions about people and society, and they develop arguments.

From this follows a given reasoning and position, not so much for a given political party, but for basic human values. Because that's what it comes down to: respecting human rights on a global level.



YOU DECIDE

Particular criticism regarding the lack of opportunity for being listened to

The possibility of only voting every four years undermines faith in the political system. The fact that it is not possible to actually be listened to is frustrating.

We observe a considerable discrepancy between the time frame of traditional politics and the time frame of young people. They work in the short term. They develop ideas, take initiatives, start initiatives, share, post and go deeper into what's on the social agenda, etc. with a much shorter time horizon than politics.

Yet there are also hopeful examples that suggest that the frustrations and mistrust as regards politicians and

policy-makers can make way for cooperation and understanding. This happens when there is dialogue and communication between young people, politicians and policy-makers. In such cases, a constructive connection emerges whereby the playing field of young people, politicians and policy-makers briefly overlaps, despite major differences in power positions between the two.

These collaborations can help build bridges between the two parties, but only if there is genuine dialogue and the intentions are sincere.

“It comes across as: you’re not entitled to vote so you have nothing to say. While it doesn’t mean I don’t have a voice or an opinion.” Tess, 18 years old, Deurne

“It is important for citizens to be able to express an opinion between elections.” Mina, 20 years old, Antwerp

“We get a lot of opportunities to voice our opinions here in the town. (...) If it’s achievable, they’ll try to do something about it. The councillors we talk to are also honest: we can’t promise anything for that, but this other thing is okay. We get to reflect with other young people about what needs to change in the town. It’s great, we discuss everything. They really listen to us, it’s cool.” Driss, 15 years old, Antwerp

“At the level of the law and the government, it’s like they are untouchable, that there is indifference. (...) I can see that I can change the opinions of my classmate who is transphobic, but not politicians!” Solène, 17 years old, Liège

7

*Engagement
bubbles*

The wide range of possibilities in terms of engagement forms a heterogeneous ecosystem that is difficult for young people to understand.

For young people who are not in contact with the issues or organisations that are active in terms of engagement, via school or their family, it is difficult to know where to start or who to turn to. Engagement is a separate world, detached from the world of business or the world of leisure: it can therefore be off the radar of young people. This means that even if young people feel a desire to be engaged, they perceive engagement as a labyrinth of initiatives

and organisations, with many asking themselves: which one to choose? Which issue? Which organisation? What are the possibilities? etc. In this sense, it is not surprising that entering into engagement is driven by specific circumstances and events or close relationships, rather than by major causes in the broader sense.

“I would like to get involved in feminism, for example, but what do I need to do? That’s the question.”

Fleur, 19 years old, Jette

The engagement ecosystem: separate worlds

The engagement ecosystem seems to be made up of separate “bubbles” with little in the way of contact among themselves. Young people grow up in different environments, and specific types of engagement are often attached to these environments. As such, engaged young people in the Scouts have little or no contact with engaged young people in NGOs such as Oxfam and Broederlijk Delen, and even less contact with young activists campaigning against police violence, for example.

Entering into these bubbles is generally determined by the social environment of young people: family, school, friends, relationships on social networks. Engaged young people live in environments that encourage engagement, and the same is true for young people who are not engaged in any organisation or association, these young people develop in bubbles where activities in connection with engagement are not common.

When parents are involved in causes, in a more or less formal way, this engagement filters down to their children. Implicitly through education and awareness of certain values and practices: some young people grow up in families that are particularly mindful to ecology (“we are very green at home”);

others grow up within politicised families. Young people feel the influence of their parents’ convictions and make them their own – all the more so during the lockdown period when these convictions come to the fore. Parents are also often the driving force behind their children’s engagement, for example when some allow their children to miss school to take part in a climate march, or others choose to enrol their children in a youth movement from the age of 6 or 7.

The school is another component that makes engagement exist in one or another bubble – or not at all – depending on whether it is a Catholic school, which organises charity actions, or a school with an active pedagogy, taking part in interventions in the public sphere, or a school that values the engagement of young people by developing participative projects and inviting NGO chapters into their midst.

Access to an engagement bubble is determined by the environment in which young people grow up, but this does not mean that they systematically enter it. The search for a form and an issue that suits them is always ongoing, and some choose not to participate in the opportunities offered (the NGO project in the school for example) even if they have access to them.

The bubbles determine the type and nature of the engagement

ACTIVIST

Extinction Rebellion,
Black Lives Matter...
Active pedagogy

POLITICAL PARTY

Ecolo j
COMAC...

SOCIAL AND SOLIDARITY ACTION – NON-PROFIT ORGANISATION

Neighbourhood association
Resto du cœur
Maraudes...

NGO – INTERNATIONAL SOLIDARITY

Oxfam
Plan international

YOUTH MOVEMENT

Scouts
Guides...

Each bubble has its own influence on the worldview of the young people in it. These visions are exacerbated by social networks, another component and amplifying element of each bubble: that of the Scouts, #blacklivesmatter, feminism, etc. The information shared within each bubble is generally all in the same direction.

The bubbles determine the type and nature of the engagement

The conditions of the young person's engagement are determined by the families, schools, groups of friends or classes. A person is engaged because they are, or are not, part of these "bubble environments" that foster engagement. The point here is not to make a value judgement but to note that these bubbles therefore maintain forms of engagement or non-engagement. For example, going on an immersion trip with an NGO encourages subsequent volunteer involvement in humanitarian action. The themes of engagement are therefore often mutually exclusive. Even though young people are sensitive to a variety of issues, they concentrate their actions on a limited number of chosen themes: the young people interviewed who were committed to the Black Lives Matter movement were only involved in this one issue. The young people who are Scouts devoted their engagement time only to activities for that particular movement.

Between the ages of 15 and 19, it is almost impossible to leave and/or change your bubble, even if the interest

and curiosity are there.

The young people who are not particularly engaged today (in the formal or informal sense) find themselves outside engagement bubbles, or rather within bubbles characterised by limited interest on the question of engagement. They "think about getting involved", but do not know how or what to do because engagement requires an effort of initiative and research to "leave" their bubble, an effort that young people in engagement bubbles do not have to make.

The role of school

Schools should be a means of connecting those who wish to do so to engagement bubbles, but unfortunately not all schools fulfil this role: when they raise awareness of certain issues such as harassment, but do not propose any initiative, when they are indifferent to student initiatives or when they do not take the measure of current events such as the climate marches. In such cases, the young people's opinions about the school are negative: lack of openness, solicitation, or awareness raising, while stressing that school is the environment in which they spend the majority of their time, and which should therefore play an important role in the possibilities given to them to be engaged.

“Since I was a child, I’ve been taught the idea of struggle. I come from a very communist and open family. (...) They’ve always gone on demonstrations, read newspapers, etc.” Eléonore, 17 years old, Liège

“I’ve been strongly influenced by my parents, I can feel it. If I take the car every day, I feel bad!”
Sophie, 15 years old, Mons

“My older brother and sister were also in the Scouts. My mum was too. I joined and I really liked it. And I stayed there.” Lisa, 16 years old, Mons

“I’ve been lucky enough to go to a school that is very engaged. We used to talk about it with the religion teacher and French teacher, and it led to some nice debates.” Lisa, 16 years old, Mons

“The bubble I’m in is so alternative, I wonder whether I’m isolated in a tiny patch of the population?”
Hélène, 17 years old, Liège

8

Barriers to engagement

The reasons for non-engagement given by the young people who are not engaged

Some of the young people do not get engaged, or only to a limited extent, either personally or within an organisation. In most cases, this is not a clear willingness, but rather a state of affairs, often regretted. They are not against taking action and being engaged for a cause in which they believe.

This is what they have to say on their lack of engagement:

There are many causes, where to start?

"There are a lot of struggles, a lot of issues. I don't know, I feel like there's too many, I can't decide." Audrey, 17 years old, Charleroi

"You realise that there are so many things that should be tackled. I don't know if I'm disheartened or if I'm losing patience with it. There are a million things that need action." Anne, 17 years old, Liège

How to take action? Where to turn to? There is a lack of information.

"If I had to take action, I wouldn't know what to do."

Adam, 19 years old, Jette

"I wouldn't know who to turn to. There's not a lot of information out there for young people about the different NGOs that exist and need help."

Fleur, 19 years old, Jette

Engagement is not part of the typical activities of young people (seeing friends, going out, leisure, sports): they are busy with other activities, they are not canvassed for this type of thing, and they don't devote any time to it.

"I haven't done anything because we have our own lives to live too. We know it's really bad, but on our level, what we see is what's around us. We've got other problems, they're nothing compared to the big issues, but people always make a mountain out of it."

Keren, 19 years old, Jette

"Perhaps I haven't thought about it too much. I think more about school and my life as a child before anything else, and I didn't think too much about the problems that might be going on around me. It's more now that I think about that."

Regg, 18 years old, Charleroi

The issues are difficult to face

"I find it all so sad, I tell myself I'm not going to go on the internet and see all these problems, I'll end up sad."

Audrey, 17 years old, Charleroi

"I find it difficult going towards [engagement actions] because it's too painful. If I read a book with a chapter on it [torture], I'll close the book, I won't open it again." Keren, 19 years old, Jette

"The BLM situation did affect me a bit, though. It was a little too much for me. I watched the stories and found out all the information. (...) It was a very serious situation, it really made me sad."

Regg, 18 years old, Charleroi

Day-to-day life often focused on personal development

The young people who are not engaged (in the formal sense – i.e. within an organisation) cite their parents' relative indifference when it comes to these issues, as one of the reasons for not being engaged. Parents' expectations are focused on school, on career choices and on personal development in after-school activities. As a result, kept away from initiatives and

possibilities related to engagement and not encouraged by their environments, young people feel that they are not legitimated to take this direction. They lack confidence and encouragement and often fear that they will not be taken seriously (a recurring expression in the interviews), on account of their young age in particular.

The exemplary nature of the engagement inhibits

Beyond the intrinsic obstacles of their environment, the restraints may come from more personal considerations. Some of them do not consider themselves to be sufficiently engaged in their daily lives (see "conscious living") to be entitled to speak out, including on issues that are important to them such as global warming. For others, their lifestyle habits appear as contradictions that inhibit them, such as valuing ecological habits, but continuing to eat meat or to like flying. Their personal ethics would not be up to scratch for an open activist approach.

On the one hand, the opinions of some young people are often nuanced and sometimes uncertain regarding the major causes of engagement, they become hesitant or even step back. On the other hand, one young person takes up the major issues of the Anthropocene and overpopulation, while at the same time displaying optimism in the possibilities of change; someone else is alarmed by global warming before questioning the need to save the planet and humanity.

In the face of these developing reflections, some young people are quick to think that adults (or simply older generations) are better equipped and organised to get a grasp on these issues, as their position in society also allows them to have more influence in what they undertake – in contrast to young people. These young people credit adults with a maturity that they feel youth may be lacking, who instead are referred to as self-interested, sentimental and impulsive.

On this subject, a young girl talked about a petition distributed at the end of the year on whether or not to organise exams. Many young people around her voted against organising the exams, “out of apathy”, without thinking, in her view, about the importance of the exams.

“I feel like no-one is asking us to be engaged at our age. Just do well in school, rather than giving money to homeless people, or taking part in associations. It’s not useful, it might be a waste of time.”

Audrey, 17 years old, Charleroi

“Already at the level of a 15-year-old, who could ever make an impact?”

Maëlle, 15 years old, Mons

“The climate is an important issue. I didn’t think I was entitled to go there. From a personal perspective, I’m not really that committed to anything. I’m not a vegetarian. I don’t see why I would have gone to a protest when I don’t do anything else for a cause.”

Fleur, 19 years old, Jette

“I feel like, in order to defend the ideas I have, you need other people: they will have more influence, or rather they’ll be older, they will have more opportunities. I always feel like at my level I don’t have too many options if I want to help a cause.”

Maëlle, 15 years old, Mons

“We still need older people. We need help from higher up to know how to go about it. So by ourselves, we wouldn’t be able to change the world I think.” Sophie, 15 years old, Mons

Start close to you

When asked what these young people could do, in what kind of action or cause they might be engaged, they all highlight the “little things”, local actions that are “concrete”, even if they are small: visiting a care home, taking part in a donation drive, collecting waste, helping to organise events. They are part of their environment (family, neighbourhood, school, etc.) and are related to what young people know. This type of action is easier to consider than forms of engagement on global issues such as racism or global warming, where they wouldn’t know what to do or where to start.

The question of the impact of large-scale initiatives such as the climate protests, or the Black Lives Matter movement was also raised. For some young people, it would be more a question of “symbolic” actions, which “will not really change the situation” and perhaps also a trending effect that gives the feeling that those who participate do so more for the social aspect of these actions, rather than for the cause they defend.

“Apart from that I did participate in actions, but it needs something deeper as a change (...) I don't feel it's the best thing I can do. I would have been better off getting involved in some issue, donating money.” Keren, 19 years old, Jette

“There have been major demonstrations against global warming and I have the impression that not many of them really defend the cause. (...). I feel like everyone is making something look good, but we haven't really made any progress.” Sophie, 15 years old, Mons

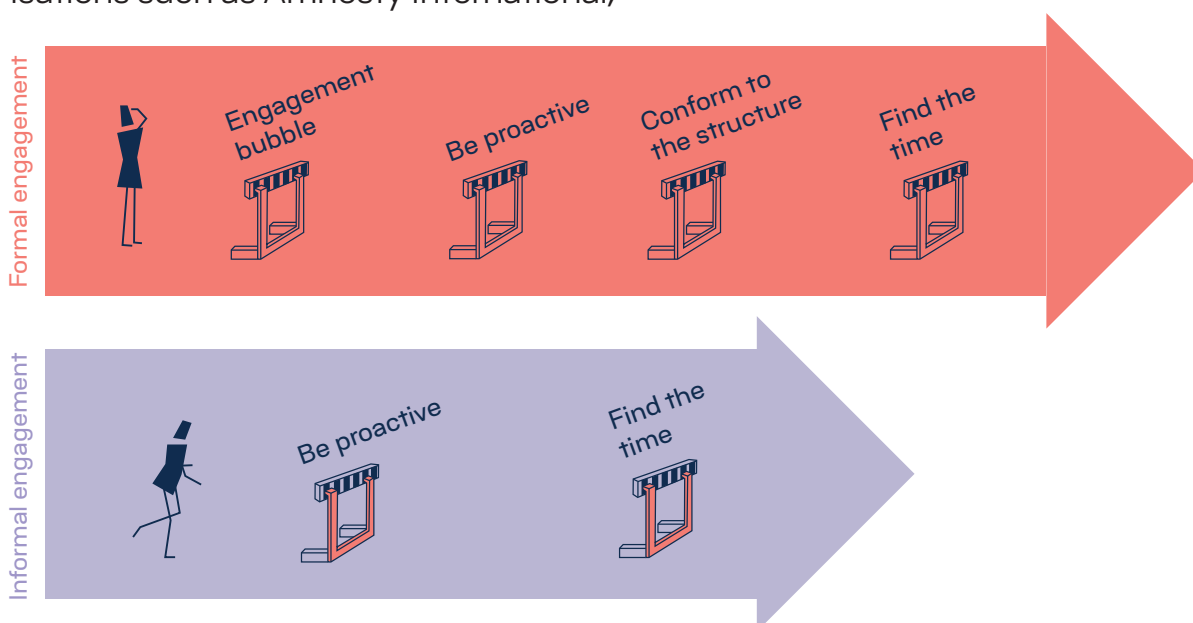
“I would prefer to be specifically involved in a project. I can imagine visiting a care home or spending time with people in the future. For the school, we had to collect money: that's not my thing. I would rather be more like the little hands getting things done. I had already helped out at school, with meals: helping serve.” Keren, 19 years old, Jette

Barriers to engagement: formal *vs.* informal

For a young person who wants to be engaged, there are a range of perceived barriers. These also appear to be more significant in the context of “formal” engagement (i.e. engagement for an organisation or movement) than informal engagement. The first obstacle is that of access (access to an engagement bubble) for young people whose home environment (family, school, friends) is far removed from the spheres of engagement. The second is the very nature of the organisations and their structure: you need to be brave enough to approach them, be proactive in addressing them, and before that, know what to do. It is also necessary, once integrated into these organisations, to accept conformity with a framework, standards, codes and ways of doing things. Young people engaged in organisations such as Amnesty International,

for example, agree to speak and act on behalf of the NGO in accordance with the guidelines of, and on issues chosen by, the NGO. Finally, it is necessary to accept putting in the time, and fitting the engagement-related activity into an often already full schedule.

“Informal” forms of engagement, as they are based on the individual’s willingness and frame of reference alone, appear to be more accessible and more easily conceivable for young people. They need to find inspiration or be driven by a strong need for expression, to find the courage and self-confidence, accept putting in the time, but the resources necessary for engagement need to be found at the level of the individual, and do not depend on an organisation.



9

Incentives for engagement

The engagement breeding ground, more or less fertile

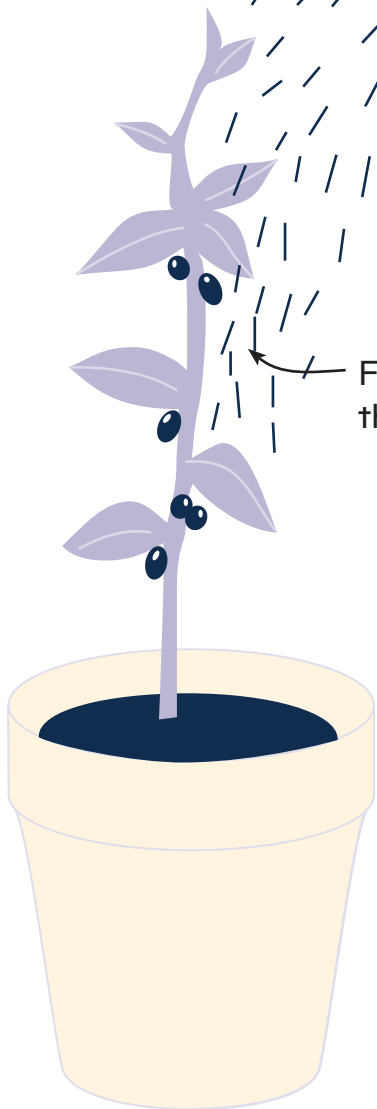
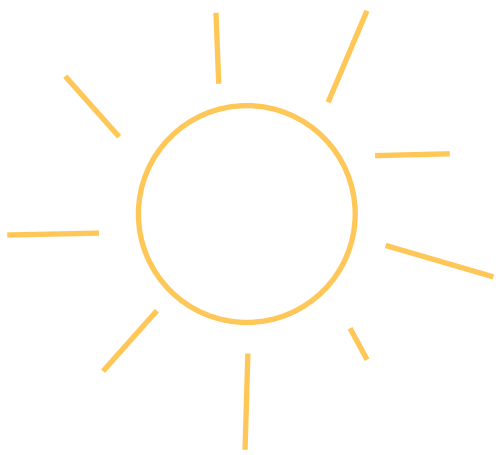
We can consider that the environments in which young people grow up (family, school, networks, both real and virtual) are more or less fertile breeding grounds for engagement. These breeding grounds generate expectations, communicate information and encourage initial experiences.

The influence of the family setting

In some families, engagement is already an established and natural practice. The parents are active or aware of the issues of global warming or international solidarity, and value critical thinking and discussion. Information about the possibilities of engagement is already available in families, when children express an interest, they are supported and encouraged by their parents: to go on demonstrations, go on humanitarian trips, volunteer, etc. In many cases, parents are also the driving force, for example enrolling children in the Scouts at a young age (in these families, the parents were often Scouts themselves).

The importance of school

Another place for developing young people's critical thinking is school, which, on engagement-related issues, should give them the opportunity to take part in projects and carry out initiatives. All the young people interviewed cited the influence of their school on their engagement (or as a reason for their lack of engagement): cultivated in schools with an active pedagogy or in Catholic schools, interest in youth engagement issues seems to depend to a significant extent on the faculty and the choice of each school for the others. While in most schools, there is awareness of issues such as racism, harassment or global warming, some young people decry the complete lack of information or proposals in their school to take action and become effectively engaged for an issue. Others praise the vitality of their school and some of their teachers, who are often cited as triggers for their engagement in a given issue.



Fruits of the engagement

Fuel for engagement

What keeps people motivated and maintains engagement

- models, examples
- the energy of the group
- consideration from the political world
- the fruits of the engagement

Breeding grounds for engagement

Living environments (family, school), which provide support.

Nutrients: awareness, access to information, opportunities

If the breeding ground is not fertile, you need fertiliser to nourish the soil



Nurturing & stimulating engagement

While they are busy developing their identities, young people's choices are also significantly influenced by their friends and networks, through meetings, through discoveries that can become forces of attraction towards forms of engagement.

The energy of the group

In the dynamics of engagement, the group is an important component. It provides the confidence and support that young people may need to make choices. Engagement is facilitated when it takes place in a group (a group of friends launching an initiative) or when an individual joins an already existing group.

The encounters and friendships that are created in the course of the activities are a strong bond that allows the engagement to be maintained over time. One young girl explained that she had left her youth movement before returning to it thanks to new friendships.

Inspiring models and examples

Social networks are a source of information and inspiration for young people. Many young people indicated that it was through social networks that they became more aware of a given issue, or through the networks and the people and accounts they follow (on Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok in particular). Certain individuals encourage, raise awareness and become examples through the words and deeds they disseminate. Outside networks, teachers are cited as the main figures who make young people aware of given causes, and encourage them to take action. In some cases, it is also friends or acquaintances who are behind inspiring initiatives.

The actions of the political world

Political attention to the initiatives of young people can be a stimulus to engagement. When young people feel heard, they feel they are having an impact and it gives them hope and confidence that their actions are worthwhile. The opposite is also true: being ignored by the political world is seriously demotivating.

“My parents have really supported me. For example, on the information evening for the immersion trip. My parents said, ‘Go for it!’, while other parents said, ‘Is it really a good idea?’. They believe in me and have given me opportunities.” Emma, 19 years old, Genk

“I think that already in school they could talk to us more about it. There should really be a course. (...) the school has to play a role in this. It’s important to show us what we can achieve if we are engaged.” Sophie, 15 years old, Mons

“What about at school, where I spend most of my time, why don’t they suggest projects that we can participate in? Explain things to us, talk about concrete projects?” Regg, 17 years old, Charleroi

“It would be nice to have them come and sit in on classes. In junior school, some scouts did this, but in high school, there was no-one. That could fire everyone up.” Fleur, 19 years old, Jette

Seeing the fruits of their engagement

As explained above, young people are attracted by local initiatives, by the possibility they have to take action and see the direct effects: taking action to change the school rules or cancelling the curfew, visiting homes, changing people's opinions within their network (in the real world and on social networks), helping to organise a donation drive... it is a question of having an impact on their immediate environment. Judging for themselves the fruits and results of their engagement is a strong incentive.

The young people reported having a negative experience if this is not the case. Some of them, for example, had been part of various councils, such as municipal councils, but they left, disappointed. "We were sold something: you're going to have an impact on the city! and in the end that wasn't the case at all. We were planning shows and having conversations that were all a waste of time (...) I wanted to make things happen and practically nothing happened." The same goes for donation drives, for example (whether intended for local initiatives or more distant ones): young people need to judge the effects of these initiatives for themselves, a possibility that they are generally not given.

Conclusions

“Every Sunday, I try to avoid eating meat. Just fries, no Bicky burger.” Driss, 15 years old, Antwerp

This initiative to listen to and enter into dialogue with young people between 15 and 19 years old in Belgium, on their engagement, shows that they have a vital sense of engagement, both in the initiatives they undertake and in their desire to express themselves on social issues. Young people also express confidence in themselves to change mind-sets and pass on a better world to future generations. The young people who spoke in this study are concerned by the global challenges. None of them (even the least engaged) remain indifferent. Each at their own level, through their words or deeds, in what they choose to develop at the individual level or within the organisations and movements they join, each of them generate change, and in a sense, demonstrate a form of engagement.

For young people, having engagement is not with the goal of saving the world or starting a revolution, but it is pragmatic and initially local in nature: creating change around themselves, their friends, families, neighbourhoods, social network, starting with themselves: being aware of climate issues, racism and inequalities, adapting their words and deeds as much as possible, little by little, every deed, every gesture counts.

The choice of whether or not to express themselves, to commit to a cause or not, is made at a time of serious intensity for young people between the ages of 15 and 19, a time of discovery of the world at the same time as they are discovering themselves and building their identity. These decisions are not made lightly, without thinking about the causes that need to be defended and associated with.

When young people are engaged, they give it 100%, ideally collectively and in any case in a network, to disseminate and embody the message. They expect to have an impact and want to see the results of their actions.

As these results are far too often not forthcoming from the political world, it is not surprising to observe the disconnection between young people and politicians, as their conception of engagement differs so much from the way politicians deal with social issues – with responses and posturing that is widely criticised by the young people in this study.

This should give food for thought because while young people are concerned and are engaged, they do not believe in the political system, in the way democracy works, and more specifically cannot see the point of voting. In so doing, they lose interest in the very idea of citizenship, and the role they should have within institutions. A gap is growing between the democratic system, its actors, institutions and rules and the emerging forms of expression and action favoured by young people.

It is urgent for the future of our democratic system to work on forging connections and establishing a constructive dialogue between different conceptions of the place of the individual and their role in public debate. In a globalised world, a networked society where the capacity left to the individual is significant, a model based on dialogue and cooperation has a better chance of ensuring the involvement of the citizens of the future.

As a promoter of global citizenship and international solidarity, Enabel / Kruit / Annoncer la Couleur is the ideal actor to work on this endeavour: to strengthen the vital link between young people and the democratic system, in a global perspective. It is not only a matter of encouraging participation at the local level – “acting locally” – but also “thinking globally”, so as to facilitate an awareness of interdependencies and responsibilities at the international level. This issue is fully in line with the mission of Enabel / Kruit / Annoncer la Couleur to foster engagement among young people, by putting it back in the context of institutions, to ensure that young people today become active and engaged citizens tomorrow, for a more just and sustainable world. This initiative could take the form of a “global citizenship incubator” under the aegis of Enabel / Kruit / Annoncer la Couleur.

“Being engaged when young”

Final Report – 1 September 2021

A qualitative study on the theme of engagement among young people aged 15 to 19 in Belgium.

Study carried out by Méthos, a research and innovation company based in Brussels and Paris, made up of sociologists and designers, driven by the commitment to strive for a better, more balanced and sustainable society.

Study commissioned by *Kruit* and *Annoncer La Couleur*, the global citizenship education programmes of the Belgian development agency Enabel.

This report is accompanied by a series of podcasts.

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