

The Contribution of the Capability Approach to the Understanding of Young People's Sustainability Engagement as a Positive Developmental Outcome.

Giulia Rossi, Ph.D. Free University of Bozen, Italy

Martin Dodman, IRIS - Interdisciplinary Research Institute on Sustainability, University of Turin, Italy.

Abstract.

Young people's engagement with sustainability includes both civic and pro environmental behaviors (e.g. environmental activism) that contribute to the development of sustainable communities. It reflects a holistic idea of sustainability, where civic democracy and ecological integrity are strictly interconnected. The lack of empirical studies exploring this kind of engagement among young people may well be a consequence of the lack in the literature of a shared theoretical model that provides a framework for both types of behaviors. By integrating Positive Youth Development with the Capability Approach, the aim of this paper is to provide new theoretical input as a way of filling this gap. The proposed model is based on the idea that both positive individual and sustainable development are a question of social justice that takes place within specific domains and is related to understanding experience within life courses.

Key words: Positive Youth Development; Capability Approach; Young people; Engagement; Sustainability

ISSN 2384-8677

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.13135/2384-8677/2927>

Article history: Submitted June 04, 2018. Accepted October 14, 2018

Published online: October 20, 2018

Citation: Rossi, G. and Dodman, M. (2018). The Contribution of the Capability Approach to the Understanding of Young People's Sustainability Engagement as a Positive Developmental Outcome. *Visions for Sustainability*, 10: 00-00.

Copyright: ©2018 Rossi, G & Dodman, M.. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

Competing Interests: The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

Corresponding Author: Giulia Rossi, Italy.

E-mail: giuliarossi86@yahoo.it

Perspective: Theoretical and educational visions

Fields: Human sciences, social processes and structures

Issues: Young people and sustainability engagement

Introduction

Young people's civic engagement is one of the main issues dealt with in the literature on Positive Youth Development (PYD). Several studies have explored the relationship between civic participation and wellbeing among adolescents (e.g. Albanesi Cicognani, & Zani, 2007) and the processes at both individual and community level underlying young people's participation in community civic life (e.g. Rossi et al. 2016).

Youth engagement can be defined as meaningful participation and sustained involvement by young people in activities whose focus is on something outside themselves (Pancer, Rose-Krasnor and Loiselle 2002, 49). In the literature on PYD, the label "civic engagement" covers all those behaviors that benefit other individuals or the whole community, such as voluntary work in civic associations. However, those behaviors that have positive consequences on the environment are often not included within that category (Rossi & Dodman, 2015), but are rather labelled as "pro-environmental behaviors". This separation in the literature, as well as in educational projects on sustainability, reflects the distinction between the environmental and the civic dimensions often present within our society. Nature is considered as something separate from daily life, to be experienced on particular occasions which differ from those which characterize civic engagement. However, the core principles of sustainability (such as those expressed in Agenda 21) propose the opposite perspective and strongly emphasize the interconnection between civic democracy and ecological integrity as one of the main points on which policies need to focus in order to develop sustainable communities. Gardner and Stern (2002) have indeed underlined that the most effective actions for the environment, are those on a collective level,

when people organize to pressure Government and industry to act for the common good. Understanding the interdependence of both dimensions has increasingly come to be seen as crucial.

The aim of this paper is to give new theoretical input to the issue and in this respect the integration of the PYD model and the Capability Approach appears particularly significant. The following paragraphs will propose a way of linking theoretical frameworks through this approach, emphasizing how their integration can contribute to the understanding of young people's sustainable engagement, taken to necessarily mean the integration of the civic and the environmental dimensions of sustainability.

Positive Youth Development and Sustainable Engagement

PYD is an approach (Sherrod, Busch, & Fischer, 2004) based on the idea that every young person has the potential and the capacity for successful and healthy development (Lerner, 2005). The plasticity of human development is what allows for systematic changes throughout the life course and it is a function of the bidirectional exchanges between individuals and their multilevel contexts. Lerner et al. (2005) conceptualize PYD through five constructs, the five "Cs": Competence, Confidence, Connection, Character, Caring (Figure 1), which lead to the potential for a sixth C: Contribution. A young person who manifests the 5 Cs will be more likely to contribute to self, to family, to community and to civil society in more positive ways. It follows that being part of a context that promotes the five "Cs" constitutes an opportunity for the positive development of both the individual and the community, since the given contexts and relations are mutually beneficial.

Five Cs	Definition
Competence	Positive view of one’s actions in domain specific areas including social, academic, cognitive and vocational. Social competence pertains to interpersonal skills (e.g. conflict resolution). Cognitive competence pertains to cognitive abilities (e.g. decision making). School grades, attendance and test scores are part of academic competence. Vocational competence involves work habits and career choice explorations.
Confidence	An internal sense of overall positive self-worth and self-efficacy; one’s global self-regard, as opposed to domain specific beliefs.
Connection	Positive bonds with people and institutions that are reflected in bidirectional exchanges between the individual and peers, family, school and community, in which both parties contribute to the relationship.
Character	Respect for societal and cultural rules, possession of standards for correct behaviors, a sense of right and wrong (morality) and integrity.
Caring and compassion	A sense of sympathy and empathy for others.

Table 1. Definitions of the Five Cs of Positive Youth Development (Lerner et al., 2005)

A lack of longitudinal studies makes the testing of all the assumptions of the model difficult (Lerner et al., 2005; Eccles and Gootman, 2002), but a considerable amount of empirical evidence has shown how such factors are important in understanding young people’s civic engagement. Eccles and Gootman, (2002) provide a more detailed analysis of these factors, but there is a lack of studies that directly refer to PYD in dealing with sustainable engagement. However, many aspects of the model have already emerged as being important in the literature on the environment and young people. For example, Riemer et al. (2013) and Chawla & Flanders Cushing (2007) developed both a framework and a model for engaging young people in environmental change by directly referring to the literature on civic engagement. The model proposed by Rossi & Dodman (2015) also includes many aspects which overlap with the PYD, considering the community as an arena where sustainable practices can develop through learning processes of assimilation and accommodation triggered by interacting with its public spaces and with other inhabitants. These processes are seen as promoting knowledge-building, communicative, methodological-operational and personal and social competences which together constitute a capacity for individual and joint orientation, the ability to understand certain situations and

act in a conscious way in order to engage them and work towards given objectives (Dodman, 2016).

At present, for each of these models further studies that provide adequate empirical evidence are still necessary.

The Capability Approach and Sustainability

The Capability Approach (CA) is a model of human development that has its origins in the field of developmental economics and focuses directly on the quality of life that individuals are actually able to achieve through the expansion of their capabilities (Sen, 1985, Nussbaum, 1988). It addresses the inadequacy of *growth* as an indicator of the quality of life because this fails to show the condition of people who suffer from deprivation (Nussbaum, 2003) and provides an alternative paradigm in terms of *poverty reduction* (Sen, 1992). CA goes beyond previous meanings ascribed to the concept of development, which is now defined as people’s freedom to engage in valued social activities and roles. Capabilities are considered as those freedoms that can be enjoyed, what people are “able to do and be”, given both individual capacities and environmental opportunities (Nussbaum, 2000).

Nussbaum (2003) lists 12 central human functional capabilities that must be satisfied at least at some level that is adequate to afford

people a life worthy of the dignity of a human being:

1. *Life*: being able to live to the end of a normal human life-span, not dying prematurely, or being reduced to a state whereby one's life is not worth living;
2. *Bodily Health*: being able to enjoy good health, including reproductive health, to be adequately nourished, to have adequate shelter;
3. *Bodily Integrity*: being able to move freely, to be secure, and having opportunities for sexual satisfaction and reproduction;
4. *Senses, Imagination, and Thought*: being able to use the senses, to imagine, think, and reason, and to do these things in a way informed and cultivated by an adequate education, being able to do these things in connection with experiencing and producing works and events of one's own choice;
5. *Emotions*: being able to love, to grieve, to experience longing, gratitude and justified anger;
6. *Practical Reason*: being able to form a conception of what is good and to engage in critical reflection about the planning of one's life;
7. *Affiliation*: (a) being able to live with and towards others, to recognize and show concern for other human beings, to engage in various forms of social interaction and (b) enjoying the social bases of self-respect and non-humiliation;
8. *Other species*: being able to live with concern for and in relation to animals, plants, and the world of nature;
9. *Play*: being able to laugh, to play, to enjoy recreational activities;
10. *Control Over One's Environment*: (a) *political*: having the right and being able to practice political participation, protection of free speech and association; (b) *material*: having property rights and being able to hold property, having the right to seek employment, enjoying freedom from unwarranted search and seizure.

Some authors have emphasized the close relationship between CA and sustainability, since both deal with the issue of social justice. For example, Holland (2007) argues that the environmental dimension is a matter of basic equity and must be considered as an

independent "meta-capability", since environmental resources are indispensable for enabling all the other capabilities. Ballet et al. (2013) consider Nature as the mediator of social justice among human beings in terms of access to natural resources: "sustainable development guarantees for both present and future generations an improvement of the capabilities of wellbeing (social, economic, or environmental) for all, through the aspiration of equity on the one hand - as intra-generational distribution of these capabilities - and their transmission across generations on the other hand" (p.6).

In this respect, both positive youth development and the capability approach are clearly linked to the idea of sustainable education as "an educational culture [...] which develops and embodies the theory and practice of sustainability in a way which is critically aware. It is therefore a transformative paradigm which values, sustains and realizes human potential in relation to the need to attain and sustain social, economic and ecological wellbeing, recognizing that they must be part of the same dynamic" (Sterling, 2001:22). Realizing human potential and wellbeing are thus part of a dynamic that depends on a facilitating environmental dimension and can as such be represented in terms of Lewin's (1936) equation which sees human behavior as a function of the relationship between a person and her/his environment: $\text{human potential} + \text{wellbeing} = f(\text{person, environment})$.

The Capability Approach, Positive Youth Development and Sustainable Engagement

Shinn (2015) has already provided a theoretical linking between the central human functional capabilities of Nussbaum and the features of the social settings fostering positive youth development proposed by Eccles and Gootman (2002). At the same time, Nussbaum's central capabilities can also be related to, and in most cases overlap with, the five "Cs" of the PYD model.

In this respect, the domain of *competence* partially coincides with the capability based on *senses, to imagine, think, and reason*. Lerner et al. (2005) refer to three kinds of competences: social, cognitive, and vocational, which are

based on the skills of perceiving through the senses, to imagine, to think, and to reason. Nussbaum refers to being able to use one's mind "in connection with experiencing and producing works and events of one's own choice, religious, literary, musical, and so forth." (Nussbaum, 2003:41).

Being able to access and express efficaciously one's own inner world through the senses, imagination, thought and reasoning, allows the development of a positive sense of *Identity* and *Self Worth*, which overlaps with the domain of *Confidence*. Lerner (2004) defines this as a sense of overall positive self-efficacy, and the capability that derives from this includes being able to produce self-expressive works, the freedom for general self-expression and religious practice (Nussbaum, 2003), which are all important components for the development of *Self-integrity*. The main instrument through which young people can learn to express themselves is experience. Just as the expert is one who experiences, children who have the chance to *play* and to handle new situations and roles will be more likely to develop a sense of self-awareness concerning their inner worlds and their ways of expressing it, and this will continue through adolescence into young adulthood. This process of expression can be linked to the relationship between life course and narrative (*gnarus* = expert, s/he who experiences) in terms of the interaction between the prospective and retrospective dimensions of development and understanding our lives and creating coherence (Cohler, 1982). If narrating is building knowledge by telling the story of experience, then narrative knowledge is both built on experience and still encoded as experience. It is knowledge as process, understanding a world in which things happen and people act in particular circumstances, knowledge mediated by the verbal language of ongoing contextualised experience (Dodman, 2014).

The domains *Caring* and *Compassion* overlap with the capability *Emotions*. Feelings of empathy and concern are secondary emotions allowing the recognition of one's own and others' inner state, which is essential for the development of human association.

Connection overlaps with the capability *Affiliation*. The establishment of positive bonds with people and institutions implies the social basis of self-respect and non-humiliation and the opportunity to belong to a community. In both the accent is on the mutual benefits that individuals and communities receive by interacting with each other.

The domain *Character* includes the capability of *Practical reason* and can be considered as an extended version of *Political control*. Elements pertaining to the moral sphere such as personal values and social conscience, together with a sense of integrity, are considered the components of an individual's character (Lerner, 2005), allowing on the one hand the integration of the person into community life and, on the other hand, critical reflection on one's own life plan. Such reflection within both personal and civic areas leads to building an adequate knowledge of both personal and community's moral norms and a consequent reciprocal beneficial relationship.

As Shinn (2015) has already emphasized, on the one hand, CA includes two capabilities that are not mentioned in the literature on PYD: *play* and *other species*. On the other hand, the Positive Developmental Settings proposed include the analysis of all those micro-social contexts, such as family, school, and community, where individual development concretely takes place. We can identify references to different contexts such as Nature in CA and the microsystems identified in the literature on Youth Civic Engagement. The interaction between these contexts becomes crucial in the understanding of youth engagement with sustainability for two main reasons. Firstly, following Shinn's proposal, consideration of all those microsystems in which the person is daily embedded is fundamental, since they are the mediating structures that exist between individuals and society (Berger and Neuhaus, 1977) and that allow people's empowerment. Secondly, the literature on pro-environmental behavior and environmental activism has emphasized how having experience in Nature during childhood is one of the strongest predictors of such behavior in adult life (Gifford and Nilsson, 2014). By integrating the two models, we can

develop a new one that includes all the contexts and processes that are factors leading

to young people’s engagement with sustainability (Figure 1).

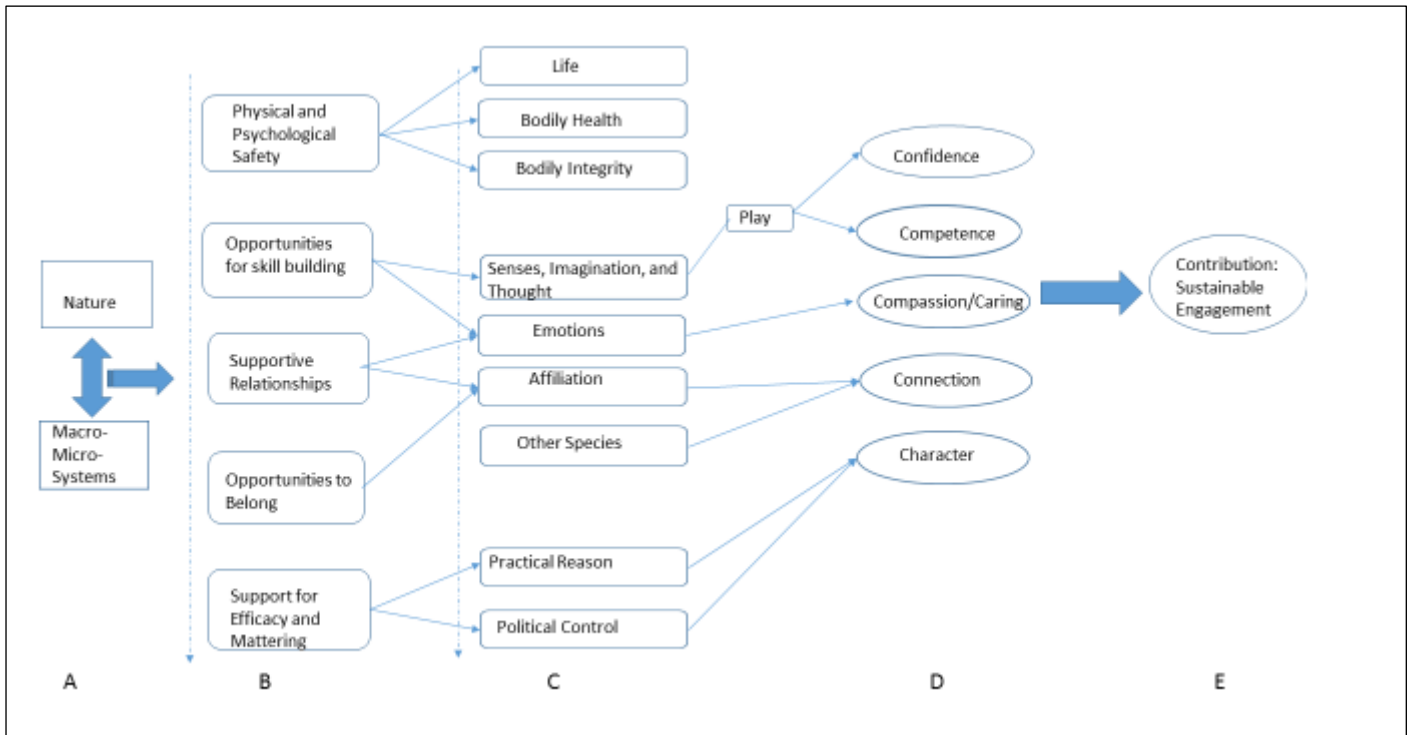


Figure 1. The Capability Approach and Positive Youth Development in the understanding of Sustainable Engagement as a Positive Developmental Outcome

Key. Letters preceding each step correspond with letters beneath the columns.

- A. Settings
- B. Features of positive developmental settings
- C. Central human functional capabilities
- D. The 5th Cs of Positive Youth Development
- E. The 6th C, Contribution: Sustainable engagement

Conclusions

Despite the fact that many documents consider young people as an important target group within the promotion of sustainability (e.g. Agenda 21), few studies explore which social conditions may foster youth sustainable engagement (Riemer et al., 2013; Rossi & Dodman, 2015). Sustainable engagement can be considered as the integration of civic and environmental behaviours, an active and critical participation within community life and in policy making. Current ecological problems have indeed been clearly recognized as collectivist problems, and strictly related to the social hierarchy developed by political and

social systems (Bookchin, 1985). Therefore young people’s sustainable engagement must imply all those behaviours that both directly (such as buying local products rather than those produced by multinational corporations) or indirectly (such as writing or signing a petition) contribute to the development of social justice.

The literature dealing with sustainability based on CA emphasizes how the presence of the environmental dimension in our daily lives is a question of social justice. CA underlines the idea that personal development is a question of freedom to choose and to pursue a life project, given both internal and external

constraints. The environmental dimension can thus be considered as a “meta-capability” (Holland, 2007), since its presence allows the fulfilment of all the other freedoms to be exercised. If we apply CA to the understanding of youth engagement, then a number of needs emerge that point to directions for further research. Firstly, the lack of the pro-environmental dimension in the literature on both youth civic engagement and PYD. Secondly, the lack of studies considering Nature as an eco-social setting, even within the city, where young people’s development may achieve positive outcomes. Thirdly, the lack of analyses that consider engagement towards sustainability as a positive developmental outcome.

In this respect, integrating CA and PYD could provide new input in the understanding of youth engagement with sustainability. The interaction between Nature and micro-social systems emerges as the context within which all those mechanisms leading to engagement may develop. Such a perspective is coherent with the model of Civic Ecology Education developed by Tidball and Krasny (2010), where “environmental education is seen as a part of ongoing social and ecological processes, including as contributing to virtuous cycles and feedbacks between the social and biophysical aspects of the environment, as fostering ecosystem services and human health, and as one among a number of drivers of social-ecological system processes” (p.12). Sustainability is based on social justice in which the union of the civic and environmental dimensions support a positive development at both individual and societal levels in terms of understanding and building life courses based on awareness of human potential and wellbeing and the coherence between environmental engagement and their realization. In terms of young people’s development, this will necessarily involve a capacity for critical and divergent thinking, imagining and contributing to the achievement of alternative pathways and new, more sustainable, trajectories.

Some current empirical evidence concerning youth civic engagement and based on a community psychological perspective has identified which bridging processes and

mechanisms across different social domains (school, neighbourhood, community programmes) may promote youth civic participation within the community arena (Rossi et al. 2016). Future research should also consider the natural spaces within the city as an important social setting to explore within the overall perspective of the integration of both environmental and civic engagements as positive developmental outcomes.

References

- Albanesi, C., Cicognani, E., & Zani, B. (2007). Sense of Community, Civic Engagement and Social Wellbeing in Italian Adolescents. *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology*, 17, 387–406. doi: [10.1002/casp.903](https://doi.org/10.1002/casp.903).
- Ballet, J., Koffi, J.M., Pelenc, J. (2013). Environment, justice and the capability approach. *Ecological Economics*, 85, 28-34. doi: [10.1016/j.ecolecon.2012.10.010](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecolecon.2012.10.010).
- Berger, P. L., & Neuhaus, R. J. (1977). To empower people: The role of mediating structures in public policy. Washington DC: American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research.
- Bookchin, M., (1985). *The Ecology of Freedom: The Emergence and Dissolution of Hierarchy*. Montreal and New York: Blake Rose Books.
- Chawla, L., and Flanders Cushing, D. (2007). “Education for strategic environmental behavior.” *Environmental Education Research*, 13 (4), 437-452. doi: 10.1080/13504620701581539.
- Cohler, B. J. (1982). Personal narrative and life course. In P. Baltes & O. G. Brim (Eds.), *Life span development and behavior* (Vol. 4, pp. 205–241). New York, NY: Academic Press.
- Dodman, M. (2014) Language, its technology and sustainability. *Visions for Sustainability* 1, 09-19.
- Dodman M. (2016). Knowledge and competence. Key concepts in an educational paradigm for a sustainable society. *Visions for Sustainability*, 5, 15-27.
- Eccles, J. S., & Gootman, J. (Eds.). (2002). *Community programs to promote youth development*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.
- Gardner, G. T. & Stern, P. C. (2002) *Environmental problems and human behavior*. Boston: Pearson Custom Publishing.

- Gifford, R., Nilsson, A. (2014). Personal and social factors that influence pro-environmental concern and behavior. A review. *International Journal of Psychology*, 1-17. doi: 10.1002/ijop.12034.
- Holland, B. (2007). Justice and the Environment in Nussbaum's "Capabilities Approach". *Political Research Quarterly (XX)*, 1-14. doi:doi:10.1177/1065912907306471.
- Lerner, R.M., Lerner, J.V., Almerigi, J.B., Theokas, C., Phelps, E., Gestsdottir, S., Nuadeau, S., Jelicic, H., Alberts, A., Ma,L., Smith, L.M., Bobek, D.L., Richman-Raphel, D., Simpson, I., DiDenti Christiansen, E., von Eye, A. (2005). Positive Youth Development, Participation in Community Youth Development Programs, and Community Contributions of Fifth-Grade Adolescents: Findings From the First Wave Of the 4-H Study of Positive Youth Development. *Journal of Early Adolescence*, 25, 17-71. doi: 10.1177/0272431604272461.
- Lewin, K. (1936). *Principles of Topological Psychology*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Nussbaum, M. (1988). Nature, Function, and Capability: Aristotle on Political Distribution. In *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Nussbaum, M. C. (2000). *Women and human development: The capabilities approach*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Nussbaum, M.C. (2003). Capabilities as Fundamental Entitlements: Sen and Social Justice. *Feminist Economics*, 9 (2-3), 33-59. Doi:10.1080/1354570022000077926.
- Pancer, S. M., L. Rose-Krasnor, and L. Loiselle. (2002). "Youth Conferences as a Context for Engagement." *New Directions for Youth Development*, 96, 47-64.
- Riemer, M., Lynes, J., & Hickman, G. (2013). Engaging youth in environmental change. A model for developing and assessing youth-based environmental engagement programmes. *Journal of Environmental Education Research*, 1-23. Doi: 10.1080/13504622.2013.812721.
- Rossi, G., Dodman, M. (2015). Understanding Young People's Engagement with Sustainability. An Ecological Approach. *Journal of Academic Perspectives*, 4, 1- 12.
- Rossi, G., Lenzi, M., Sharkey, J., Vieno, A., Santinello, M. (2016). Factors associated with civic engagement in adolescence: The effects of neighborhood, school, family and peer contexts. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 44(8), 1040-1058. DOI: 10.1002/jcop.21826.
- Sen, A. K. (1985). *Commodities and capabilities*. Oxford: North-Holland.
- Sen, A. K. (1992). *Inequality reexamined*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Sherrod, L.R., Busch, N., & Fischer, C. (2004). Applying developmental science: Methods, visions, and values. In R. Lerner & L. Steinberg (Eds.), *Handbook of adolescent psychology* (pp. 747-780). Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons.
- Shinn, M. (2015). Community Psychology and the Capabilities Approach. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 55, 243-252. Doi: 10.1007/s10464-015-9713-3.
- Sterling, S. (2001) *Sustainable Education – Re-Visioning Learning and Change*, Schumacher Society Briefing no. 6, Green Books, Dartington.
- Tidball, K. G., & Krasny, M.E. (2010). Urban Environmental Education From a Social-Ecological Perspective: Conceptual Framework for Civic Ecology Education. *Cities and the Environment*, 3(1), 1-20.