

EcoYOU – Clean and green Minds for Environmentally Friendly Behaviour

A1.18 Developing a Joint Study that includes a Blue-Map used to raise awareness on environmental protection for youth in BSB regions

As part of the study dedicated to understanding environmental attitudes and behaviors among young people and adults, a focus group was organized according to the structure proposed in the methodology of the project "EcoYOU – Clean and Green Minds for an Environmentally Friendly Behaviour". The activity aimed to explore the participants' perspectives on preferred learning methods regarding environmental protection, identification of topics of environmental interest, barriers that limit involvement and the role that social media plays in environmental mobilization.

The focus group was moderated by two facilitators and lasted 2 hours. The structure of the session included an introductory phase, opening questions to warm up the discussion, a main section of in-depth dialogue (deep dive), interactive activities and a closing session with reflections and feedback. The opening questions, displayed visually, allowed participants to introduce themselves by answering one of them, thus contributing to the creation of an informal and open climate. The subsequent discussions focused on personal experiences and opinions related to ecological learning, civic engagement, barriers encountered in participation and the influence of digital channels.

This approach allowed for valuable insights, both cognitively (what participants know) and emotionally (what they feel and what motivates or discourages them), providing a solid foundation for the development of future initiatives in the field of ecological education and sustainable public participation.

To the open-ended question "What do you think are the most pressing environmental issues today?", participants repeatedly identified air pollution, water pollution and excess plastic (including in the form of microplastics) as the most worrying. Problems related to inefficient recycling, improper waste management, heavy car traffic, lack of green spaces and degradation of natural habitats were also frequently mentioned. Other relevant responses included climate change, unsustainable consumption, light pollution, but also human factors such as indifference, lack of environmental education and lack of civic engagement. These themes reflect a clear perception of the cumulative impact of human activities on the environment and set a suitable framework for exploring in-depth environmental attitudes and behaviours within the focus group.

When asked about the motivation for participating in environmental activities or campaigns, participants repeatedly highlighted the importance of individual and collective responsibility, as well as concern for the future. Responses such as a cleaner future, the future of young people, hope for the future or a responsible future reflect the desire to actively contribute to protecting the environment for future generations. Values such as civic spirit, community involvement, the desire for change and care for nature were also frequently mentioned, indicating a deep motivation anchored both in personal beliefs and in the attachment to the common good.

Regarding learning preferences related to environmental topics, participants expressed a clear preference for practical, interactive and non-formal methods. Terms such as practical activities, projects, workshops, workshops, games, teamwork and exchange of experiences appear frequently, indicating that learning is perceived as more effective when based on direct experience and collaboration. Participants also mentioned visual and auditory sources, such as documentaries, examples provided by specialists and online content (e.g. YouTube, webinars), signaling the need for accessible and reality-based content. Thus, the results suggest that ecological learning is perceived as more effective when it combines active involvement, concrete examples and social interaction, to the detriment of purely theoretical or formal formats.

1. What learning methods do you find most motivating for environmental subjects? Why?

The analysis of the responses provided by the four groups – two of young people and two of adults – highlights both similarities and notable differences in preferences related to learning methods for environmental subjects. These differences are mainly related to life stages, interests and the ways in which each category interacts with information and personal or collective motivation.

YOUTH: Interactivity, visual, social involvement and personal motivation

Common elements for both groups of young people:

- Interactivity is essential: methods such as playing, gamification, competitions and workshops are preferred because they transform learning into a pleasant, engaging and active experience.
 - Personal and social involvement matters: both self-interest and learning through experience exchange (NGO, Erasmus) or teaching others contribute to deeper and more motivating learning.
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- Visual tools and media: films, social media posts or advertisements are seen as effective methods of information, because they adapt to the current way of consuming information among young people.
- Debates and discussions are valued because they stimulate critical thinking and allow for the confrontation of ideas, generating reflection and deeper understanding.

Specific to group 2 of young people: emphasis is placed on experiential learning and gamification, with a clear justification: environmental themes can become attractive through gamification, which helps internalize messages through direct involvement.

TEACHERS, TRAINERS, PARENTS: Practical, community-oriented, socially responsible

Common elements between the two group:

- Practical and experiential methods are dominant: activities such as sanitation, educational visits, workshops, demonstration activities are perceived as the most effective. Here, the need for adults to see the concrete applicability of knowledge is noted.
- Films and documentaries appear in both groups, suggesting a consensus on the effectiveness of narrative visual formats.
- Volunteering and public campaigns: adults are more likely to relate to community and social responsibility. Activities like "Plastic-Free July" or public events have a behavior modeling component through civic engagement.
- The power of example and motivation through incentives show that it is important for adults to see tangible results or recognition for sustainable behaviors.

Specific to adults:

- Methods such as future planning (scenarios) and mind maps are mentioned, which involve abstraction and planning, indicating a more reflective and strategic thinking style.
 - Family activities and educational roles for children – reflect a parental and community dimension specific to adults.
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Conclusions

- Young people are attracted to dynamic and interactive methods that stimulate curiosity and personal involvement. Learning through play, direct experience and visual media dominate their preferences. Valuing the exchange of ideas and collaboration indicates a high openness to informal learning.
- Adults prefer methods that are grounded in reality and applicability. They learn more effectively when methods are connected to everyday life and have a visible impact (e.g. recycling, volunteering, educating children). There is an increased emphasis on responsibility and the role of social role model.
- The common point between generations is the desire for practical involvement and the use of visual means, but the motivations differ: for young people, it's about curiosity and reward; for adults, it's about responsibility and social impact.
- For effective educational policies or environmental campaigns, it is essential to adapt methods to the specifics of each target group: for young people - gamification, online media, experiential; for adults - practical examples, community empowerment, transgenerational education.

2. What environmental topics are you most interested in learning more about?

Analysis of answers:

Youths are showing a broad and diverse interest in a variety of environmental topics. Recurring themes include global warming, biodiversity, pollution (air, water, fuels), deforestation and food waste. Emerging or less widely discussed topics in the general public discourse are also highlighted, such as microplastics, light pollution or the impact of artificial intelligence on the environment.

A notable aspect is the interest in the information dimension: young people are concerned about disinformation, media manipulation, and superficial or exaggerated presentation of environmental issues. This indicates a developing critical capacity and the need for credible, clear, and balanced sources.

Teachers, trainers and parents focuses on issues with a tangible and immediate impact on the quality of life. Among the most mentioned are air and water pollution, lack of green spaces, insufficient recycling and weak environmental regulation. There are also concerns about major sources of pollution, such as large industries, intensive agriculture or the fast fashion sector.

Adults place a strong emphasis on institutional, economic, and legislative responsibility, indicating an understanding of environmental issues from a systemic and structural perspective. There is also a desire for civic and educational involvement, with an emphasis on modeling sustainable behaviors in the community and family.

Comparative conclusions

Young people are receptive to a wider range of topics, including emerging themes and aspects of communication and technology, while adults focus on concrete, local issues with the potential to be regulated through public policies. Young people also view the environment through the lens of media experience and the technological future, while adults approach it through the lens of the tangible present and civic or family responsibilities.

3. What are some of the barriers that prevent you from participating in environmental initiatives?

Analysis of answers:

In the context of promoting sustainability and civic engagement, it is essential to understand the perceived obstacles that limit citizens' participation in environmental protection initiatives. This analysis explores and compares the barriers identified by groups of young people and adults, with the aim of highlighting commonalities and significant differences, providing a solid basis for proposing tailored solutions.

Barriers identified among young people

Lack of access to information and promotion - one of the most frequently mentioned obstacles is insufficient or difficult to access information. Young people report a lack of adequate promotion both online (social networks) and in the educational environment (schools, teachers). This deficiency leads to low visibility of initiatives, which, although they may exist, do not effectively reach the young audience.

Logistical and systemic limitations - other barriers are of a logistical nature or related to the local context: lack of transport, lack of large or frequent actions in small towns and low involvement of local authorities, such as city halls. There is also dissatisfaction with the insufficient coverage of existing systems, such as RetuRO, perceived as incomplete and ineffective for all types of waste.

Personal constraints - limited free time, limited financial resources and convenience are mentioned as personal factors limiting participation. The idea of scholarships for involvement is suggested as a method of actively encouraging participation.

The role of education – education is seen as an essential factor, but currently insufficient and unequally distributed. The need for a systematic, continuous approach, from the early years of school and adapted to the current needs of young people is expressed.

Identification barriers among teachers, trainers and parents

Lack of institutional promotion and involvement - adults emphasize, similarly to young people, the lack of promotion of environmental initiatives by competent institutions and the insufficient involvement of the state. They see the authorities as a key actor in activating and supporting ecological actions and perceive a lack of leadership in this regard.

The lack of education and awareness - for adults, early childhood education and continuing environmental education are considered weaknesses of the current system. The lack of a coherent and continuous educational effort to support the formation of a sense of civic responsibility and personal responsibility is reported.

Lack of role models and effective communication - a distinctive barrier highlighted by adults is the absence of promotion of positive behaviors in public space, but also the lack of accessible role models, such as influencers or public figures who consistently and credibly support environmental causes. Individualism and social apathy are also identified as important obstacles ("Why me?").

4. What role do social media and online platforms play in your commitment to the environment?

Analysis of answers:

In the digital age, social media and online platforms have become essential channels for information, mobilization and civic expression. This section analyzes the perceptions of groups of young people and adults regarding the impact of the digital environment on engagement in environmental issues. The aim is to highlight the similarities, differences and opportunities for strategic use of these channels in environmental campaigns and initiatives.

Young people's perception of the role of social media

Young people identify social media as an essential tool in forming ecological awareness, with the following major functions:

- Information and awareness: Networks are primary sources of information about environmental issues (e.g. microplastics, deforestation), events (e.g. Earth Hour), projects or initiatives (e.g. tree planting).
- Promotion and mobilization: Young people use platforms to promote their own activities or to highlight areas that need protection, thus contributing to the local visibility of the issues.
- Community building: There is a strong need for belonging to an environmental community, and social media provides this framework, allowing for quick interactions and the feeling of being "part of something bigger."
- Informal education: The accessed content also has a didactic role, and young people learn from videos, infographics or viral campaigns.
- Beware of disinformation: Young people are aware of the risk of disinformation, an aspect that indicates a relatively high level of critical thinking regarding digital sources.

Teachers, trainers and parents perception of the role of social media

Adults similarly recognize the significant impact of online platforms in the field of environmental protection, but with some specific nuances:

- Awareness and information: Social media is perceived as a tool for public awareness of environmental issues, especially in the context of abuses and crises (e.g. illegal construction, maritime accidents).
 - Appeal to influencers: Unlike young people, adults emphasize the role of influencers in shaping public behavior and express the need for them to explicitly promote sustainable behaviors.
 - Clarity and efficiency in communication: The need for simple, short and concise language, adapted to the viralization mechanisms specific to the platforms, is emphasized.
 - Thematic communities and applications: Adults mention circular economy platforms (e.g. Vinted) and the idea of forming online communities with common ecological interests, reflecting a practical and solution-oriented approach.
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Conclusions

Both young people and adults recognize the importance of social media in environmental engagement, but they value it differently. Young people see these platforms as primary sources of information, spaces for promoting their own initiatives, and means of belonging to ecological communities. In contrast, adults emphasize the role of social media in raising public awareness of serious environmental issues and emphasize the importance of involving influencers and clear messages. While young people draw attention to the risk of misinformation, adults highlight the need for effective communication and practical solutions, such as reuse applications.

At the closing stage of the focus group discussion, participants were asked the following open-ended question: "What do you think can be done to improve environmental education and engagement?"

Following the participants' answers to this recapitulative question, several clear and recurring directions regarding the improvement of education and involvement in the field of environmental protection emerge. First, the emphasis is on practical ecological education, introduced early and maintained throughout life, through activities adapted to both children and adolescents, adults and seniors. The importance of interactive lessons, educational games and applied projects, carried out in schools, high schools and universities, but also in the community, is emphasized.

Secondly, there is a constant need for intensified promotion – online, through the media, but also within educational institutions – so that the ecological message is visible, accessible and attractive. In this regard, the involvement of authentic influencers, inspirational models and resource persons who can mobilize large audiences is also mentioned.

It is also emphasized that environmental education should not remain the sole responsibility of teachers, but should be institutionally supported, including through the creation of a specialized structure and the active involvement of authorities and political decision-makers. At the same time, the organization of frequent, smaller events that facilitate community participation and involvement in concrete actions is appreciated. Finally, the participants believe that personal example, youth empowerment and continuity of education are essential to transform environmental concern into a natural and constant practice.

In addition to the feedback provided, participants unanimously appreciated the open and interactive atmosphere of the focus group, noting that they felt listened to and involved throughout the discussion. The facilitators were described as professional and energetic, contributing significantly to the positive dynamics of the event.

Among the most appreciated elements were the quality of the discussions, the interactivity through the Mentimeter platform, the good organization, the teamwork and the exchange of ideas. As aspects for improvement, the need for a short break for networking and the complete accessibility of the location for people with mobility difficulties were mentioned.



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