

Audio paper 3 – MEDIATING SUSTAINABLE CITIES: Elderly, Care and Environmental Sustainability

Welcome to the series of audio papers: Mediating Sustainable Cities!

I am Paola Monachesi, researcher at Utrecht University. I am a creative migrant like the ones I have analyzed in this series of audio papers. I have been living in the Netherlands for 30 years but, originally, I come from Marche, a beautiful region in the center of Italy. Even though tourists have been more numerous in the last years in this region, especially Dutch ones, it has maintained its rural character and authenticity. Maybe because people are very attached to the land and to agriculture. The landscape is diverse: sea, mountains and a beautiful countryside fragmented in many small family-owned plots, with vegetable gardens and olive trees. I think that nobody buys olive oil in the shops in our region, either people own olive trees or they know somebody that makes oil from whom they can buy it.

Jingle

When Valentina Carella from the University of Macerata came to Utrecht University for an exchange period in the context of the Grage project, our attachment to the Marche countryside was our starting point. Grage is a European project that aims at achieving suitable urban solutions for an aging society. In the project, I was leading a research group dealing with the role that information and language technology can have in transforming cities into environments that support green and healthy lifestyles for the elderly.

In the paper Valentina and I have written together during her period at Utrecht University, we combined our research interests and expertise by focusing on a philosophical and social media analysis of ageing in relation to sustainability. We moved away from current anthropocentric approaches to sustainable development and suggested a vision in which the notion of Care becomes central. In this audio paper, I will highlight some of the main themes and implications of our research, that I think was very much inspired by the countryside of the region Valentina and I, come from.

Jingle

We wrote the paper in 2017, a couple of years before the current covid-19 pandemic, but we were quite visionary in our claims and it might seem as if the paper was written today.

Our starting point was frailty, as a feature that is usually associated with old age and we show that ageing can be the means to highlight the constitutive vulnerable condition of human beings which makes them exposed to others. Vulnerability reveals dependency from other people. This is a funding dimension of our existence, not only of the elderly. I think that covid-19 has made this concept very clear to everybody. It seemed quite abstract at the time of writing, when people thought that science and technology could always provide a solution to all our problems. Our vulnerability becomes evident when we consider the emergence of new variants of the corona virus that will continue to circulate if vaccines are the privilege of the western world that sends to the South, only the leftovers. Or when big events that allow many people to gather together such as football games, Olympic games or religious festivals become the source of contagion.

Jingle

It is clear that we are exposed to others, our vulnerability is due to the relational nature of mankind, a relation that includes also the environment. The environment is a relational, dynamic system in which human beings are an important element for its constitution and maintenance. The relationship

between the human and the natural world is one of co-constitution and reciprocal sustenance and promotion. We move away from the standard approach to sustainable development whose main concern is the reduction of environmental footprint. Our idea of sustainability is based on the concept of care. We have adopted the normative proposal in feminist literature to link vulnerability to an ethics of care in its double dimension: need for care and need to care. We highlight the necessity of going beyond the instrumental function of the environment, as we believe that the roots of the ecological crisis are to be found in the breaking up of the constitutive relation between human beings and the natural world, a bond that needs to be re-established.

We are all aware of the importance of care these days, Covid-19 has made the validity of the proposal we made 3 years ago very current and very urgent. The core of our proposal, published in a scientific journal, has become common knowledge. This is a positive consequence of the pandemic.

Europe is investing quite a lot of resources to boost sustainability, but at the same time we also see that the prevalent neoliberal ideology is dictating the agenda and very little attention is dedicated to nature and climate. As soon as the pandemic allows it, we go back to the old habits of traveling all over the world, exploiting, consuming and now also infecting. We all know that care is the solution, but not much is really done about it.

Jingle

In my country house there is a piece of land that has not been cultivated, for many years. It had become a typical Mediterranean forest full of trees, trapped in thorny brambles. I have started to clean up the forest, removing the brambles, freeing the trees, even though everybody was telling me that brambles would grow again. After few years they are gone. Herbs and wildflowers have taken their space. I strongly believe in care practices, care of the environment, care of others. In my forest, care has allowed flowers to come back instead of brambles that kill the trees in the long run, re-establishing a natural balance that is not only healthier for the forest, but also beautiful. Taking care of this forest has been beneficial for me, it has given me sense of purpose in a period of lockdowns and the result is a beautiful forest where now one can go for walks and get oxygen overdoses that make me happy.

The example of my forest shows the importance of care in its double dimension: **need for care and need to care**. The pandemic has highlighted the **need for care of the elderly** that have been the first target of the virus because of their frailty. The elderly are usually associated with being in need of care, but it is also important to sustain the potential of human beings, including the elderly, to take care of both other individuals and the natural world through, for example, volunteering activities. In other words, it is important to sustain their **need to care**.

Social media can play an important role in highlighting the importance of volunteering activities among the elderly and their crucial role in the sustainable development debate since the number of seniors active on social media is growing rapidly, at least in the Netherlands, where 60% of those between 65 years and 75 years old are active on social media.

Jingle

I have carried out a Twitter analysis in the use of hashtags from a sample of users representing three age groups. It reveals that the 67+ group shows an extensive use of location hashtags: more than three times as much as the younger group. A detailed analysis reveals that they use them to promote the city they live in, showing that they are connected to the local environment.

They are also the group that uses more nature related hashtags. They are also interested in sustainability, the hashtags they use in this respect are mainly related to climate, climate change and climate actions, including hashtags related to a political dimension of climate change, as well as hashtags related to organic farming. Their hashtag's use reveals that the elderly analysed associate sustainable development mainly to its environmental dimension. This might be due to the fact that for the elderly it is important to rely on nature's beauty to recreate human spirit in later years of life and for this reason, they might be more connected to the environment.

Jingle

I believe that the elderly can play an important role in reshaping the discourse on sustainable development and redefine the relation between the human and the natural world, a necessary condition for a new perspective on sustainable development. Evidence comes from Japan that is active in redesigning the community bond unravelled by the widespread individualism in Japanese society, giving the opportunity to retired people to carry out caring activities at the intersection between agriculture, food and community support. Preliminary research suggests that these voluntary activities, especially when they concern the care for the natural environment, may have health benefits for the elderly since they tend to involve physical activity and thus promote health, reducing expenditure for health care systems and the connected risk of social marginalization. Japan is at the forefront in this respect since it precedes other countries in acknowledging ageing as an urban issue. In this vision, elderly can play a very concrete role towards the creation of a more human-centred smart city.

Jingle

The elderly can act as innovators since they have time and a lifetime experience at their disposal. This is especially the case for Dutch old adults since they are at the forefront with respect to volunteering activities and social media use. It is thus important to give rise to initiatives in order to stimulate an alternative debate on sustainable development driven by volunteering activities where older adults can play a central role, for example through social media communication. Sustainable forms of tourism that connect care activities in organic farms with cultural heritage could also be pioneered by the elderly.

Environmental sustainability has received attention in the last years thanks to the active involvement of the younger generations through initiatives such as Fridays for Future, but the elderly have not been much involved. They could instead play an important role since my research has shown that interests of the younger age group and of the 67+ group with respect to nature is comparable. Social media could be exploited by both groups that could join forces to give rise to an active ageless community. The political interests of the 67+ group that emerged from the hashtag analysis I have carried out could be beneficial for the younger generation and could help in creating a stronger impact at political level and contribute to re-shaping the environmental sustainability discourse.

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The current pandemic has shown the vulnerability of cities and challenged the smart city agenda. One wonders whether the sustainability discourse should be promoted in relation to the city or whether one should go beyond it. A recent exhibition by Rem Koolhaas at the Guggenheim Museum of New York, has drawn attention on what he calls the countryside. He defines with this term everything which is not city, that amounts to 98% of the earth surface. Koolhaas claims that rural areas are changing as

consequence of the changes that occur in urban areas. Transformations outside of the city are just as radical as those that occur in relation to the urban, an aspect often neglected. However, the countryside that is represented in the exhibition is subordinated to the needs of the city, without a clear identity, it accepts passively gentrification phenomena. The polarization that we have witnessed in recent political elections, in the US, but not only, shows that the non-urban spaces have their own identity that usually sharply conflicts with the urban ones. It is often triggered by this subordinate role.

The Covid-19 pandemic has made the borders between the rural and the urban less sharp, it has brought many people to leave the city and to experiment new ways of living and new possibilities. Time will show whether those people have left to stay or whether they will go back to their urban lofts, coffeeshops and cappuccino's.

I think that there is the need to acknowledge the big transformations that have characterized the non-urban in the last years, exploit their potential and maybe conceive new ways of merging the rural and the urban in the future, as a way to support environmental and social sustainability. As a way to support the existence of the human species.