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Unlocking Youth Civic Engagement for a Sustainable Future - GreenSpace

Project No: 2023-2-CZ01-KA220-YOU-000185329

GreenSpace Focus Group Report

Date: 10-11/12/2024

Location: Sofia, Bulgaria

Number of Participants: 25

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1. INTRODUCTION

The GreenScape focus group was designed to involve young people, educators, and community stakeholders in a structured discussion about sustainability and civic engagement. The event was intended to generate discussion, gather insights, and investigate fresh approaches to increasing environmental awareness and active participation in sustainability activities. Participants had the opportunity to share their thoughts on current environmental issues, provide solutions, and talk about how interactive educational experiences could help them engage in sustainability initiatives.

To ensure that participants had an extensive understanding of the GreenScape Project, we started the session with an overview of the project's aims, goals, and expected impact. The GreenScape Project intends to create an innovative and immersive Escape Room experience that teaches young people about sustainability, EU policy, and civic involvement. This introduction gave participants a thorough explanation of the scope of the project, the importance of their contributions, and how their input will help develop and improve the Escape Room concept.

This report summarizes the important findings from the focus group conducted in Bulgaria as part of the GreenScape Project. The event was held on December 10th and 11th, with 25 participants including youth activists, educators, officials, and community representatives. The focus group provided an opportunity for lively conversations, interactive brainstorming sessions, and collaborative problem-solving activities.

The primary goal was to obtain a thorough understanding of participants' expectations and needs in order to help develop a tailored Escape Room experience. This program aims to engage young people in sustainability and environmental challenges while emphasizing the value of civic participation. Participants were asked to offer their thoughts on critical environmental issues, propose new solutions, and provide input on how to make the Escape Room more instructive and impactful.

The discussion was structured around five core themes:

- ✓ **Sustainability and Community Impact:** Understanding participants' views on sustainability challenges and their impact on local communities.
- ✓ **EU Policies and Environmental Impact:** Exploring participants' awareness and perspectives on EU sustainability initiatives and regulations.
- ✓ **Civic Engagement and Youth Motivation:** Assessing factors influencing youth involvement in environmental advocacy and ways to increase participation.
- ✓ **Feedback on GreenScape Project Activities:** Gathering insights on how to enhance the project's approach and ensure meaningful engagement.
- ✓ **Future Collaboration and Implementation:** Discussing potential partnerships and next steps for integrating the Escape Room experience into broader sustainability initiatives.

The GreenScape Project's goal is to provide an interesting, interactive, and instructive

experience that promotes sustainability awareness and encourages young people to play active roles in defining environmental policies and practices.

2. DISCUSSION ON SUSTAINABILITY AND COMMUNITY IMPACT

Participants in the focus groups were asked to explore sustainability and its influence on their communities. To provide an appropriate basis for the conversation, we first presented current information and news about sustainability and community impact in Bulgaria. These speeches addressed significant environmental issues, legislative developments, and continuing sustainability activities at both the local and national levels. The purpose was to provide participants with relevant information and encourage meaningful discussion about the most pressing issues in their communities.

Participants recognized the importance of sustainability in their communities and voiced significant support for efforts that raise environmental awareness. Waste management, pollution reduction, deforestation, and green space preservation were among the most commonly expressed issues. Participants emphasized the lack of sufficient recycling infrastructure and the need for improved waste management techniques.

The discussion also emphasized the need for increased education and community involvement in sustainability efforts. Participants suggested that schools and universities should incorporate environmental awareness programs and practical activities that encourage young people to take an active role in local sustainability projects. They pointed out that public campaigns and social media initiatives could be used to spread awareness and encourage greater participation in environmental initiatives.

They advised that the Escape Room include real-world scenarios that show the costs of unsustainable habits as well as the benefits of adopting environmentally friendly behaviors. Renewable energy, circular economy, and responsible consumerism were identified as essential themes for education and action. Participants also stressed the importance of community-led sustainability projects, calling for greater collaboration among local governments, corporations, and residents.

In addition, participants suggested that incentives, such as community awards or grants, be implemented to encourage local environmental initiatives. They emphasized the necessity of government and business cooperation in sponsoring sustainability programs and establishing accessible resources to help communities implement eco-friendly solutions. The focus group also emphasized the need for better waste management infrastructure, such as more easily accessible recycling bins and public composting facilities.

3. ENGAGING WITH EU ENVIRONMENTAL POLICIES

Before starting the conversation, the organizers, gave a systematic presentation on important EU environmental policy frameworks. This introduction wanted to provide all participants, regardless of prior expertise, a solid understanding of the European Union's role in

environmental sustainability. The lecture included important programs such as the European Green Deal, which outlines the EU's aim to becoming carbon neutral by 2050, and the Circular Economy Action Plan, which encourages resource efficiency and waste reduction. We also

introduced crucial rules addressing carbon emission reduction objectives, renewable energy policies, biodiversity protection, and waste management regulations, emphasizing their relevance in combating climate change and boosting environmental resilience. This session provided participants with critical context, enabling a more informed and meaningful discussion.

During the discussion, participants demonstrated varying levels of familiarity with these EU policies. Some attendees exhibited a strong grasp of the objectives and mechanisms behind major environmental initiatives, while others acknowledged a need for more accessible and practical information. Many expressed that while they were aware of broad sustainability goals, they lacked a clear understanding of how these policies translate into tangible actions at the community and individual levels. This divergence in knowledge underscored the necessity of bridging the information gap by making EU environmental policies more engaging and applicable to real-world scenarios.

To overcome this challenge, participants underlined the need of introducing EU policy frameworks into the Escape Room experience in a way that promotes learning while keeping engagement. Several creative ideas were proposed, including:

✓ **Designing Challenges Based on Real EU Policies:** Participants suggested embedding puzzles that reflect actual environmental regulations and goals, such as meeting specific carbon emissions reduction targets, solving

waste management dilemmas using principles from the Waste Framework Directive, or implementing energy-efficient solutions aligned with renewable energy directives. By incorporating these elements, players would experience firsthand the complexities and trade-offs involved in sustainability policymaking.

✓ **Simulating Policy Impact Through Interactive Scenarios:** Another recommendation was to create dynamic simulations where players must make policy-related decisions and witness the consequences of their choices. For instance, a scenario could challenge participants to balance economic growth with strict environmental policies, illustrating the real-life challenges policymakers face. Alternatively, an interactive model could demonstrate the effects of deforestation policies on local biodiversity, encouraging critical thinking about environmental trade-offs.

✓ **Encouraging Role-Playing Elements:** To deepen engagement, participants proposed incorporating role-playing mechanics where players take on the roles of policymakers, environmental activists, or industry representatives. This approach would help illustrate the different perspectives involved in environmental decision-making, fostering debate, negotiation, and problem solving skills.

Participants also pointed out that visual and hands-on learning tools could enhance understanding. For example, augmented reality (AR) or digital dashboards could visualize

environmental data and policy outcomes, making abstract concepts more tangible. Some also suggested using infographics and storytelling elements to present case studies of successful EU policy implementations, reinforcing how strategic decisions at the policy level contribute to environmental progress.

The discussion emphasized that incorporating EU environmental policy into the Escape Room experience is about more than just raising awareness; it is also about providing participants with knowledge and instilling a sense of agency in addressing sustainability concerns. Making these regulations more engaging and relatable allows participants to better understand their role in reaching sustainability goals, ultimately leading to more engagement with environmental issues outside of the game itself.

4. EUROPEAN YOUTH GOALS AND YOUTH ENGAGEMENT

Engaging young people in sustainability efforts is critical for promoting long-term environmental development and instilling civic responsibility. However, influencing young people to take an active role in environmental activism and policymaking remains a major difficulty. Many young people express an interest to contribute but feel disconnected from decision-making processes or struggle to find accessible and engaging avenues of participation. This mismatch is frequently caused by a lack of understanding of opportunities, a scarcity of youth-friendly information, and a belief that their views have little effect in policymaking. Recognizing these limitations, panelists discussed strategies to bridge the divide and encourage young people to be proactive change agents.

Participants agreed that while many young people care deeply about environmental issues, several key barriers hinder their engagement. One major challenge is the perceived disconnect from decision-making, where young individuals feel that sustainability policies and environmental decisions are made at a high level, often without their input or representation. This lack of direct involvement discourages them from participating in discussions or advocating for change. Another barrier is limited access to youth-friendly information—although EU institutions and sustainability organizations publish extensive reports and guidelines, these materials are often complex, technical, and difficult for young audiences to navigate. Without easily digestible and engaging content, awareness and motivation remain low. Additionally, participants identified the lack of practical engagement opportunities as a significant obstacle. Many sustainability initiatives focus on theoretical knowledge rather than hands-on experiences, making it difficult for young people to see how their efforts can lead to tangible change.

To address these barriers, participants proposed incorporating elements of gamification and interactivity into the Escape Room experience, ensuring that young players feel actively involved in sustainability decision-making. One key idea was to design interactive role-playing scenarios, where players assume decision-making roles within EU institutions or youth activist organizations. By taking on roles such as policymakers, sustainability advocates, or corporate leaders, players would experience firsthand the challenges and complexities of environmental governance. These scenarios could simulate real-life decision-making processes, requiring participants to balance economic, environmental, and social factors when crafting sustainability policies.

Participants also highlighted the power of storytelling in inspiring youth participation. By integrating real-life case studies of successful youth-led sustainability initiatives, the Escape Room could highlight concrete examples of young people driving change. Stories of climate activists, local community projects, or EU-funded youth initiatives could serve as motivational tools, demonstrating that small actions can lead to significant policy shifts and environmental impact. This approach would make sustainability efforts feel more personal and relatable, showing young participants that their contributions matter.

5. INSIGHTS AND RECOMMENDATION FOR GREENSCAPE PROJECT

The GreenScape Project received generally positive comments, with participants praising its innovative approach to sustainability education. The utilization of an Escape Room as a learning tool was widely regarded as an innovative and entertaining way to raise awareness of environmental issues while also encouraging cooperation, critical thinking, and problem

solving abilities. Many participants commented that the interactive element of the event made complicated sustainability concepts more approachable and memorable, thereby bridging the gap between theoretical understanding and real-world applications.

One of the standout aspects of the project was its ability to immerse participants in sustainability challenges, requiring them to actively engage with problem-solving rather than passively receiving information. Participants highlighted that this hands-on learning approach enhanced their understanding of environmental policies and sustainability issues in a way that traditional educational methods often fail to achieve. The combination of collaborative tasks, role-playing scenarios, and interactive storytelling was particularly well received, as it encouraged active participation, creativity, and strategic thinking.

Despite the positive reception, participants also provided constructive feedback on how the GreenScape Project could be further refined and expanded to maximize its impact. Several key suggestions emerged:

✓ **Ensuring Challenges Are Culturally Relevant and Connected to Local Environmental Issues:** While participants appreciated the overall design of the Escape Room, they emphasized the importance of incorporating challenges that reflect local environmental concerns.

✓ **Incorporating Real-Life Examples of Successful Sustainability Initiatives:** Participants suggested integrating case studies of real-world sustainability projects to provide concrete learning experiences. Showcasing EU-funded green initiatives, youth-led environmental campaigns, or corporate sustainability transformations could help participants see the tangible impact of sustainability efforts.

✓ **Making the Experience Both Educational and Entertaining:** Participants emphasized that balancing education with entertainment is essential for maintaining engagement. ✓ **Expanding the Scope of Activities Beyond the Escape Room:** Another key suggestion was to extend the project beyond the Escape Room experience.

As a whole, feedback on the GreenScape Project demonstrated its capacity to make sustainability education relevant, participatory, and thought-provoking. By fine-tuning the experience to include regional obstacles, real-world examples, immersive narrative, and

extended learning opportunities, the initiative has the potential to greatly increase environmental awareness and drive action among participants.

6. FINAL REFLECTIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The focus group discussion provided useful insights into Bulgarian participants' expectations, interests, and requirements in terms of sustainability education and civic engagement. Participants' responses emphasized the importance of accessibility, relevance, and engagement in environmental learning. Their feedback will be critical in improving the GreenScape Escape Room so that it is both instructive and powerful, effectively engaging young people in meaningful discussions about sustainability and government.

Throughout the session, participants expressed a strong desire for interactive and immersive learning experiences, emphasizing the need for real-life case studies, localized challenges, and hands-on engagement to reinforce sustainability concepts. The discussion also reaffirmed the significance of gamification and storytelling in making environmental education more compelling and inspiring. These recommendations will be instrumental in shaping the next phase of the GreenScape Project, ensuring that the Escape Room not only educates but also empowers youth to take an active role in environmental sustainability efforts.

The session concluded with a renewed commitment to fostering youth participation and civic engagement through innovative educational approaches. Participants conveyed their enthusiasm for ongoing collaboration, expressing excitement about the potential impact of the GreenScape Project on their communities. Their feedback underscores the importance of creating meaningful opportunities for youth to engage with sustainability issues and contribute to real-world solutions.

Moving ahead, the GreenScape Project team is committed to adopting the ideas made throughout the conversation. The goal is to make the Escape Room an effective tool for education, engagement, and inspiration, providing young people with the knowledge, skills, and passion to promote positive environmental change. The project aims to have a long-term influence on sustainability education and youth empowerment through ongoing collaboration, innovation, and community involvement.