

## Article

# Young People Developing Their Identity Perception and Values: How Can School Support Such a Process by Bringing in Controversial Issues?

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**Abstract:** This article draws upon group conversations with young people (11–19 years old) from Europe, focusing on the Nordic countries. The participants' identity perception showed more aspects as the deliberative, non-structured conversations advanced. From initially showing limited aspects of identity as being related to geographical and temporal aspects, a broader comprehension of identities as constructed, multiple, and at times subject to negotiation and change came to the fore during the discussions. Examples given showed an awareness that people, such as older relatives, develop diverse ways of thinking and acting due to historical and cultural contexts. Understanding that there is an intersection between psychosocial, post-structural, and sociocultural explanations for how identity formation progresses, we propose pedagogical actions working with controversial issues and values, raising critical consciousness of the context. During the conversations, a majority expressed that controversial issues were not something they dealt with at school. By working with controversial issues, the content of conflicts is made visible, and the possibility for students to recognize and respect each other's diverse identities and perceptions increases. The goal of bringing controversial issues into education and conducting good discussions in the classroom is to help students develop and assess their opinions, gain an increased understanding, and consider new perspectives on various issues.

**Keywords:** controversial issues; identity; Nordic countries; values; young people



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## 1. Introduction

In this article we will focus on young people's discussion about civic society, citizenship, identity, and values. Identity is intensively built during adolescence and young adulthood, especially through real-time experiences and relational contexts [1]. Young people develop their sense of being and becoming by interacting with peers, family, and society as whole. Although very important and beneficial for the development of one's identity, social interactions may disseminate discriminatory discourses which lead to a normative framework of identity formation [2]. The concern about discriminatory discourses among young people has utmost importance at present because the world is facing an important and delicate moment concerning the formation of groups that identify themselves as totalitarians, fascists, and other identity conceptions based on antidemocratic ideas [3].

School-aged young people, and especially the ones living in economic vulnerability, were considered a risk group in sharing extreme nationalist ideas and joining nationalist groups [4]. Although it may be important to build an identity related to citizenship or other territorial senses of belonging, there may be a risk of extreme ideas related to prejudice against different groups of people and the normalization of violence will gain ground. One study [5] found that boys had higher scores on indicators related to cults

of power, permissibility of aggression, and normative nihilism, being prone to react with violence and ignoring social norms. Girls, on the other hand, show a great sense of group belonging because of their internal behavior regulators. Both findings are grounded on social constructs that can be questioned through access to other perspectives and debates.

When adolescents develop critical thinking abilities, they are more able to differ facts from claims and deal better with information spread on social media [6]. In this sense, to promote critical reflection among young people is highly needed, so that young people's identities are not defined based on the ideas and beliefs shared and propagated by people and media.

It is important that education encourages students to question, analyze, and challenge dominant ideologies and power structures. Critical thinking is a tool for personal and social transformation [7]. Encouragement of critical thinking in education involves empowering students to analyze information, develop their own perspectives, and engage in thoughtful, independent inquiry. By cultivating critical thinking skills, students can become active participants in shaping their own lives and contributing to social transformation [8].

One approach to develop critical thinking skills in young people is to explore controversial issues with them [9]. Controversial issues could be about politics, religion, and violent extremism, but it could also concern questions that focus on racism, honor, power structures, discrimination, equality, solidarity, and social justice between people. Furthermore, stimulating critical thinking and addressing controversial issues is not enough if pedagogical practices are still grounded on epistemological perspectives and beliefs that are linked to colonial systems [10]. Although colonial practices are usually linked to Western Europe and, nowadays, also to the United States, different countries and regions act(ed) against the native people from their territories. Practices and thoughts that endorse European and white supremacy can also be understood as coloniality [11]. The authors carry on the discussion highlighting that racism is an important issue in the Nordic region. By engaging with topics that have differing viewpoints and perspectives, young people are encouraged to analyze and evaluate information, consider multiple sides of an argument, and form their own informed opinions. This process fosters intellectual growth and empowers them to think independently. Discussing controversial issues promotes empathy and tolerance. It exposes young people to diverse perspectives, allowing them to gain a deeper understanding of diverse cultures, backgrounds, and experiences. This exposure can help break down stereotypes, reduce prejudice, and encourage acceptance of diversity.

The aim of this study is threefold; first, already here in the introduction, we want to grasp a brief context of how young people build their identity, and what kind of values they express in discussing civil society and citizenship. The second aim of this study is to present some examples of conversations between young people regarding how they talk about their identity and what kind of values they express in this context. Thirdly, this study aims to suggest how teachers can work together with their students in the classroom to promote how young people understand values and at the same time develop skills to actively participate in society.

After this introduction, the materials and methods used in this study are presented, then followed by the result section that gives the reader an understanding of the students' individual/personal values. It also indicates how they formulate the opinions they consider important regarding the sensitive questions that are focused in both the larger European study as in the part of the study from the Nordic countries. Furthermore, the results section suggest how teachers can work together with their students using controversial issues as a method in the classroom. Finally, in the discussion section, this study argues that by practicing deliberative conversations focused on various controversial issues, the students may develop their competence regarding global ethics and values which in turn helps them increase their skills towards being active citizens in future society.

## 2. Materials and Methods

The study is a minor excerpt of a larger investigation that adopted a qualitative methodology to explore how young people in mainland Europe construct their identities, including their affiliation with their country and with Europe. Blinded, the researcher visited 104 different locations across 29 European countries, engaging in discussions with approximately 2000 young people through 324 conversations. Each conversation session consisted of a small group of young people gathered for open discussion, mediated by the researcher and a translator, when needed. All conversations started with the same question: “How would you describe yourselves?” and the researcher interference was minimal. The criteria for selecting participants were to gather young people from both middle-class and working-class areas, ensuring diversity in gender, ability, and representation of minorities. The study obtained consent from school principals, parents (for those under 16), and the young people themselves. Pseudonyms were used to protect privacy and each young person will be identified in this paper using the initials of the pseudonyms, followed by gender (F for female and M for male), and age. The researcher is identified using the initials AR. The fieldwork was conducted in two phases: the first phase (2010–2012) covered countries that joined the European Union after 2004, while the second phase (2014–2016) included additional countries. At least two locations were visited in each country [12].

Because there are differences across Europe, our research group decided to focus on specific perspectives and regions. This paper focused on a better understanding of how young people from Nordic countries perceived their identity and values. We analyzed seven conversations’ transcripts from each of the following countries: Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden. All 35 transcripts were then carefully screened using a thematic analysis approach [13] followed by a critical discussion on the topics. The quotes were categorized into the four aspects of young people’s identity perception.

## 3. Results

Four themes regarding young people’s identity perception were identified: (a) a development of the participants’ identity as the deliberative, non-structured conversations advanced; (b) older relatives were perceived as developing diverse ways of thinking and acting due to historical and cultural contexts; (c) a broader comprehension of identities as constructed, multiple, and at times subject to negotiation and change; and (d) the emergence and contribution of controversial issues.

### 3.1. Development of the Participants’ Identity in the Deliberative Conversations

At first, young people showed a narrower perspective and then they broadened it. The development was perceived during the conversations in two forms, the first being a collective construction where each young person would, based on the previous comments, develop their critical perspective into a critical analysis of their national/regional identities. It can be perceived here as the following:

AR—What does it mean to ‘be Danish’?

CE (F—15)—I think it means that you come from Denmark, that you feel Danish, that you have lived most of your life in Denmark, and that you can speak Danish—and that you feel a part of the country, that you feel welcome, and that you are allowed to be a Dane in Denmark.

GG (M—15)—My opinion on being a Dane is when you contribute to the country, when you’re working and take care of other people, and not just yourself. That makes you feel Danish. When you go to a Danish school, when you’re together with Danish friends—and are an open person, not closed.

AL (M—14)—I think it’s a lot about accepting rights. For example, in Saudi Arabia, and all kinds of eastern countries, they don’t have rights for women, so you can’t drive a car, you can’t vote for politicians—and that’s a huge deal in

Denmark, because we love to have everyone have the same rights—or at least we try to give everyone the same rights and have equal rights.

The second form of identity perspective development in the deliberative conversations happened when the same young person would deepen their own ideas during the conversation, stimulated by their colleagues' discussions and the questions asked by the researcher. One example that illustrates this perception development about the meaning of European Union is the following quote:

SP (M—15)—I am student, in Finland of course, calm, pretty sporty, cool. I don't really have any feelings towards the European Union—it's there, but I don't care ... that's it.

[...]

SP (M—15)—I think I have a different view, and that I feel more European than Finnish. I would like to live abroad in the UK, in London someday. Perhaps that is why I feel more European. And also that the European Union is like the United States of Europe, and that's why I feel more European than Finnish. I think of Finland as part of the EU, of the bigger thing, the whole thing.

AR—Does it make you feel good to be part of a bigger thing?

SP (M—15)—Yes, I suppose we have more power as a bigger group than as an individual country—because Finland is quite small—it doesn't matter—not a lot of people know about our existence, while in the European Union we can actually change things. Affect the world.

[...]

SP (M—15)—[about Belarus joining EU] They do have a dictator right now, so they would have to get rid of him first before they joined. Human rights, they have to have them at a certain level before they can join, and they don't really have any, as far as I know—not as good as we do. That's why—you do have to be a good country, you have to solve the problem, before you join. To solve the problems of other countries, you have to be a good country yourself.

Both forms appeared in different conversations, in different age groups and in different locations in different Nordic countries. When the groups consisted of young people older than 14 years old, the development of identity perspectives during the deliberative conversation was more consistent. Nevertheless, deliberative conversations promoted some level of discussions and reflections in all age groups.

### 3.2. Diverse Ways of Thinking and Acting among Older Relatives

One way of understanding and perceiving their own identities was by acknowledging that they thought and acted differently than older relatives. The most frequent example was regarding grandparents who deal/dealt with diversity and human rights issues, such as in the following quotes:

IA (F—19)—I grew up thinking that my grandparents were just great people, and I loved them because they were my grandparents, they took care of me. But then, now I am older and have a sense of—I have my own opinions about politics and the world and those sort of things—and then I listen to my grandparents say 'People have always been racist, and that's OK'.

CP (F—15)—Because we—I was going to say we're smarter, but that's maybe not it—we can learn more about different cultures, and we learn about that in school now—Maybe the older people didn't do that when they went to school, so they are more limited in their way of thinking. But that's not all the younger people, or all the older people.

LH (F—15)—I also think that they think more about money, and that they like the country the way it is because they have lived in it for many years—I think

we [young people] have a little bit more humanity as kids—we feel a little bit more sad about them than adults do—so maybe they think about money and everything, and we think a bit more about the humans—and the politicians they need to think about the money and everything

KR (M—14)—Also, I think that they know we are the new generation, and we have to lift this country and get it moving—so maybe they are afraid that they [refugees] are going to ruin it, because there have been many things over the past ten years—new technology things—and the older people are not used to that, so maybe they think that we can't handle it all

It is important to highlight that the above quotes are from different conversations, in different countries. Young people perceive their older relatives as people who, sometimes, don't know how to deal with diversity. Interestingly, these older relatives were not considered to be bad or unintelligent. The participants often tried to understand their backgrounds, although without sharing their opinions. One example is this dialogue:

MF (F—18)—I know that when the older people were young and went to school, maybe there was one from another culture in the class, maybe no one—only Danish people in the class—and in our class, we're like eleven other cultures—also in the school we're so mixed up with other cultures—so we learn to live with each other, and to accept each other and what we are—so that's probably why we are not scared of each other—apart from religion and culture, we're just people—

PP (M—19)—I agree the younger are less scared, because we have grown up with classmates from other cultures—so I know that Isman M's not going to school with a gun—or maybe it's a trick, may be he will one day—while the older generations haven't experienced the same friendship towards people from other countries—so when the media says that Muslims are terrorists, they kind of believe it more than we, the younger generation, who know that Muslims can be friends. Yes, there are Muslims that are terrorists, fanatics, but most of them—and everyone I know—isn't a terrorist.

### 3.3. Identities As Constructed, Multiple, and At Times Subject to Negotiation and Change

Heterogeneous groups allowed young people to have contact with different viewpoints during the conversations. The participants would show surprise and open themselves to new perspectives. An example of this situation is found below:

HR (F—17)—Maybe regard[ing] racism the situation will change, because we are having a public conversation about racism, so for a lot of kids, and the people who are now kids will really be better parents, and teach their kids to be less prejudiced

AR—KO, what's your experience?

KO (F—16)—If you're dark skinned, people can see you're not a Finn, it's easier [to be identified]—for me it's normal, if I go the bus or something it's normal, it's normal if someone says something bad—it's a kind of everyday situation—and I usually don't answer to it, I just move on—but especially for Somalis it's just an everyday thing, that someone says something bad, or insults you. I don't accept it—but—there's nothing I can do. I could talk to these people, but I don't think it would change anything, so I just be quiet, and do nothing

VT (M—18)—Kaia O, what kind of people say these things?

Moreover, the conversations allowed them to reflect on the idea that their national identity is something they have chosen and is, thus, constructed, as can be seen below:

JL (F—16)—I consider my friends whose parents are from Iraq as Swedes, they are born in Sweden. Because they're born here. But also if you have lived in Sweden for more than—five years—I could consider them as Swedes too.

TH (M—15)—I don't think it has anything to do with culture and stuff—there's a party here in Sweden, a political party that's growing and growing, and in this year's election they got 12.9% of the votes—they are nationalists and very often called racists. I think it's a huge problem that they are growing so much, because they want to divide Swedes who are born here from other people—they want to divide them into two groups. And for me, being Swedish is not about which culture you have, or where you come from, or actually which language you talk—actually, it's about how you want to identify yourself. If you live in Sweden, and you feel that you're Swedish, then you are. It doesn't have to do with which religion or culture you come from.

As can be perceived in some of the quotes shown within this paper, the participants often related their identities to some aspect of their nationality. However, the cultural aspect (and the feeling of being part of a group identity) was more important than nationalism, as the following discussion shows:

AR—I haven't been using the word 'nationality' or 'nation'—but you've both brought the word in—is that the same as feeling part of the country? Is feeling Danish the same as having Danish nationality?

HA (M—17)—No it's not, because if you feel Danish that is that you feel integrated into the culture, that you do something because you so like this culture that you feel you are Danish. But loving the country, that's nationalism. And nationalism didn't really exist before the first world war—this concept is new, and it's being eradicated, because we are a global society and even more a European society—because we have the United Nations, and so on—so the world is being more globalised—you can see we are just six people here, and half of us have different roots than just Danish, though we are in a Danish town.

JW (M—17)—Yes, you can have Danish passport without feeling Danish, and you can also feel Danish without being able to get a Danish passport—so it's very hard to say 'now you are Danish' or 'now you are something else—Palestinian'—I think it all comes down to what you feel—and even then though you may feel Danish you may not get a Danish passport—and it's all some kind of construction, and it's very hard to put borders on it.

### 3.4. *The Emergence and Contribution of Controversial Issues*

Controversial issues have been the most prominent approach to provoke debate, reflection, and the development of critical thinking about young people's identities. An excerpt of a long discussion very well shows that they listen to each other's arguments, and are eager to clarify what they mean:

EJ (M—16)—Well, unlike HA, I would argue that to 'be Danish' is more than just to come from the area called Denmark—there is a certain mindset, or something like that—if you were to put the Danish social system in Britain, with the British people, then I don't think that you'd like paying 50% taxes—I don't think I'd get elected if I asked that—or if I was to come from the US and say 'Let's have a gun law just like in the US in Denmark'—then I wouldn't get elected. So there are certain mindsets that makes us like these things, or dislike other things—and one of these things is just trust. In Denmark we are very trustful—there are some people that claim taxes are very bad, but not at all like in the US where they are very angry at their taxes, and they pay a lot less than we do. My parents, and most of the people that I know, don't have any problem paying their taxes, because they know that if they get injured, they can go to hospital completely free, and have very [well] qualified doctors—they know that this money is not 'stolen' from them—that it will get back to them. But that's of course because you have to trust your system, to trust that those monies are not going to the royal family's food, or something like that. That's something Danish to have this

trust. Of course, it's not unique to Denmark—Sweden and Norway have the same system—that's something Danish and I think an American would disagree with me—he doesn't have that mindset.

HA (M—17)—When you said you disagreed with me, I didn't mean that they weren't Danish. If you're born and raised somewhere, you are bound to be indoctrinated in this culture, in this system, in this trust—but to have an identity that is Danish—If you were born in America, if you travelled to America and lived there for thirty or forty years, would your mindset change? Because you've tried this form of system, and you've tried that form of system? Just because you are indoctrinated to a certain country, you have the same mindset, but because you are born and raised there, that doesn't define your identity.

EJ (M—16)—I think to some extent it would, but of course, I haven't migrated to anywhere, so I don't know if I were to spend the next thirty years of my life in the US whether I would adopt the US mind—so I don't know—but I don't think so, actually.

JW (M—17)—I find it very strange that you use the word 'indoctrinated', instead of 'raised' in a certain culture. Is your [HA] view of being raised in a nationality that bad?

HA (M—17)—When you learn in the public school system, the way that they put forth democracy and so on, and why we pay taxes, EJ knows very well why we pay taxes, and what it goes to—so that's the indoctrination that I'm talking about.

Additionally, young people looked for different perspectives when someone brought mainstream thinking up. For example, instead of ignoring or not paying enough attention, they followed the new path presented by a colleague:

MA (F—15)—It's as AB said, it's mostly older people who look down on people, because they have these traditions from the old days that they still; follow, so when someone looks like me walking through, they'll maybe think I'm not—er—not—not behaving like most Danish people

TM (M—15)—I think also there are many teenagers who are very racist against—the age of sixteen, seventeen—or my age, like [name of a colleague]—I mentioned—he's very racist

NB (M—13)—People of our age think that it's funny to make fun of someone who doesn't look like them, someone who's not white and doesn't look most of the people in the world—I think that's wrong, you can't make fun of someone just because they look different.

Finally, when confronted with their own contradictions, young people also managed to engage in critical and reflective thinking and develop their identity perceptions:

AR—You brought up the issue of perhaps somewhere like Turkey joining the European Union—but earlier you suggested you could define Europe as being Christian.

IB (M—16)—Yes, I did, but it would be interesting because Turkey is a Muslim country, and it would be very good for the European Union to have more religions in the European Union, because –

MA (M—16)—It increases diversity.

IB (M—16)—Yes, religious diversity would be a good thing, I think—it's nothing bad.

JC (F—16) Yes, that's what I meant too—it might be dangerous if Europe becomes just Christian, just conservative, very monotone place/It would develop this feeling of Europe against the rest of the world, and that would be dangerous.

We see here that the students/young people make critical reflections, especially about religious diversity, and they state that it would be good if the European Union was more multireligious than it is.

Another topic that appeared in the discussions was that there is little room to address these kinds of questions and issues at school or with their friends. One important aspect was pointed out here:

AR—That’s been very interesting, thanks very much for talking to me. Do you talk about these sorts of things with your friends?

All—No no

SP (M—15)—I talk to my parents.

AR—In school, to teachers?

All—No. . .

SP (M—15)—In civic education we only talk about what the book says—and the book doesn’t say anything about this, so. . . we have our own opinions, but we do not talk about them.

In this last conversation, the students express that they wish to talk more in school about their various opinions and how these relate, or do not relate, to the content in their textbooks in civic education. As we see here in the results, these various topics focus on questions that are sensitive and might be demanding, both in that the students need to reflect on a more personal level, but also that they need to be knowledgeable regarding political and civic education in order to discuss these issues [14]. This makes these questions both obvious and important to include in teaching various subjects, but also in citizenship education in a broader sense.

#### 4. Discussion

As stated above, this study is based on interviews with young people and students from the Nordic countries and contain a great deal of interesting data, and here we have only given a few examples of these conversations. The conversations have been presented under four themes: (a) a development of the participants’ identity as the deliberative, non-structured conversations advanced; (b) older relatives were perceived as developing diverse ways of thinking and acting due to historical and cultural contexts; (c) a broader comprehension of identities as constructed, multiple and at times subject to negotiation and change; and (d) the emergence and contribution of controversial issues.

The conversations illustrate that the student’s groups are very heterogenous and that the students are open to discuss even if they differ in opinions, and they are open to new perspectives and sometimes shifting their point of view during the conversations.

One interesting aspect of the interviews is that they were conducted before 2018. Back then, a common opinion among young people was the desire of having a more multireligious Europe [15]. The issue of religious diversity is always present and urgent, as is seen even today. Also, the selected interviews show that the young people developed their critical perspectives and that they would develop their arguments and do critical analysis during the conversations within their group [6–9].

In the final part of the results section, some of the students expressed that they wanted to discuss more of these kinds of sensitive questions, and this connects well with the argument promoted in this article that teaching about these kinds of controversial issues is a way forward to develop the students’ competencies during deliberative conversations [15,16].

The concept of controversial issues has been used in the social sciences for many years, and there are different ways of defining what it means. One definition suggested by Kerr and Huddleston reads as follows: “Issues that arouse strong emotions and create tension in society” [17,18]. In this understanding, we find that controversial issues are issues that generate contradictory explanations and complex solutions. These are questions that tend to divide people into different groups, and these types of questions have no easy solutions

or answers. They can be controversial both in a longer historical perspective and they can be actual controversies current in our time.

Controversial issues are always sensitive and/or difficult to deal with and take a stand on. At the same time, these are issues that are significant for learning about and for understanding what democracy is, and they are considered very challenging for teachers to work with in the classroom. Kerr and Huddleston [17] articulate that working with controversial issues by emphasizing that they are important for learning about democratic processes and human rights.

It is often emphasized that the value of teaching about and discussing controversial issues lies in actually doing it. To work with the goal of teaching about controversial issues and conducting good discussions in the classroom is to help students develop and test their opinions and gain an increased understanding of, and think about, new angles and perspectives on various issues. The students learn to critically review facts and information and, at the same time, to discuss them in a civilized way with their classmates, even if they disagree on the issue [15–17,19–21]. This is a learning process that is central to the democratic process and crucial for teaching about global values and human rights.

For instance, on the Swedish National Agency for Education's website, we can read that controversial issues can touch everything from politics and religion to racism, honor, power structures, sexuality and relationships, discrimination, and violent extremism. It can also be about equality and solidarity between people. The Swedish National Agency for Education also emphasizes the importance of the teacher teaching the students how to converse in a respectful manner, that everyone has the right to express themselves and be listened to, and that the conversations must be free from violations of various kinds [22].

It is also important to emphasize that teachers need to develop their skills in carrying out discussions with students in an informed way and must be well prepared regarding the issues to be discussed so that they can lead the work in the classroom.

Working with controversial issues can be seen as part of the values-based work. As a teacher, it is important to note conflict-laden opinions, but it is also—somewhat contradictorily—important that these are clarified and made visible. Thereby, the students get the opportunity to learn to discuss, understand, and respect the opinions of others. This is practicing what democracy is, which is central to what we might call civic education or citizenship education [14].

Exploring controversial issues prepares young people for active citizenship in a democratic society. It equips them with the necessary skills to engage in respectful and constructive dialogue, listen to differing opinions, and participate in democratic processes. This empowers them to become informed and engaged citizens who can contribute to their communities and advocate for positive change [23].

## 5. Conclusions

In this paper, the ambition has been to focus on discussions about young people's development of their identities towards being active citizens that take an active part in democratic processes in society, and who are both emphatically and critically competent. We see in the study how young people in Europe, and especially in the Nordic countries, construct their identities, including their affiliation with their country and with Europe at large. Specifically regarding Nordic countries, one study [24] analyzed Norwegian teacher education programs and curricula, and discussed some academic misbeliefs that understand decoloniality only as identity politics. Understanding that most of young people's identity perception is based on a colonial perspective, it is important to go beyond discourse and produce/allow different epistemologies that comprise diversity, immigrants, and native people in Nordic academia and school systems.

It has also been shown here that teaching about humanistic values and global ethics together equips students for active citizenship and gives them the civic education needed to be able to participate in a democratic society. The goal for active citizenship education could well be to focus on inclusion and global humanistic values to a greater degree, and to

teach students to practice democratic discussions and deliberative conversations to develop a sense of justice, generosity, tolerance, and global responsibility.

Teachers can, in a didactically conscious way, using controversial issues in teaching, connect the teaching about a socially sustainable society and humanistic values with the general values-based work in the school. If education gives space for these questions and puts them in relation to human rights and the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the content connects well with values-based work, as well as with humanistic values and what we can call citizenship education [14,15]. In addition, controversial issues are questions that can develop students' competence regarding existential global future issues, such as those we can find, for instance, in Agenda 2030, and this may thus strengthen their ability to actively participate in a society on the way to greater sustainability.

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