



Unlocking Youth Civic Engagement for a Sustainable Future - GreenSpace

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GreenScape Focus Group Report

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Number of Participants: 25

Facilitators: Bibiana Cunningham

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Welcome and Purpose

The session kicked off with a warm, welcoming atmosphere, setting the stage for a constructive and engaging discussion. As the facilitator, I had the privilege of leading the session solo, which gave me an incredible opportunity to connect directly with the students. The participants, hailing from a variety of backgrounds within the university where I teach, brought unique perspectives that made the conversation all the more enriching. I really loved seeing them in action, and I felt genuinely excited to engage with them on this important topic. Their insights would play a pivotal role in shaping the GreenScape project, which is aimed at improving environmental engagement among youth. It was clear that the participants' views, experiences, and challenges would be key in creating initiatives that are not only impactful but also truly meaningful to them. I made sure to encourage open and honest sharing, knowing that their contributions would guide the project in the right direction.

1.2. Overview of the GreenScape Project

To kick things off, I presented a thorough overview of the GreenScape project, explaining its purpose and objectives in detail. The main focus of the project is to encourage active youth involvement in European Union sustainability policies, while also promoting local actions to protect the environment. I highlighted how the initiative aims to bridge the gap between policy and practice, empowering young people with the tools, resources, and opportunities needed to make a real impact in environmental advocacy and sustainability.

During the session, I shared our belief in the power of immersive education, particularly through initiatives like the virtual escape room. I explained that we think this innovative approach will have far-reaching results, as it engages participants in a dynamic and interactive way. I also took the opportunity to discuss the EU Youth Goals, placing a special emphasis on Goal number 10, *Sustainable Green Europe*. To make the topic more tangible, I showed videos illustrating the realities of global warming and the climate crisis, painting a stark picture of what might happen if we don't take action immediately.

At the same time, I wanted to balance this with hope, emphasizing the positive shifts we're seeing in funding for sustainable energy resources compared to fossil fuels. To further illustrate the urgency, I shared real-world examples like the devastating wildfires in Los Angeles and the recent floods in Spain (Dana). These examples underscored the pressing need for action, but I also reminded the group that we can still change the course of our future if we commit to tackling these challenges head-on.

1.3. Explanation of Confidentiality and Consent

As an experienced facilitator, I understand the importance of creating a safe, non-judgmental space where participants feel comfortable sharing their thoughts

and opinions. Given the sensitive nature of the topic—the climate crisis—it's not always easy for everyone to openly engage, especially when discussing such pressing issues that are often connected to personal responsibility, in some ways. But I made sure to curate the introductory presentation in a way that would help unlock key insights and encourage meaningful dialogue. My approach focused on fostering curiosity, as I believe curiosity is what drives emotions and sparks conversations.

Before diving into the discussion, I emphasized the confidentiality measures in place to ensure that everyone felt comfortable sharing. I assured the group that their responses would remain anonymous, with no identifying details disclosed. This was crucial in setting the tone for an open and honest conversation. I also informed the group that the final focus group results will be recorded, but I made it clear that their consent was required before proceeding. I wanted to make sure everyone felt secure in the process and reassured them that their identities would remain protected. I then asked, “I will be recording our final findings, please raise your hand to give your consent if you agree.” The focus group results are available here: https://drive.google.com/file/d/1mfQ3DPsWQut1bO7W_DZ-zFEDSLW5MVhS/view?usp=share_link

By emphasizing transparency and respect, I created an environment where participants felt valued and listened to, which allowed for a deeper and more genuine exchange of ideas. The ground rules I set—respecting others' opinions, allowing one person to speak at a time, and encouraging openness—further contributed to the positive atmosphere, ensuring that we could make the most of our time together and gather valuable insights for the project.

2. DISCUSSION ON SUSTAINABILITY AND COMMUNITY IMPACT

2.1. Exploring the Meaning of Sustainability

Participants shared a wide range of perspectives on what sustainability truly means, with many expressing a deep concern for its importance on both a local and global scale. For some, sustainability was about ensuring that we meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. [One participant eloquently captured the essence of this, saying sustainability is “about maintaining a balance between environmental care, economic stability, and social equity.”](#)

Others emphasized the role of individual actions, such as reducing waste, conserving energy, and adopting eco-friendly practices, in contributing to the overall goal of sustainability. The conversation quickly shifted to the urgent and visible impacts of climate change that are already being felt worldwide. For example, there was a notable interest in marine conservation and the direct impact of climate change on global ecosystems, especially the conservation of parks in East Africa. One participant expressed a deep frustration with the prevailing attitude in the West, noting the need for energy industries to be more regulated and the ignorance

surrounding the way forward in East Africa. There was a strong call to stop following "colonial logic" when addressing these environmental issues.

The group also pointed out the immediate consequences of neglecting sustainability in their own communities, such as overflowing waste, rising sea levels, and the increased frequency of extreme weather events like intense summer heat. Several participants mentioned how climate change disrupts human biorhythms and public health, particularly through the spread of diseases and poor-quality food. They voiced a sense of urgency, noting that the future looks bleak and that it is making them fearful for the world they will leave behind.

Many expressed a shared desire for a better world for future generations, where children can grow up in the same environment they once knew and loved. They reflected on the sadness of seeing animals suffer and lamented the lack of snow on Christmas, which was once a cherished part of their holiday tradition. Participants were deeply concerned about the overwhelming amount of bad news related to the environment, particularly the rising frequency of climate-related disasters. They stressed that this issue isn't isolated—it affects everyone, from the wealthiest individuals to the poorest, and from the Global South to the Global North. The group emphasized that the Earth should be a place where people can live without having to constantly worry about their future, yet they noted that people are not actively implementing change or even trying to make a difference.

2.2. Identifying Local Sustainability Initiatives

During the session, participants shared a variety of local and community-driven initiatives focused on sustainability. These included organized beach clean-up campaigns, reducing litter in public spaces, tree-planting drives to restore biodiversity, and programs that encourage waste segregation and recycling. Some participants were actively involved in these efforts, whether by volunteering at local events, educating peers on environmental issues, or even leading sustainability initiatives in their schools and neighborhoods.

Despite these positive actions, some participants highlighted several challenges in maintaining these initiatives. Issues such as limited funding, a lack of public awareness, and insufficient support from governments were seen as significant obstacles to achieving long-term impact. There was a strong call for improved collaboration between local communities, government authorities, and environmental organizations. One key suggestion was to introduce sustainability education in schools, offer incentives for eco-friendly practices, and raise the visibility of successful local projects to inspire broader community participation.

In reflecting on the challenges they face, students emphasized the importance of taking responsibility for their actions toward the planet, future generations, and the collective future. They highlighted that sustainability isn't just about the environment—it's about becoming part of something bigger, something influential. "Be curious and act," they urged, recognizing that even at 18, if you don't care about your future, you won't care about others either.

Although participants were aware of recycling policies in their local areas, they expressed frustration at the lack of more comprehensive sustainability efforts. Even

with this awareness, many felt that for sustainability efforts to have real traction, governments must show more interest in supporting citizens and helping to drive change. There was a call for spreading the message of sustainability through events like this one—where people feel safe, not threatened—across the globe. They emphasized the importance of education, whether through schools, campaigns, or events, to raise awareness and inspire action.

One significant point raised was the need for more information. Participants wanted to know what was possible, what could actually be done, and how they could contribute meaningfully. They stressed the importance of seeing changes in policies and actual action plans that could make a real difference. They also noted that while many people focus on impacts within their own immediate environment, they lack awareness of how others are experiencing similar challenges across the globe. "Why should we care about what's happening in Africa?" one student asked, expressing the belief that it was hard to feel connected to issues far from home.

Comfort was also identified as a significant barrier to action. Students stated that they needed sustainability issues to be communicated in a way that was easy to understand and that encouraged them to act. At the same time, there was a recognition that living sustainably can be expensive. Several participants shared their frustration at not being able to afford fair-trade, higher-quality food, and at not having the time to search for sustainable options when making food or fashion choices.

Another point of concern was the shift in terminology from "global warming" to "climate change," which participants attributed to the influence of big business lobbying. Despite this, students expressed genuine care for the future of their children—even if they didn't yet have children themselves—and were deeply motivated by the desire to leave a better world behind. However, many felt a lack of motivation to take action, as they saw that those in power were not taking meaningful steps to address the crisis. "They're lying," one participant said, echoing a sense of betrayal and frustration with political leaders.

The lack of information was also a common theme. Students expressed the need for more facts and better ways of communicating the consequences of both correct and incorrect actions. Suggestions included using AI to simulate these outcomes, helping people see the tangible effects of their choices. The overwhelming nature of the climate crisis, especially with constant news about natural disasters, was another barrier. Many participants felt desensitized to the constant barrage of bad news, and they worried that it was becoming normalized, with too much to worry about at once.

One particular area where students felt uninformed was about the circular economy. "What is it and how can we be part of it?" they asked, expressing a desire for more understanding of how this economic model works and how they could get involved. The group also felt the need for more concrete actions that individuals could take, stating that there simply isn't enough information about what is actually happening on the ground.

Some students pointed out that solutions being implemented in certain countries weren't leading to tangible results. There was a strong desire for practical,

sustainable options that could be easily incorporated into daily life. "Make sustainability profitable," one student suggested, recognizing that creating incentives for individuals and businesses to act sustainably could have a broader and more lasting impact.

Finally, participants agreed that spreading information more effectively was key, stressing the importance of better targeting and tailoring messages to different communities to inspire action and engagement.

3. EU POLICIES AND ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT

3.1 Awareness of EU Environmental Policies

During the session, participants expressed low levels of awareness regarding EU sustainability policies. Most participants were familiar with 17 Sustainable Development Goals, some knew about the European Green Deal, which aims to achieve climate neutrality by 2050. Generally they admitted to having limited knowledge about specific measures, citing a lack of accessible information and outreach about EU directives in their local communities.

When discussing the impact of these policies on their own regions, participants shared mixed opinions. Those living in urban areas mentioned some positive outcomes, such as increased investment in renewable energy projects and stricter waste management regulations. On the other hand, participants from rural communities felt somewhat disconnected from EU policies, expressing that the initiatives often seemed distant and lacked tangible, on-the-ground results. This feedback underscored the need for more localized implementation and awareness efforts to make these policies more relevant and impactful.

Students suggested that a clearer, more transparent approach to the EU's mission would help increase engagement and understanding. "Simplicity is key," one participant emphasized, suggesting that policies should be communicated in a way that is straightforward and easily understandable to the general public. They also called for the use of relevant metrics, such as poverty levels and GDP, to make the impact of policies more relatable and meaningful.

One recurring suggestion was for more eco-friendly transportation options, such as increased availability of eco-buses and greener forms of public transport. Several students also highlighted the importance of providing tangible incentives for participation, such as rewards for eco-friendly actions. "If we're involved, we need to see that our efforts are actually rewarded—whether through more jobs, better opportunities, or visible benefits in our communities," said one participant.

Making EU policies more engaging and accessible for younger generations was another key point. Students expressed a desire for policies that speak their

language, particularly through modern channels like social media, and suggested that sustainability issues be integrated into popular culture, such as movies, TV shows, and series. "We need to connect the climate crisis to our world," they argued, suggesting that environmental issues should be portrayed in ways that resonate with their everyday lives.

Additionally, participants felt that gatherings like the one they attended—where people who genuinely care about these issues come together—were valuable in raising awareness and fostering dialogue. The role of facilitators like Bibi, who can bring people together and initiate conversations, was highlighted as essential in making these discussions more accessible.

Overall, students stressed the importance of increasing the EU's presence on social media and engaging them more effectively through these platforms. They also noted that, while the climate crisis is a major issue, it can often feel distant, with statistics and numbers that don't seem to connect to their own reality. Making the crisis feel more immediate and personal, they argued, could help drive greater participation and action.

3.2 Expectations for EU Action on Sustainability

Participants voiced high expectations for the EU to take a more proactive and visible role in driving sustainability efforts. Many emphasized the importance of increasing funding for green technologies, such as renewable energy and sustainable agriculture, to address the environmental challenges faced in both urban and rural areas.

A recurring theme among participants was the call for stricter regulations on industries contributing to pollution and deforestation. Students believed the EU should hold large corporations accountable for their environmental impact, while also providing support to small businesses and local communities to adopt more sustainable practices. Several students emphasized the need for the EU to promote fairness, ensuring that the transition to greener practices does not disproportionately affect those who are already struggling.

Educational outreach emerged as another key expectation. Participants called for targeted programs to raise awareness about sustainability, particularly aimed at youth and marginalized communities. They suggested initiatives such as workshops, digital campaigns, and partnerships with local schools and organizations to engage more people in sustainability efforts. As one student put it, "We need programs that help us understand how we can make a difference, and that encourage us to act."

Several participants also highlighted the need to create more opportunities for youth involvement in policy discussions. They expressed hope that the EU could provide platforms where young people can share their perspectives, contribute ideas, and

actively participate in the decision-making processes. By doing so, they believed the EU could ensure that future sustainability strategies are inclusive, representative, and reflective of the diverse needs and concerns of the younger generation. "Motivate us, the younger generation, to care more and take action on climate change," one participant urged, underlining the desire for the EU to inspire and empower youth to play a more active role in shaping the future of sustainability.

4. CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AND YOUTH MOTIVATION

4.1 Motivations for Engaging in Environmental Advocacy

The students expressed a wide range of motivations for engaging in environmental advocacy. A key theme that emerged was the idea that awareness leads to care, and care leads to action. **They stressed that if people truly understood environmental issues in a clear and relatable way, they would be more inclined to act.**

Several students shared that large-scale environmental challenges often feel overwhelming and distant, making it difficult to know where to start. They suggested shifting the focus from broad global issues to smaller, tangible actions—like nurturing a single plant or making simple lifestyle changes. This approach, they believed, could make sustainability feel more accessible and achievable.

The importance of education and communication was also highlighted, with students emphasizing that environmental advocacy should be presented in a way that is engaging and easy to understand. They saw the **GreenScape project** as a valuable tool for breaking down complex environmental issues and making them more relatable, particularly for young people who may feel disconnected from the topic.

One student echoed another's point that people often jump from one crisis to another without truly committing to long-term solutions. They emphasized that while we may never fully end environmental damage or human suffering, we can take consistent steps to reduce harm and create a more sustainable future.

One key insight was the belief that if people understood environmental issues on a deeper, more personal level, they would naturally begin to care. As one student put it, *"If people understood more, they would start to care. And after they care, the next step is: What should I do? What actions truly make a difference? And what is that difference?"* Participants emphasized that large-scale problems often feel distant and overwhelming, making it hard for individuals to connect with them.

To increase motivation, instead of focusing solely on the global scale, participants suggested framing environmental action through small, relatable steps—like helping

a single plant thrive. *“If we all take small actions together, maybe real change can happen,”* one participant noted. They also highlighted how complex environmental issues are often explained in ways that feel inaccessible, suggesting that projects like GreenScape can simplify and personalize these topics to engage a broader audience.

Another powerful point was the need to localize the issue. *“When we see videos of people suffering due to the climate in Bangladesh, we feel bad for them, but if we don’t live there, we also think, ‘What can I do?’ We don’t think it will happen to us—until it does.”* **This sentiment reflects the importance of framing climate change not as a distant, abstract threat but as a local, immediate concern.** *“We need to localize the issue because even though climate change is a global problem, only when it directly affects your city, your neighborhood, you feel it, and you understand why you should take action.”*

Ultimately, participants agreed that the key to sustained environmental advocacy lies in making the issue feel real, relatable, and actionable at the individual level.

4.2 Barriers to Civic Participation

Participants identified several barriers that hinder their involvement in sustainability initiatives. A common challenge was the lack of time, as many are juggling academic responsibilities, work, and personal commitments, leaving little room for consistent civic engagement. Limited access to resources, such as funding for community projects or educational materials about EU policies, also restricted their ability to contribute effectively.

Another significant obstacle was the **sense of disconnection from larger institutions, particularly when it comes to EU policy** discussions. Participants expressed that these policies often feel overly complex, bureaucratic, and inaccessible, making it hard to relate to or understand their relevance in everyday life. This complexity fosters a perception that individual efforts are insignificant in the grand scheme of things, discouraging active participation.

Logistical issues also posed barriers—transportation to events, lack of local opportunities, and insufficient support networks made it difficult for young people to get involved. Participants stressed the need for more inclusive platforms and support systems to facilitate broader youth participation.

From the students' perspective, several key points emerged:

- **Simplicity is Key:** *“If they (EU) would disclose clearly what their mission is, it would be easier to connect with.”* Participants called for straightforward communication about sustainability goals and EU missions, making them more digestible for the general public.

- **Relevant Metrics:** They expressed frustration with outdated measures of progress, suggesting the need for metrics that reflect real-world issues like poverty and environmental health, not just GDP.
- **Engagement Through Culture:** Participants emphasized the power of media, suggesting that EU policies should be integrated into movies, shows, and series to connect climate issues with the cultural experiences of younger generations. *“Make a policy that speaks our language, connect the crisis to our world.”*
- **Incentivizing Participation:** They highlighted the need for tangible rewards—whether through job opportunities, skills development, or recognition of their efforts. *“More events with rewards; we need to see that if we’re involved, our efforts are actually rewarded.”*
- **Local Champions Matter:** Gatherings like the one facilitated during this project were praised for creating safe spaces where genuine conversations could happen. *“People like Bibi, who genuinely care, can bring people together to talk to us about it.”*
- **Visibility and Accessibility:** Participants stressed the need for greater social media presence to engage young people where they already spend time. They also pointed out that the climate crisis often feels like distant statistics, making it hard to grasp its urgency. *“The climate crisis seems like a distant problem—just numbers. We need it to feel real.”*

Reducing complexity, increasing visibility, offering incentives, and creating relatable narratives are crucial steps to overcoming barriers and fostering greater youth involvement in sustainability efforts.

5. FEEDBACK ON GREENSCAPE PROJECT ACTIVITIES

5.1 Reactions to Proposed GreenScape Activities And Aligning Activities with Participants’ Interests

Participants responded positively to the proposed GreenScape activities, which included workshops on sustainability practices, networking events with policymakers, and hands-on community projects such as tree planting and clean-up campaigns. They appreciated that these initiatives were designed to create tangible environmental impacts while fostering a sense of community and purpose among young people.

Their suggestions for the Escape Room itself were following:

- **Interactive and Problem-Solving Focus:** Participants expressed a strong preference for activities that go beyond traditional formats. They emphasized the importance of *“problem-solving, interactive design, and tricky questions”* to stimulate critical thinking and keep them engaged.

- **Real-Life Simulations:** A standout suggestion was to create *real-life scenarios where every choice has a consequence—small, big, negative, or positive*. Participants felt that experiential learning, where decisions lead to visible outcomes, would be more impactful than theoretical discussions.
- **Personal Connection to Climate Change:** They highlighted the need for activities that *“inform the player on how climate change will affect them on a personal level.”* By reflecting on how sustainability issues directly impact their lives, participants believed they would feel more motivated to take action.
- **Focus on Circular Fashion:** There was specific interest in learning about *circular fashion*—understanding sustainable practices in the fashion industry and how to make eco-conscious choices as consumers.
- **Incentives for Participation:** Participants suggested offering **certifications** for completed activities, which could enhance their resumes and incentivize engagement. They also proposed **financial compensation** for involvement in long-term projects and emphasized the value of **investing in green sectors** that create job opportunities.
- **Mental Health and Educational Support:** Recognizing the emotional toll of climate anxiety, participants recommended integrating *“educational and mental health support”* into sustainability programs. They stressed that addressing climate-related stress can empower young people to remain hopeful and active.
- **Accountability and Systemic Change:** Participants voiced strong support for structural changes, including *“fines for environmental misconduct,”* and the creation of *“more jobs that support environmental and ecological approaches.”* They called for **investments in projects like recycling, sharing data transparently**, and creating opportunities that allow them to *“make a living while changing the world.”*

6. CLOSING REMARKS

6.1 Final Reflections

As we reached the conclusion of our focus group session, participants were invited to share their final thoughts and insights regarding the GreenScape project. This space allowed them to voice additional ideas, reflections, and emotions that had emerged throughout our discussions.

My Reflection:

This event reaffirmed for me that addressing the climate crisis is an emotionally charged and complex topic for young people. They are navigating a spectrum of contradictory feelings—ranging from perceiving the problem as overwhelmingly vast to struggling to fully understand the facts and the specific consequences for their own lives.

While it may appear that many young people are desensitized to climate issues—perhaps due to the constant influx of information from social media, much of which they either distrust or actively avoid because it’s too distressing—I realized that beneath this surface, they care deeply about the planet. Their frustration, often masked by apathy or detachment, is actually rooted in fear. Fear of the future, fear of powerlessness, and fear that no matter what they do, it won’t be enough.

What stood out during our session was how these emotions found release through open, participative conversations. The focus group became more than just a data collection exercise; it was a safe space where their worries were validated, their voices heard, and their feelings acknowledged. This dialogue allowed them to move beyond passive concern and engage actively, sharing not just opinions but genuine emotional responses to the climate crisis.

Through this experience, I’ve come to understand that young people need more than facts, figures, and awareness campaigns. **They need guidance from adults who are willing to listen without judgment, support them in processing their overwhelming emotions, and help them channel their energy into actions that feel both meaningful and effective.** They are eager to contribute, but they need direction—practical steps that show how individual actions connect to broader solutions.

The GreenScape project has the potential to be that bridge. By creating platforms for genuine dialogue, providing mentorship, and offering clear pathways to action, we can help alleviate not only the climate crisis itself but also the heavy emotional burden it places on the next generation.