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Abstract: In many countries, young people are justifiably viewed as possessing the energy and ideas required to advance the sustainability agenda. However, the degree to which youth can influence that agenda depends on how meaningfully they engage in Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and related processes. Further, the extent to which they can meaningfully engage may vary across countries. Though studies have shed light on the core elements of meaningful youth engagement, those insights have not been used to compare how these elements vary across countries. The paper aims to fill this knowledge gap with a preliminary assessment of youth engagement in sustainability processes in Finland and Japan. The approach used herein draws upon relevant literature to construct an analytical framework comprised of four key elements underpinning meaningful youth engagement: (1) aims and justifications; (2) power-sharing; (3) transparency and accountability; and (4) support. The study then employs text mining, institutional analysis, and key informant interviews to offer a preliminary assessment of how meaningfully youth have engaged in sustainability processes in Finland and Japan. The assessment reveals that youth engagement mechanisms in Finland more clearly explicate aims and justifications, balance power dynamics, and enhance transparency and accountability than in Japan. Both countries could do more to offer support to young people. The article also suggests that additional research is needed on three areas: (1) the effect of underlying socio-cultural differences on youth engagement; (2) the relationship between youth engagement and the performance of SDGs 4, 7, and 13; and (3) the role of education as an upstream enabler of engagement.



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1. Introduction

Recent years have made it abundantly clear that the world is not on track to achieve the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that sit at the heart of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2030 Agenda). At the midpoint of the 2030 Agenda, there is a growing consensus that the world needs a course change to accelerate progress on the SDGs. The engagement of multiple, diverse stakeholders could arguably inject the energy and ideas needed to trigger this course change. Among different stakeholders that could lead this change, much of the attention has rightly focused on meaningfully engaging the next generation—that is, young people.

Youth participation has been invoked in intergovernmental agreements since the adoption of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989 [1]. That foundational agreement underlined that it is children's right to be involved in decisions that affect them and their future. Since that agreement, young people have become increasingly viewed as essential actors and valued participants in advancing the sustainability agenda. Numerous international forums, programs, and resolutions have underlined the growing need for youth engagement—for example, calling for young people's or youth-led organizations'

active participation in sustainability processes. Similar calls for the importance of engaging youth can be found in the academic literature on sustainability [2].

At the same time, some additional reflections should inform discussions of youth engagement. Among the reasons for more reflection is that there is no consistently agreed definition of young people; nor are young people a homogenous bloc. On the former point, biological age is often cited as a determinant of youth at both the national and international levels. Yet, even in this case, there exists variation in what constitutes being young—with age cut points ranging from 13 to 35 [3] (p. 17). In addition, young people are very diverse in their backgrounds and identities. Generalization may lead to overlooking and failing to capture the differences in opinions and insights from young people with varying geographical, educational, and socioeconomic backgrounds.

On a related note, there may also be various ways young people participate in sustainability processes. Voting has long been the main means to formally participate in policymaking processes; however, this once widely held view that voting is the chief channel for engagement is becoming less relevant in recent years. It is also less applicable to young people who may be under voting age or more inclined to use other avenues to push for change, especially in progressive policy realms such as sustainability. Instead, there could be multiple forms of participation and varying influences on the decision-making processes in crafting sustainable futures [4,5]. Further, given the diversification of channels, there is also the question of whether the ways that young people engage can have a meaningful effect on sustainability processes. Another pertinent point is that the degree to which young people can meaningfully influence these processes may vary from one country to the next.

The above possibilities suggest a critical question: how do countries compare in terms of meaningful youth engagement in sustainability processes? This paper answers this question with a preliminary assessment of two developed democratic countries: Finland and Japan. This assessment draws on a simple framework comprised of four elements that arguably sit at the core of meaningful youth engagement: (1) aims and justifications; (2) power-sharing; (3) transparency and accountability; and (4) support. It then employs a mixed-method approach to derive some initial insights into how Finland and Japan compare across those elements. This approach entails the text mining of key documents followed by a desk study of official descriptions of key institutions and key informant interviews. The assessment reveals that youth engagement mechanisms in Finland more clearly explicate aims and justifications, balance power dynamics, and enhance transparency and accountability than in Japan. Both countries could do more to offer support to young people.

The remainder of the paper is divided into six sections. The next two sections (Sections 2 and 3) reviews the relevant literature on participation and engagement to develop an analytical framework consisting of four elements: (1) aims and justifications; (2) power-sharing; (3) transparency and accountability; and (4) support. Sections 4 and 5 use this framework to compare Finland and Japan. The final section (Section 6) provides a summary of the paper and recommendations for future work.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Setting the Context

Often, decisions made today affect young people for years to come. In SDG processes, policymakers and practitioners are increasingly acknowledging that these decisions will influence young people into the future. At the same time, there is also a realization that young people are not merely passive supplicants when it comes to those decisions. Rather, they are key stakeholders and future leaders with the potential to shape their future. This growing recognition traces back to the notion of intergenerational equity [6]. That notion was made famous in the 1987 Brundtland Report “Our Common Future” and features in definitions of sustainable development that offer “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”.

In the years since the release of the Brundtland Report, landmark agreements would give young people firmer ground to stand upon in sustainability processes. For example, the 1992 Rio Earth Summit adopted Agenda 21, including Chapter 25, titled “Children and Youth in Sustainable Development”, which identified young people as pivotal stakeholders in sustainable development. In underlining the central role of the next generation, the chapter clarified that “the involvement of today’s youth in environment and development decision-making is critical to the long-term success of Agenda 21”. Agenda 21 also led to the creation of nine “Major Groups” that help to organize the different channels for communication and engagement in UN activities related to sustainable development. The Major Group for Children and Youth (MGCY) is one officially recognized group, receiving a mandate from the UN General Assembly and specific entities through agreements and terms of reference.

The 2030 Agenda and its SDGs also recognize the importance of intergenerational equity and acknowledge that the future of humanity and the planet lies in the hands of younger generations. Toward that end, the SDGs developed specific targets relating to youth empowerment, education, capacity building, and (un)employment (e.g., SDG 4; SDG 8.6) and emphasized the importance of participatory and inclusive decision-making and societal development across all ages or other statuses (e.g., SDG 16.7). As implied in the above list of SDGs, young people are not only influenced by the intergenerational disparities that need to be narrowed, they are also expected to shape pathways to a sustainable future or use their unique perspectives to craft creative solutions to thorny problems [7,8]. In addition, young people may hold broader conceptions of sustainability that can help to pull communities and even countries closer together [9]. Further, young people, equipped with sufficient knowledge and skills, can use those broader conceptions to spark positive change in everything from small towns to global arenas [10,11]. As such, there are a growing number of positive examples of youth participation contributing to awareness-raising across generations and community building across regions in sustainability processes [12].

In recent years, the United Nations System has increasingly sought to harness this potential by involving youth in the SDGs and related processes. For instance, the UN has established an office called “the Secretary-General’s Envoy on Youth” to foster a collaborative and integrated approach to UN initiatives on youth issues. The UN has supported other similarly focused efforts to expand youth participation, such as “Youth 2030”—an umbrella framework initiated by Secretary-General António Guterres in 2018 to engage young people and solicit ideas on UN activities across three pillars: peace and security, human rights, and sustainable development. In doing so, national governments are urged to make youth participation the norm, rather than the exception, across all decisions, policies, and investments [13]. In response, Member States have been reported to establish a variety of forms to engage young people, including participation in national youth councils, follow-up and review processes, and thematic political consultations. However, there still remains room for improvement when it comes to meaningful engagement [13,14].

2.2. Meaningful Youth Engagement

Much of the research on participation comes from political science where there is a long-running emphasis on institutionalized forms of engagement, such as elections. Political science studies often assume that participation entails activities that are intended to directly influence the choice of elected representatives or the organizations behind them [15,16]. However, in recent years, the notion of participation has grown to include forms of engagement beyond the government or formal political institutions while questioning boundaries between political and social spheres. This has led to a broader definition of political participation that stresses activities “indirectly aimed at impacting civil society or attempting to alter systematic patterns of social behavior” [17].

This more expansive view is important when discussing the engagement of young people [18–20]. At the national level, the legal voting age often functions as a threshold for deciding whether young people can participate in activities. Indeed, some young people

who are not eligible to vote may need other kinds of institutional mechanisms to participate in public matters. Thus, such a broader view is essential since it is impossible for young people to vote until they reach legal age (though voting rates have also fallen among younger generations). While this declining trend might suggest a disinterest in public affairs, it should not be regarded as *prima facie* evidence of political apathy [21]. Instead, sociological research on values and behavior changes has revealed that young people opt for alternative and new forms of engagement such as protests, demonstrations, utilization of social networking services (SNSs), consumer actions, and charitable fundraising or volunteer work [22]. Such activities are forms of participation—a form that is neither explicitly social nor political but rather socio-political [23]. If expanding youth engagement is considered a desirable goal, there is also a need to look more at the landscape of means and channels through which young people actively engage [24].

In a similar vein to opening multiple opportunities, young people may need support to enable their involvement in key processes. Such support is warranted because, compared to adult stakeholders, young people may lack confidence and tools or confront barriers to becoming involved. This support could, for instance, prioritize marginalized and vulnerable youth to ensure inclusive decision-making, aiming to “reach the furthest behind first” [25]. Research indicates that active youth are more likely to be from socio-economically advantageous groups, already equipped with the necessary abilities to participate [26,27]. Therefore, empowering youth with knowledge and skills as well as appropriate support is crucial to making their participation meaningful [5,28]. Focusing on the essential elements to make their engagement meaningful is necessary, as surface-level tokenistic participation may actually do more harm than good.

Building upon the above insights, a few studies have looked at what factors affect whether young people meaningfully engage on the SDGs in different contexts. For example, some studies have used survey data from university students in Rome, Italy, to show that taking classes centered on real-world energy projects can motivate greater youth involvement in sustainability initiatives [29]. Other studies also underlined that equipping university students in Malaysia with knowledge of the SDGs increased awareness and action on sustainability [30]. However, not all of the research has been so optimistic. To illustrate, research based on interviews again in Malaysia found that even motivated youth that are working on the SDGs operate in a relatively small circle and have not been able to reach a wider range of international/government organizations or the private sector [31]. Some studies have taken these findings a step further to suggest how to break through these barriers. In this connection, some have offered that one of the keys to meaningful engagement is to enable young people to serve as evaluators of SDG processes, noting that Saharan Africa, the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), and South America have seen progress in this regard [32].

Though the above studies help to illustrate some of the promise and challenges for truly influential or meaningful engagement on the SDGs in particular places, they lack the kinds of insights needed to determine how meaningful participation varies across countries. There is, however, a complementary set of studies that can shed light on some of the core elements of meaningful youth engagement that could be used for a comparative assessment. The next section reflects on some of the key insights from that literature.

2.3. Toward a Comparative Assessment of Meaningful Youth Engagement

The work that can inform a comparative assessment of meaningful engagement has a long history that is not only about youth but engagement more generally. In fact, much of the relevant literature draws upon on the well-known typology known as the “Ladder of Children’s Participation [33]”. The metaphorical ladder is based on seminal studies from Arnstein (1969) that argued that citizen (adult) participation could be classified as sitting on rungs corresponding to actual levels of influence on a plan and/or program [34]. The lowest three rungs on the more recent “Ladder of Children’s Participation”, (1) manipulation, (2) decoration, and (3) tokenism, are viewed as forms of “non-participation”; the five rungs

above, (4) assigned but informed, (5) consulted and informed, (6) adult-initiated, shared decisions with youth, (7) youth-initiated and directed, and (8) youth-initiated, shared decisions, suggest young people are granted progressively more responsibility and decision-making power. Moving up the rungs implies changing power relations and a more equal distribution of rights between adults and young people [33].

A recent OECD Future of Education and Skills 2030 project offered that the “Sun Model of Co-Agency” has modified this ladder schema yet further. In this useful reformulation, the emphasis is placed on developing fruitful collaborations with adults across degrees of “co-agency” (except the newly added degree of zero or silence where neither young people nor adults believe that young people can contribute and adults lead all activities and make decisions) [35]. This reformulation is particularly helpful because it implies a shift towards joint action and decision-making from young people working with adults, while also recognizing young people can be experts in some areas, especially in youth-related matters [36]. In suggesting the potential for collaborative partnership while also underlining the promise for youth agency and expertise, the Sun Model aligns well with the trends in sustainability processes that began this section. More concretely, it suggests that young people can be active participants and valuable partners in efforts to institutionalize initiatives such as the aforementioned “Youth 2030”, as well as to develop specific SDG-related policies where they have strong relevance and interests. Some examples include but are not limited to health and well-being (SDG 3) [37,38], education (SDG 4) [39], employment (SDG 8) [40], and climate change (SDG 13) [41].

Though the Sun Model and some similarly motivated antecedents [42–44] represent breakthroughs for classifying different forms of partnership and participation, one possible drawback is they may not be easy to use for a comparative assessment as the flexibility in the terms used in the model makes comparisons challenging. Simply stated, it can be difficult to employ a co-agency framework for comparatively assessing how meaningfully youth engage in SDG processes. In this connection, several studies offer some insights into the core elements of meaningful youth participation [3,13,37,45,46] or combine several approaches toward that end [7]. Though it is not possible to bring in insights from all of this above work, distilling four elements that can be compared across countries as they encourage and empower young people to participate in mechanisms related to the SDGs: (1) aims and justifications; (2) power-sharing; (3) transparency and accountability; and (4) support.

1. **Aims and Justifications:** A clear presentation of aims and justification underlying youth engagement is arguably essential for meaningful participation. The need for such a clear presentation stems from the fact that young people have the right to participate and express their views and opinions freely in all matters affecting them (rights justification). In so doing, they can offer suggestions that can help to improve policies and services (efficiency justification). Furthermore, young people can develop knowledge and skills (development justification) and enhance self-esteem through involvement (empowerment justification). It also merits noting that there may be several aims and justifications and these could be combined within a single participatory activity [3,13,47,48].
2. **Power-sharing:** Another critical dimension of meaningful engagement involves efforts to create balanced power-sharing arrangements. Young people can initiate activities and make decisions on their own. It is also arguably their choice to work together and share decisions with adults—provided that different responsibilities and competencies are clearly stated. It may similarly be important that young people are considered capable and competent and their views are respected. Under these conditions, young people can establish partnerships among other relevant stakeholders, including decision and policy makers. In this context, it merits noting that engagement mechanisms may aim to position young people as equal partners to improve the situation—a sentiment that aligns well with the partnership principle of Agenda 2030 [33,35,42,43,45,46,49,50].

3. **Transparency and Accountability:** A third important element of meaningful engagement involves whether the processes involving the SDGs are transparent and clear to young people and other stakeholders. With open communication channels, young people can be well-informed on all matters affecting them. For example, they can know what roles they are expected to play along with other stakeholders and what competencies are required to move forward. A possible desirable side effect of transparency is strengthening accountability. That is, transparency around the SDGs will help to allow decision-makers (as well as young people) to be held accountable for their commitments and actions. Similar to the previous elements, there are many references to calls for transparency and accountability in an effort to drive forward implementation [13,14,38,45,46].
4. **Support:** Last but not least is the issue of support. As noted previously in the article, young people may need support to safely and continuously participate regardless of background, status, or identity. Support may be particularly important for young people from less privileged backgrounds, enabling them to participate with confidence. Such support includes, but is not limited to, financial assistance for travel and accommodations, economic incentives, psychological and mentorship assistance, as well as providing learning and capacity development opportunities. The above needs are embedded in the SDGs No One Left Behind principles, which calls for support to be provided to those who are vulnerable and excluded [7,10,11,13,14,37,45,51].

The above four key elements are selected because they are viewed as core components of meaningful youth participation while aligning with principles underpinning the SDGs. The analytical framework based on these four elements makes it possible to bridging the theoretical question with the empirical analysis [52]. The next part of this paper uses this framework to offer an initial assessment of youth engagement mechanisms or activities related to SDGs' implementation in Finland and Japan. The four aforementioned elements will be helpful in comparing engagement mechanisms between two countries: Japan and Finland.

3. Case Selection and Methods

3.1. Selection of Countries

The four elements described above will be used for a small-n comparison of youth engagement in Japan and Finland. The selection of the two countries follows assumptions in comparative case study research that are frequently used in the social sciences to offer practical policy recommendations. These assumptions highlight the desirability of selecting cases that are similar across most key dimensions while varying in one or more limited sets of areas of interest. The reason for selecting cases with many similarities is to control for the possible confounding effects of issues that may influence a particular policy, program, or process (including engagement mechanisms) but are not the focus of the research. For example, if the two cases selected for this study were from countries of different levels of development and/or had different political systems, one might reasonably argue that inferences drawn about the variation in the engagement mechanisms are really related to the development levels or political systems [53].

As such, Finland and Japan were selected because there are many similarities between the two countries that limit concerns about confounding effects and make them useful for comparative policy-relevant case study research. In fact, there are at least five general similarities. First, both Finland and Japan are developed high-income countries [54]. Second, both countries are parliamentary democracies. Third, both countries have formulated and implemented policies to address environmental challenges, mitigate climate change, and promote sustainable development. Fourth, Finland and Japan are renowned for high-quality education systems that nurture future generations and consistently perform well in international assessments such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). Fifth, the two countries are recognized for promoting environmental education and Education for Sustainable Development (ESD).

In addition to the five more general similarities, both countries share more specific sets of traits related to engaging young people in implementing the SDGs. For example, Japan established the “Japan Next-Generation Platform” in 2018 under the initiative of the Prime Minister, creating a space for those interested in sustainable development. Similarly, Finland set up “The 2030 Agenda Youth Group” in 2017 under the Finnish National Commission on Sustainable Development, led by the Prime Minister. Both initiatives were referred to as good practices in the Voluntary National Reviews (VNR) shared at the High-level Political Forum (HLPF) to summarize the progress and achievements in implementing SDGs [55,56].

In addition to these general characteristics and specific traits, there are also similarities in the kinds of policy documents that have been developed. Table 1 shows the SDGs’ plans and related policy documents that will be used to inform the comparative analysis in this study. In Japan, the SDGs’ Implementation Guiding Principles (launched in 2016 and revised in 2019 and 2023) provide an overview of the status of the SDGs as well as its visions, priorities, institutions, and processes in promoting the SDGs. The guiding principles are used to develop an annual SDGs Action Plan in Japan. To some extent paralleling Japan, Finland developed a national 2030 Agenda Roadmap in 2021. That roadmap is a medium-term plan detailing the actions Finland needs to take to achieve the goals of the 2030 Agenda. The most recent version of the roadmap, adopted in 2022, is used in the comparative analysis to follow.

Table 1. SDGs-related documents included in the analysis.

Country	Document Title
Finland	• The 2030 Agenda Roadmap of the Finnish National Commission on Sustainable Development (2022) [57]
	• Strategy of the National Commission on Sustainable Development 2022–2030 (2022) [58]
	• Report on the Implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2020) [55]
Japan	• SDGs Implementation Guiding Principles Revised Edition (2019) [59]
	• SDGs Action Plan (2023) * [60]
	• Report on the implementation of 2030 Agenda ~Toward achieving the SDGs in the post-COVID-19 era~ (2021) [56]

* Only available in Japanese.

As seen above, Finland and Japan demonstrate a shared commitment to engaging young people in the national SDGs’ implementation by, for instance, establishing institutionalized mechanisms for these purposes. While there are general similarities, there may be particular differences in how much they facilitate or support meaningful engagement. Further, although a rigorous check of causal claims goes beyond the scope of this article, those differences may also have implications for performance on the SDGs (see also the conclusion of the article). On this point, it should be noted that Japan ranks lower (21st in 2023) than Finland (1st in 2023) in SDG performance (based on the Sustainable Development Report from the Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN)) [61].

The next subsection describes how to draw out those differences and answer the aforementioned research questions: How do countries compare in terms of meaningful youth engagement in sustainability processes?

3.2. Three Approaches

The paper relies on three different but complementary approaches to compare how meaningful youth engagement is in sustainability processes in Finland and Japan (see Figure 1). It merits noting that the approaches build off each other, starting with a rather general text mining of key words that is then complemented by descriptions of formal institutions and key informant interviews organized around the four categories in the literature review. In addition, as is also discussed in the conclusion, these methods can offer a “preliminary” assessment of engagement and could be further complemented by a larger sample of survey data or an expanded number of country case studies (see also Section 6, the Conclusions).

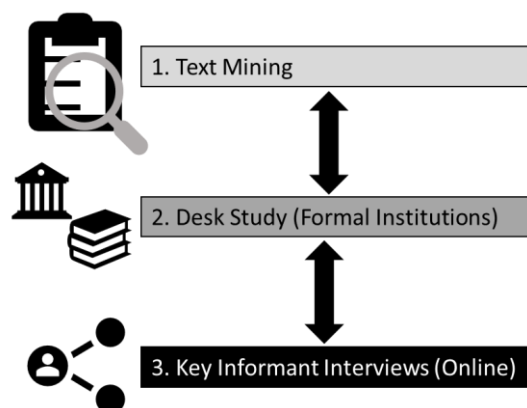


Figure 1. Three research methods.

It is also critical to highlight that, with the exception of the text mining, the data used for this research are qualitative. The use of qualitative as opposed to quantitative data is commonly practiced in comparative institutional analysis as a subfield of social science research. Though not perfect, qualitative data allow for insights into the design of policies and institutions that might not be visible from a quantitative analysis of key features of youth engagement mechanisms. It is also arguably more appropriate to use a qualitative lens for a two-country comparison as it can offer a richer and more nuanced understanding of the design of policies and institutions.

The first approach used for this comparative assessment involved the text mining of key words related to youth engagement in the documents in Table 1. The text mining aimed to gain a first-glance indication of how much youth engage in SDGs and other sustainability processes. Text mining can offer a useful perspective of whether and to what extent the formal mechanisms for engagement are meaningful as it can help to illuminate patterns in language that might not be discernible from a description of institutions. To obtain these initial insights, the authors went through an iterative process of re-reading key SDG documents to determine what words might be associated with youth engagement in the case studies’ countries. After repeated re-readings (and the realization that the coverage of youth-related issues was a small part of the key documents), it was decided that the key word list should include a select number of the following admittedly general key words:

- Finland: youth; young people; adolescent(s); education
- Japan: youth; young people; adolescent(s); education; next-generation; wakamono (youth, adolescent); jisedai (next generation); kyoiku (education)

The key words were then counted based on a simple automated keyword search procedure with manual coding to check whether the word was used in a way that was relevant to the scope and substance of the article. This was important because there were some instances where key terms applied to statements about youth and initiatives taken outside the countries (e.g., international aid). In most cases, it was possible to conduct the text mining in English. For Japan’s Action Plan, this was not feasible, and translation from Japanese to English was needed. Following the text analysis, the article turned to the two additional methods to obtain an

additional perspective on the meaningfulness of that participation that is more closely aligned with core elements in the literature: institutional analysis and key informant interviews.

The second approach therefore involved a careful desk study of formal institutions and policies. Much of the material for this review came from official government and youth organization websites and/or other publication channels. During the desk study, the authors aimed to assess how the engagement mechanisms performed on the four analytical categories detailed in the previous section.

The third and final approach aimed to address concerns that looking only at formal institutions and policies may miss how they actually work in practice. To address this concern, key informant interviews were conducted with young people who are members of the Finnish Agenda 2030 Youth Group and Japan Youth Platform for Sustainability (JYPS), one of Japan's Steering Committee Organizations of the Next-Generation Platform. The interviews sought to obtain perceptions about youth engagement mechanisms and validate or refine some of the inferences drawn from the desk study. To accommodate the needs of the interviewees, the discussions consisted of one group interview and three one-to-one interviews.

The interviews were semi-structured, with questions covering themes including the motivation to participate in the respective platforms and suggestions for better youth engagement mechanisms. Each interview took around one hour. The interviews were conducted mostly online, and every interview was recorded with the interviewee's consent. Rather than being presented as a standalone section, the results of the interviews are woven into the desk study description of the formal institutions and policies (see the following Results Section). Though each of the above approaches has flaws, the combination of different approaches offers a useful way to obtain some preliminary comparative insights into the meaningfulness of engagement.

4. Results

As noted in the previous section, the study used three different techniques to determine whether youth could meaningfully engage in sustainability processes in Finland and Japan. The first part of this subsection brings in text mining and frequency counts of keywords. The latter two parts of this subsection draw upon the desk study and complementary interviews for Finland and Japan, respectively.

4.1. Results of the Text Mining

The text analysis provides an initial indication on how much youth engage in SDG processes. As illustrated in Table 2, Finland's key documents generally have more references to the keywords highlighted in Section 3. This contrast is most apparent when comparing Japan's SDG principles and Finland's roadmap. The former includes 25 references to youth-related terms, while the latter includes 188 such references. It nonetheless merits noting that much of the difference is due to references to "education". In addition, the differences in the number of references are smaller in the other two sets of analyzed documents, including both country's VNRs. To look more closely at whether these first-glance inferences are supported by other evidence, the study reviews the formal institutions and policies for each country.

Table 2. Frequency counts of key words in the reviewed documents.

Japan	Related Terms	Finland	Related Terms
SDGs Principles (2019)	youth (1), young people (2), education (14), next-generation (8)	Roadmap (2022)	youth (9), young people (5), education (168), adolescent (6; all come along with "children")
Action Plan (2023)	Wakamono (11), jisedai (9) *, kyoiku (104)	Strategy (2022)	youth (8), young people (5), education (165), adolescent (6, all come along "children")
VNR (2021)	youth (13), young people (20), next generation (15), education (127), adolescent (1)	VNR (2020)	youth (35), young people (28), education (118)

* There were 24 references, but 9 were only used in the way this research intends.

4.2. Desk Study and Interviews on Finland's Youth Participation in Sustainability Processes

To understand how youth engagement works in Finland, it is important to provide background on sustainable development institutions. That background begins with the National Commission on Sustainable Development and Development Policy Committee (hereafter: National Commission). The National Commission has been chaired by the Prime Minister since 1993 and actively encourages participation. For instance, the National Commission has encouraged a participatory approach to follow-up and review in Finland that is held in high regard for strengthening stakeholder engagement and policy coherence [62]. The national follow-up and review system also includes innovative participatory elements, such as a Citizen Panel that assesses the state of sustainable development and provides information and citizen views to policymakers. Importantly, the citizen panel also reaches out to and integrates inputs from young people.

There are also other measures taken to expand the involvement of young people in SDGs' implementation in Finland. These measures can be divided into two main areas. One involves promoting forms of education that extend beyond formal schooling to lifelong learning in an effort to empower young people to contribute to sustainable development. Initiatives promoting education utilize existing mechanisms to support young people, such as youth work [58] (p. 30 and p. 70).

While there are several mechanisms that promote engagement generally, the article focuses chiefly on the Agenda 2030 Youth Group as a mechanism that enables youth engagement specifically. The Agenda 2030 Youth Group is an institutionalized mechanism for young representatives to participate in the decision-making process on sustainable development. The Agenda 2030 Youth Group was established at the initiative of the then Vice-Chair of the National Commission (Figure 2). It is composed of 12 people and 2 equal-status chairs aged 15 to 28 years from diverse backgrounds across Finland. It is intended to expand the involvement of a wide cross-section of young people. The decision to include multiple youth representatives was based on the belief that appointing a single youth delegate for sustainable development was not enough to capture the diverse range of sentiments from young people in different places and stations in life [55] (p. 26). Table 3 shows the summarized references on the group within the reviewed documents categorized into four analytical categories.

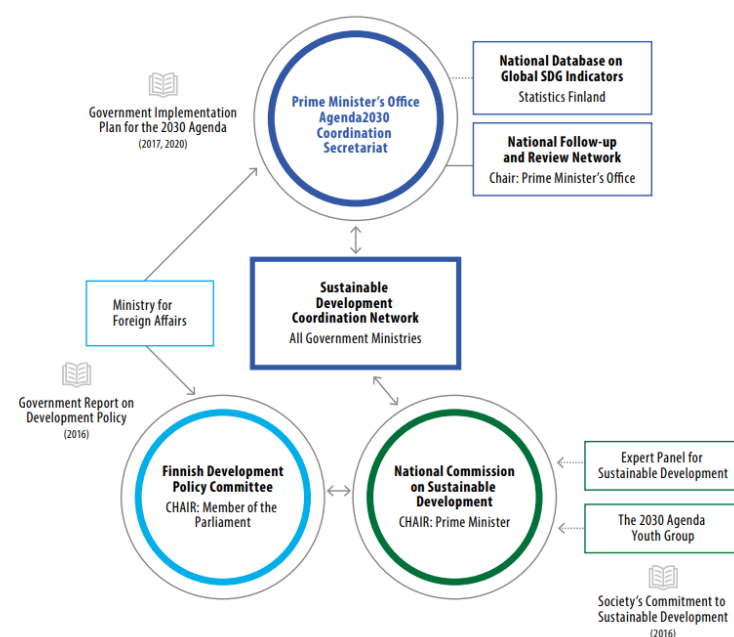


Figure 2. Illustration of National 2030 Agenda structure in Finland [42] (p. 91).

Table 3. References to areas in the analytical categories for the 2030 Agenda Youth Group.

Analytical Categories	Relevant References (Summarized)
Aims and Justifications	• Aim to expand young people’s involvement in SD policy to address the issues (VNR, p. 14) • Two expected roles: (1) to spur the Finnish National Commission and bring young people’s voices to SD policy processes and public debate; (2) to inform other young people of SDGs in their networks, schools, and leisure activities (VNR, p. 27)
Power-sharing	• Sufficient autonomy on what they will do and what matters they will promote (VNR, p. 27) • Members’ recognition of a mechanism that brought them to the center of SD decision-making processes, placing them on equal footing with other parties as contributors to SD (VNR, p. 27) • Members participated in the discussion on roadmap development, and the individual section was developed within (Roadmap, p. 83)
Transparency and Accountability	• The group is an institutionalized mechanism in the national SDGs implementation process (VNR, p. 14) • The member selection is conducted with the support of Finnish Youth Cooperation, Alliansi (VNR, p. 27) • The expected roles to play are clear (VNR, p. 27), and opportunities for participation (both mandatory and voluntary) are listed (VNR, p. 27/Roadmap, p. 83) • The members’ evaluating comments on SDG processes are integrated into VNR as part of follow-up and review (VNR, p. 27, 97)
Support	• Finish Youth Cooperation supports the engagement processes, trying to make better representation within the group (VNR, p. 27)

Regarding the aims and justifications, Finland explicitly aims to establish the Agenda 2030 Youth Group to expand opportunities for young people to express their views in the sustainable development policy process. The main justifications for creating this mechanism are that it provides a guarantee on the fundamental right for young people to participate and thereby improve sustainable development-related policies and services. Having this justification and their expected roles made explicit is helpful because it firmly established that young people can contribute substantively to national SDG processes (Group Interview, 2024).

In addition to having a well-defined role, the activities in which young people engage are based on balanced power-sharing. This balance is achieved in several ways. For example, it is mandated that the Agenda 2030 Youth Group regularly attends the National Commission’s meetings to bring messages from different youth perspectives. They are also invited to participate in critical SDG processes, such as the central government’s policy development, budgeting, and follow-up and review. While the desk study highlighted these more formal channels, interviewees further indicated that there are even more opportunities called by the national government than they attend (Group Interview, 2024).

At the same time, there are guarantees of their autonomy or freedom from political interference in SDG processes, thereby encouraging participation in public discussions and dialogue around the SDGs. Some of these signs of balanced power-sharing are evident in the active participation of young people as panelists or organizers of the stakeholders’ events, posting on social media, and media interviews. Young people also organize events by themselves to reach a wider range of young people (Group Interview, 2024). Although it is difficult to pinpoint precisely how an input influences a decision, there are several signs that young people’s views are respected in critical decision-making processes. There is also evidence that the effort to share power helps to energize young people to engage in public discussions on sustainable development in partnership with other stakeholders.

The review of publicly available information suggests that youth engagement in Finland is supported by relatively high levels of transparency and accountability. For

instance, an open application process facilitated by the Finish Youth Cooperation called Allianssi is used to determine who can join the 2030 Agenda Youth Group. The members are selected to represent diverse backgrounds across Finland, including their interests in the SDGs. This representativeness, when combined with the ability to participate in the key processes mentioned above, may also help to increase transparency and accountability. That is, policymakers may feel the need to share more information with different segments of the youth population and feel more beholden to the interests of this diverse mix of young people. While the documents imply this potential on paper, some members “do not feel that they represent Finnish youth as a whole [55] (p. 28)”. It was also indicated that the information about this mechanism was easily reachable to those who are in the “circle”, who were already active and interested, but not “regular youth” (Group Interview, 2024).

The one area where Finland appears to perform less well compared to the other elements in the framework is support. For this dimension, the allocated government budget covers the travel, accommodation, and food expenses for the members, although their work is on a voluntary basis; in other words, they do not receive financial incentives for activities (Group Interview, 2024). Based on a review of the available documents, most of the non-material support comes from the aforementioned group, Allianssi. Allianssi serves as an advocacy organization for the youth sector with over 140 national youth and education sector organizations. Funded by the Ministry of Education and Culture, Allianssi endeavors to prevent the exclusion of young people and help young people to develop into responsible members of society and participate in decision-making [63]. According to interviews, Allianssi plays a secretariat function in this mechanism, supporting annual recruitment processes and providing some technical support and advice to their own initiated activities. Though Allianssi helps to a certain degree, some youth raised the necessity of capacity development, especially technical and professional knowledge of sustainability issues. Although potential youth representatives indicate their areas of interest upon their selection, they still need to be knowledgeable about the field to make a substantive contribution (Group Interview, 2024). There might be such a space for improvement to enable their participation with confidence. There are nonetheless limited details of the type of support provided for youth participation in SDG processes—though one might presume that this assistance comes from other mechanisms reviewed herein.

In sum, Finland has created relatively well-established mechanisms aimed at enabling meaningful youth participation in SDG processes. These mechanisms have clear aims and justification, balanced power-sharing, and relatively high transparency and accountability (though there may be scope for work in this area). The amount of support provided may need to be increased.

4.3. Desk Study and Interviews on Japan’s Youth Participation in Sustainability Processes

Since its establishment in 2016, the SDGs Promotion Headquarters (hereafter Headquarters), composed of all Cabinet Ministers and led by the Prime Minister, has coordinated SDGs’ implementation in Japan. As illustrated in Figure 3, the Headquarters promotes stakeholder consultations through “SDGs Promotion Roundtable Meetings”, including representatives from related government agencies, civil society, academia, the private sector, and international organizations. This mechanism also reviews SDG progress, provides inputs into the SDGs Implementation Guiding Principles (hereafter Principles), and determines recipients of the “Japan SDGs Award” to recognize best practices. The Headquarters is responsible for monitoring the progress of measures taken in line with the Principles, as well as raising awareness of the SDGs to increase public understanding and support for engagement with the SDGs [64]. To help achieve the SDGs, the Principles set out three pillars underpinning Japan’s “SDGs Model”: (1) “Promotion of Society 5.0 that corresponds to the SDGs”, (2) “Regional Revitalization driven by the SDGs”, and (3) “Empowerment of the next generation and women” [59] (p. 2). Japan has created two main channels to enable young people with various backgrounds to contribute to achieving the SDGs: enhancement of education policies and systems and the “Next-Generation Platform”.

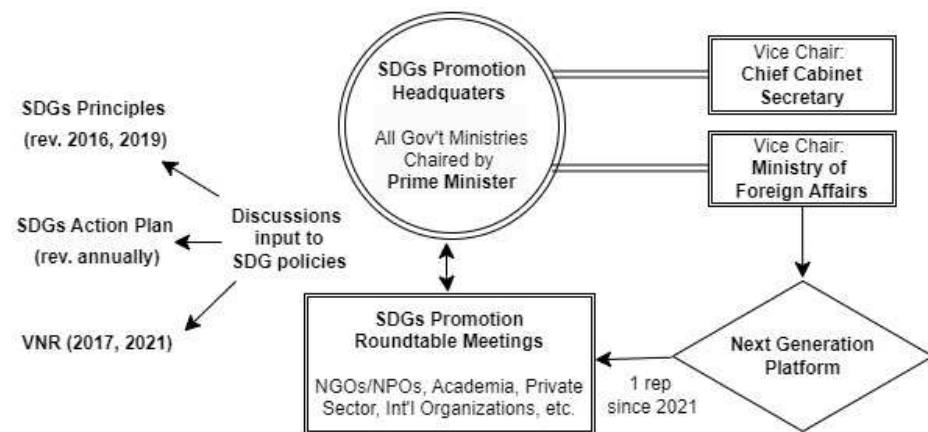


Figure 3. Illustration of the SDG implementation structure in Japan (Source: Authors).

Given the thematic scope of the article, most of the focus is placed on the “Next-Generation Platform”. The Next-Generation Platform was established in 2018 under the initiatives of the then Prime Minister. The Platform comprises seven Steering Committee Organizations: AISEC Japan, ETIC, G7/G20 Youth Japan, Junior Chamber International Japan (JCI), Japan Disability Forum (JDF), Japan Model United Nations (JMUN), and Japan Youth Platform for Sustainability (JYPS). These organizations have varied aims and activities and members. Among them, JYPS is the only organization led by young people under 30 years old to advocate youth engagement in the sustainability field [65]. The Platform aims to “deepen the involvement of the next generation, who will play a leading role in promoting the SDGs after 2030 [56] (p. 36)”. Table 4 summarizes the Platform’s performance based on the four key elements in the analytical framework and the reviewed documents.

Table 4. References to areas in the analytical categories in Japan’s Next-Generation Platform.

Analytical Categories	Relevant References (Summarized)
Aims and Justifications	“Empowerment of the next generation and women” as one of the three pillars of Japan’s “SDGs Model” (Principles, p. 2) - Work to accelerate the proactive promotion of SDGs by the next generation and disseminate Japan’s SDGs Model regarding SDGs’ promotion by the next generation (Principles, p. 2)
Power-sharing	One youth from the Platform became a member of the “SDGs Promotion Roundtable” (VNR, p. 5)
Transparency and Accountability	- The platform is the institutionalized framework for the promotion of the SDGs (Principles, p. 11) - The activities conducted are showcased, also embedded in the national governmental mechanism related to the SDGs process (VNR, p. 14) - There was a discussion opportunity with the young generation in the VNR preparation (VNR p. 5)
Support	No description was found related to the support given to the Platform

Regarding the aims and justification, the empowerment of the next generation and women is listed as one of the key elements to support Japan’s SDGs Model and to achieve the SDGs. While the importance of young people is recognized, the launch of Japan’s Next-Generation Platform is offered as a good example of the government’s effort to concretize that vision. However, there is no apparent justification for this initiative. According to the Principles, the Platform is intended to let young people “think about how to promote the SDGs and how to transform society when they become the main players [59] (p. 10)”. Despite the stated goal of empowering younger generations, the Platform does not seem to

offer an equally explicit justification for engagement—such as guaranteeing rights, utilizing ideas for better policies and services, and developing knowledge, skills, and self-esteem.

For some of the same reasons, it is challenging to assess aims and justifications, and it was also difficult to evaluate power-sharing. The Platform members are likely working on the activities of each representative organization, but there is no reference to the activities initiated by the Platform itself. As mentioned previously, one youth representative from the Platform became a member of the roundtable in December 2021. Their involvement in the roundtable started after the submission of the latest VNR, to discuss issues related to the subsequent follow-up and review processes with other stakeholders. According to the interviews, youth representatives are invited to consultation meetings twice a year to discuss revising the Principles and Action Plan and are given the same mandate as other adult members. However, youth stakeholders also find it difficult to influence the decision-making process. This is because the meetings primarily aim to exchange views between the Headquarters (government) and the non-government stakeholders, with decision-making to be made by the government (Individual Interview, 2023). While they enjoy the same mandate as other adult members, several interviewees suggested that they felt as if they were less of a priority during consultations with lower-ranked government personnel compared to other adult stakeholders. Despite the efforts to hear stakeholders' opinions, including young people, no information was available about the activities initiated by the Platform or the extent of its influence on decision-making processes.

Similarly, there are almost no references to transparency and accountability. Although all the meeting notes of the roundtable discussion are publicly available online, there is no publicly available information about the Platform's mechanisms or activities. The lack of such references is apparent in the limited details on the member selection process: simply stated, the reasons why some organizations were selected as the Steering Committee are not laid out clearly, and references to which organizations act as members of the Platform are also murky. The appointment of one youth representative mentioned may also provide a relatively narrow base for holding decision-makers accountable to different groups of young people. Combined with the limited clarity under the power-sharing category, there may be a need for greater transparency and broader accountability.

Lastly, there is almost no description of the Platform initiatives in terms of support. According to the one related reference found in the SDGs Action Plan, there is no specific budget allocation for operating this initiative for the years 2022 and 2023 [60] (p. 94, 95). The interviews underlined the same point: there is a lack of financial compensation for their activities. The youth representatives invited to the roundtable meetings receive compensation with a daily allowance; however, they do not receive any financial support for their activities. Furthermore, the meetings are often held on weekdays in Tokyo in an in-person format only, which is preferable for business persons; on the other hand, it makes it difficult for youth representatives, especially if they live far from the capital. Of course, financial support is not only a way of enabling young people's participation but it also strongly influences their continuous engagement. Another difficulty in sustaining their activities is member recruitment and capacity development. The vast majority of the members of the Steering Committee Organizations are college students, who mostly stay active for two to three years only. For a similar reason, many young people leave their activities to pursue studies and career development or give up for economic reasons—and this could prevent the involvement of diverse young people. Informally, one of the steering committee organizations, the Junior Chamber, consisting of young working professionals below 40 years old, offered to serve as a quasi-secretariat of the Platform to assist activities (Individual Interview, 2023). However, more formal and structural support, including financial assistance or incentives, is likely needed. Otherwise, it may limit the Platform's effectiveness, potentially excluding less socially and economically privileged youth.

Though the above review suggests there exists scope for improvement, it merits highlighting that it was a significant step for Japan to create a mechanism to engage young people in SDGs' implementation. Importantly, the review suggests areas in which Japan

may want to take additional steps. These include making clearer links between aims and justifications and concrete activities. This would entail going beyond simply “think[ing] about how to promote SDGs and how to transform society when they become the main players” to have a right and role to influencing activities now—and into the future. In a similar vein, though awareness-raising is important, it is arguably just as vital to have more balance in power dynamics so that people’s views have a discernible impact in the matters affecting them. A clearer understanding of young people’s competencies and responsibilities would further lead to more equitable power-sharing while also boosting transparency and accountability. Last but not least, support, particularly clear budget lines, and continuous assistance, including secretariat functions and providing capacity development opportunities, could increase the involvement of young people from more diverse backgrounds.

4.4. Preliminary Comparative Assessment

Though the picture painted in this section is based chiefly on text mining and descriptions of institutions and complementary interviews, they nonetheless shed some useful initial light on how meaningful youth engagement is in Japan and Finland. More concretely, the results suggest that there are differences in how much Finland and Japan support youth engagement in sustainability processes. Those differences are succinctly summarized in Table 5 that breaks down the comparison by the analytical categories distilled from the literature review. Table 5 shows that, by and large, Finland’s aims and justifications, power-sharing, and transparency and accountability tend be clearer and stronger than Japan’s. Meanwhile, both countries could do better in offering support for young people. The next section discusses these findings and their broader implications.

Table 5. Comparison of Finland and Japan.

Analytical Categories	Finland	Japan
Aims and Justifications	There are clear aims and justifications for establishment. They aim to expand opportunities for young people to express their views in SD policy processes, guarantee their fundamental right to participate, and improve SD-related policies and services.	Despite its intention to empower the next generation, the Platform lacks a clear justification. The platform encourages young people to think about promoting SDGs but does not provide justifications such as guaranteeing their rights or utilizing their ideas for policy improvement.
Power-sharing	Group members actively participate in national SDG processes, attend government meetings, and engage in policy development and budgeting. Autonomy in their activities is guaranteed, and they engage in public dialogue, social media, and media interviews to inform young people about SDGs.	The activities conducted by the Platform are not well-described in the documents, making it difficult to assess shared power. Although the representatives sent to the roundtable are given the same mandate as other adult stakeholders, structurally, they have no power in the decision-making.
Transparency and Accountability	Finland’s member selection process for group members is relatively open, although there is room for improvement in extending representation. Youth engagement contributes to government accountability, especially in follow-up and review processes.	Japan’s reviewed documents lack transparency and accountability, especially in the selection process and representation of the Platform’s members. In addition, the Platform’s activities are unclear, as well as how influential it is in decision-making processes.
Support	Finland provides some material and non-material support for youth activities in SDG processes through the Youth Council. Their necessary expenses are well-covered, but not for their work.	Little assistance is provided with Platform activities. Some non-material support is provided on a voluntary basis; the lack of financial support, especially, may limit the effectiveness of Platform activities.

5. Discussion

Young people’s involvement in SDG processes is important, as it is gaining recognition at the highest levels in Finland and Japan. This realization has paid some dividends; there has been progress in involving youth in the SDGs and related processes through the

creation of the 2030 Agenda Youth Group and the Next-Generation Platform in Japan in Finland. However, there is arguably a need to dig deeper into the actual operations of these mechanisms and determine whether they truly facilitate meaningful youth engagement.

In considering ways to dig deeper, it should be noted that analyzing stakeholder engagement in SDG-related documents such as VNRs is an imperfect science; these documents do not always fully articulate their goals or outline relevant activities [66]. These limitations notwithstanding, Finland's approach appears to cover more of the criteria associated with meaningful engagement than Japan's. While recognizing the four analytical categories are interrelated and difficult to disentangle, the following discussion divides the comparison into those categories for ease of presentation.

1. **Aims and Justifications:** For engagement to be truly meaningful, defining the relevant aims and supporting justifications for participation is essential. In Japan, the aims and justification for including youth are short on details and tend to rest chiefly on the need for information-sharing and awareness—a finding that is not unique to Japan as many countries tend to focus on information-sharing and SDG promotion. In the case of Finland, there tends to be not only a more varied set of aims and activities but also more clearly explicated underlining justifications. The clearer aims and justification would help to identify the appropriate youth to hear their opinions, especially to make progress on youth-related SDGs. In doing so, there would be a more deliberate effort to engage youth from different locations and social segments so as not to simply cater to, for example, socially advantaged groups [44,67,68].
2. **Power-sharing:** Similar to the first element, Finland appears to have made greater efforts to balance power dynamics. To illustrate, young people are regularly invited to participate in high-level sustainable development meetings while enjoying the autonomy to conduct pertinent activities. Further, this balance has arguably helped to build the confidence needed to launch related activities, such as the formation of a climate-focused sub-group within the Agenda 2030 Youth Group in Finland in 2023 [69]. In Japan, the youth representatives are equally responsible with the adult stakeholders in the roundtable; they are structurally limited to influencing and shaping the trajectory of the decisions. Despite the existence of the Platform, Japan has tended to limit the power and autonomy offered to young people, keeping the scope of those activities circumscribed within their respective organizations.
3. **Transparency and Accountability:** As noted previously, transparency and accountability are also critical elements to ensuring that young people are meaningfully engaging in the SDG process. In this case, Finland also tends to demonstrate a clearer commitment to these principles and related practices. This is evident in both the relatively open selection of multiple youth representatives as well as the role in important processes that can boost accountability, such as the follow-up and review. In the case of Japan, there is more scope for improvement in explaining how youth representatives are selected and how the mechanism operates, moving from informal agreements to transparent long-term contracts and arrangements [38].
4. **Support:** Perhaps more so than other forms of engagement, youth engagement necessitates support. Both countries could improve their engagement mechanisms in this regard, ensuring varied participation channels to communicate with a wider youth segment and providing adequate compensation, capacity building, and empowerment, especially for underrepresented and vulnerable youth. In Finland, the continuous backing of youth-led initiatives through official platforms, like Alliansi or National Youth Councils, may offer some forms of support. On the contrary, Japan should take specific measures to support its activities; otherwise, this could eventually engage the limited segment of young people who are already capable and socio-economically privileged. This might inadvertently keep young people who are vulnerable as recipients of “care” rather than as participants to be empowered.

6. Conclusions

At the most general level, participation requires a well-designed set of institutions—that is, a set of rules and structures that continually encourage diverse voices to engage in the public sphere. Creating these institutions to foster the meaningful participation of young people in sustainability processes is increasingly viewed as integral to accelerating progress on the SDGs. Not only can it help to build intergenerational trust and social cohesion, but it also ensures fresh and forward-looking ideas that inform the policies where youth have strong interests, including education, clean energy, and climate change.

Many governments have therefore made commendable efforts to engage young people in these decisions. Some research has developed heuristics to determine the degree to which engagement matters or is meaningful. There have nonetheless been few efforts to use insights from that research to compare youth engagement across countries.

This article employs a novel approach to address this gap in understanding and answer a critical question: how do countries compare in terms of meaningful youth engagement in sustainability processes? That approach uses a framework based on four analytical categories that have been argued to underpin meaningful youth engagement: aims and justification, power-sharing, transparency and accountability, and support. It then employs the framework to assess how Japan and Finland perform in each of these areas. The comparison suggests that Finland's effort to engage youth exhibits greater attention to the areas highlighted in this framework. This is particularly apparent in the first three elements of the framework, where there is a clearer presentation of aims and justifications, more balanced power-sharing, and greater transparency and accountability. Both countries, the article suggests, may need to do more to extend support to young people.

Expanding upon the conclusion, it warrants highlighting that the article also opens channels for future inquiry. As previously mentioned, comparative analysis of relevant policy documents may offer an incomplete picture of how formal institutions actually operate and how young people actually engage. The article addresses this issue to some degree by noting that the conclusions drawn herein are still preliminary. In addition, it also brings in key informant interviews to supplement inferences; however, a clear way forward is expanding the group of interviewees to include not only youth stakeholders but also other relevant stakeholders, such as policy and decision-makers, researchers, and other civil society members.

Another avenue for future exploration lies in examining the influence of demographic differences on participation. For instance, Finland's population is approximately 5.5 million, significantly smaller than Japan's 122 million. Given these demographic disparities, it may be beneficial to compare mechanisms across smaller countries like Finland. It may also be possible to examine differences and similarities with local-level mechanisms in bigger countries like Japan to discern variations in youth engagement mechanisms/strategies and their effectiveness. In addition, it may be useful to examine the influence of the regional level. Not limited to UN initiatives, the Finnish case indicates there might also be some influences from regional frameworks and cooperation, such as the European Union, the Council of Europe, and the Nordic Councils.

Another important consideration that has thus far been underemphasized is socio-cultural differences. Differences in underlying traditions and belief systems may play a significant role in participation and power-sharing. For instance, the Finnish documents highlight a strong tradition of participation, whereas social science studies on values indicate varying preferences for political participation among people across cultures. Comparing the approaches of various countries in involving youth can help to shed light on the reasons for the diverse pathways and effective strategies to enhance youth participation within different cultural contexts.

Further, it may be necessary to revisit the framework employed in this analysis. This research has suggested that Finland may place greater emphasis on downstream participation opportunities. Instead, Japan's emphasis appears to lean towards strengthening upstream formal school education for sustainable development, which was not featured in

the framework. The framework's key elements were originally designed to incorporate various ways of contributing to youth engagement in SDG processes, but it admittedly downplays the crucial role of education.

Finally, there may be scope to use the analyses offered herein to better understand how more meaningful youth engagement translates into performance on key SDGs. In this connection, additional work could look at whether there is a correlation between youth engagement on SDGs where there are clear benefits for young people such as SDG 4 (education) and areas where there are clear opportunities to trigger real-world changes such as SDGs 7 (clean energy) and 13 (climate change). In carrying out this research, one might hypothesize that more meaningful engagement is correlated with, for instance, quality education (SDG 4) and a willingness to take concrete actions that conserve energy (SDG 7) and address the climate crisis (SDG 13). Conducting this kind of study would ideally require expanding the number of cases and related assessments of youth engagement mechanisms. Importantly, this study offers a feasible approach for making that comparison.

In sum, there is ample room to delve deeper into the dynamics of youth engagement, accounting for reporting gaps, demographic influences, and cultural nuances, ultimately advancing understandings of how to foster effective youth participation in the SDGs in various contexts. It is also clear that looking more closely at the links between youth engagement and SDG performance would be mutually beneficial for young people and the sustainability of the planet.

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