

Fostering Green Futures: A Local Research Report on Youth Engagement in Sustainability and Climate



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Executive Summary

This report provides a detailed examination of youth involvement in sustainability and climate action in Thuringia, Germany, synthesizing observations from interviews with youth workers, survey responses from young people, and analyses of successful initiatives. The findings are intended to inform and enhance strategies for environmental education and youth empowerment.

These local efforts are understood within a broader European context, aligning with overarching objectives for a sustainable future. The "Green Seeds" project explicitly aims to bolster the capabilities of youth workers to cultivate a generation of young people who are both environmentally active and well-versed in green sustainability principles. This strategic alignment with EU Youth Goal 10, "Sustainable Green Europe," emphasizes how local initiatives contribute to a larger European vision.

This report reveals a youth demographic that is highly concerned and generally knowledgeable about climate change and environmental sustainability. However, this awareness often translates into superficial rather than deep, sustained participation, with many actions performed "for show" rather than stemming from intrinsic values.

Significant barriers impede deeper engagement, including psychological factors like eco-anxiety and perceived futility, systemic issues such as financial constraints, a critical lack of practical opportunities, and an information deficit regarding available resources and guidance. Young people also cite time constraints and a lack of knowledge on how to get involved as major obstacles. Furthermore, while youth overwhelmingly believe they should have a bigger role in shaping climate policies, many feel their voices are not adequately heard in community environmental discussions.

The research highlights the effectiveness of experiential and participatory learning approaches, especially when coupled with structured mentorship and a positive, non-judgmental framing of environmental issues. Successful initiatives demonstrate that fostering youth ownership, building strong community bonds, and embracing adaptive planning are crucial for sustained impact.

The findings show a need for robust support from local authorities and policymakers. This extends beyond financial grants to include comprehensive capacity building for youth workers, the establishment of centralized information hubs, and the integration of sustainability education into formal curricula. Ultimately, the report advocates for a holistic, community-centered approach that empowers youth by fostering a sense of belonging and agency, thereby cultivating a more resilient and environmentally conscious generation.



1. Current State of Youth Engagement: Awareness, Interest, and Perceived Priorities

Observations from youth workers and survey responses from young people in Thuringia, Germany paint a nuanced picture of youth engagement with sustainability and climate action. While a general understanding of environmental issues is prevalent, the depth and consistency of their involvement vary significantly.

High Awareness, Nuanced Interest

There is a broad consensus among interviewees and survey respondents that young people possess a notable level of awareness and interest in environmental matters. One interviewee observes "big knowledge" and "very high" interest in sustainability among the youth. Similarly, another youth worker interviewed recalls a period around 2018-2020 characterized by a "huge kind of wave of awareness on environmental issue," during which many young people were "really keen to know, to participate and to take action". Survey data from Thuringia corroborates this, with 10 out of 11 respondents rating their concern about climate change as '4' or '5' (on a scale of 1-5, with 5 being "very concerned").

However, this high awareness does not consistently translate into profound, sustained engagement. One interviewee notes a shift, perceiving that what was once genuine interest has become "more proclaimed marketing," where actions are performed "for show" rather than arising from deeply held personal values or a desire for harmony with nature. This sentiment is echoed by another respondent, who observes that the initial motivation often "ends after you go back from the international encounter," with individuals reverting to their usual lifestyles without considering the daily impact of their practices. This indicates a critical distinction between a surface-level understanding or expressed interest and a deeper, more enduring commitment. Many young people may intellectually grasp the importance of sustainability and even participate in activities when opportunities arise, but this does not always lead to long-term behavioral changes or consistent personal action driven by intrinsic values. The challenge, therefore, is not merely to raise awareness but to cultivate authentic and lasting engagement that integrates sustainable practices into daily life.

Priorities Beyond Environment

Youth engagement in climate action and sustainability are constrained to their perceived priorities. In Thuringia, one youth worker interviewed observed that "eco topics are not really the priority for them," noting that the primary concern for many youngsters was "diversity and inclusion," as they actively sought acceptance within their social environments. This observation suggests that environmental education may need to be integrated within broader social justice frameworks to resonate more effectively with young people's immediate and pressing concerns.



The prioritization of "diversity and inclusion" over "eco topics" does not necessarily imply a lack of interest in environmental issues. Rather, it indicates that other social concerns are perceived as more salient and immediate for these young individuals. For environmental education to be truly impactful and relevant, it must connect with these existing priorities. Framing environmental issues as matters of social justice -for example, by discussing environmental racism, equitable access to green spaces, or the disproportionate impacts of climate change on vulnerable communities- can make the topic more relatable and urgent for young people who are already engaged in social activism. This approach suggests that youth workers should explore interdisciplinary strategies, weaving environmental themes into broader discussions about human rights, equality, and community well-being, rather than presenting them in isolation.

2. Challenges and Barriers to Youth Participation in Climate Action

Youth workers and survey respondents identify a complex array of challenges that impede young people's sustained and meaningful participation in climate action and sustainability education. These barriers span psychological, systemic, and cultural dimensions.

Motivational and Psychological Barriers

The scale of climate change can be overwhelming. Two youth workers interviewed both highlight the prevalence of "ECO anxiety," a state of distress that can cause some individuals to disengage from environmental efforts because the problems feel too vast to tackle. This feeling is often compounded by a "perceived futility," where young people believe that "these problems are so big that there is nothing that I can do that will change anything," leading them to step back from engagement.

Furthermore, the nature of some environmental activities can contribute to superficial involvement. One respondent notes that many organizational efforts are "for show" rather than genuinely impactful, leading to a lack of "heartfelt approach" and fostering superficial engagement. This performative aspect can erode genuine motivation. Another youth worker points out that individuals often prioritize convenience, choosing "ease over the impact of their action," even when more sustainable alternatives exist, such as opting for cheaper, faster flights over more environmentally friendly but costlier and slower train travel. This preference for convenience extends to daily choices, like shopping at supermarkets with plastic-wrapped goods versus local markets that require more effort to source diverse items. Finally, a "blame culture" can deter participation, as an interviewee suggests that a fear of "shaming each other" for individual unsustainable actions can hinder open discussion and proactive engagement.

Systemic and Structural Barriers



A significant challenge lies in the lack of practical, hands-on opportunities.

One youth worker interviewed observes that many organizations focus on theoretical "shows" rather than providing "really, really practical" experiences that allow youth to "observe and reflect and then they can change the behaviour". This absence of tangible action limits the depth of learning and behavioral change.

Financial barriers are also frequently cited. Young people often face hurdles in securing funds to implement their ideas, even when they are motivated. One respondent emphasizes the general scarcity of "free opportunities and camps" for children, particularly those from non-academic backgrounds, creating an economic barrier to participation. Survey data from Thuringia shows that "Financial barriers" were cited by 2 respondents as preventing participation. The issue is not just a deficit of money, but also a critical information gap. One respondent notes that even when financial opportunities exist (e.g., European Solidarity Corps, local projects), youth are often unaware of "how actually you can get funds" or where to find "really clear guidance". Another interviewee corroborates this, highlighting the absence of a central "hub of information transfer" in cities, which results in groups working in isolation and struggling to access organized information about ongoing projects. This poor dissemination of information about available resources effectively prevents even motivated youth from initiating actions. "Lack of knowledge on how to get involved" was the most common barrier cited by Thuringian survey respondents (6 mentions). "Lack of time" was also a significant barrier (6 mentions).

Geographical accessibility presents another hurdle. For younger participants, projects need to be "pretty local" to their homes. This necessitates the establishment of numerous initiatives across different districts within a city, as engaging parents for participation in distant activities proves even more challenging.

A disconnect between formal and non-formal education is evident. One respondent points out that schools often lack robust connections to out-of-school sustainability projects, creating a "leak of connections to non-formal education". Another youth worker interviewed further emphasizes that environmental education is not yet a "crucial part of school" curricula, suggesting a need for institutional integration rather than relying solely on NGO-led initiatives.

Organizational instability also impacts engagement. One respondent notes that a lack of consistent leadership or a clear "head" and regular effort makes it difficult to sustain engagement in projects. The "instability of personal circumstances," such as young people moving for university or other life changes, makes long-term follow-up challenging for youth-led initiatives. Additionally, finding suitable physical spaces, such as land for urban gardening or meeting places for projects, is "very hard," particularly in urban areas.



Finally, youth workers themselves face systemic challenges, including a lack of "security and good working conditions," which can hinder their capacity and motivation to initiate and sustain projects.

Cultural Barriers

A significant cultural challenge lies in fostering a shared understanding that climate action is a "shared responsibility" across all young people, regardless of their background. One of the five youth workers notes that some young people from the Global South may feel less accountable for carbon emissions, believing it to be primarily the "West's responsibility" due to historical consumption patterns. This perspective underscores the need for a global, equitable approach to climate education that transcends geographical and socio-economic divisions.

The observations regarding financial barriers and the lack of information about funding opportunities reveal a systemic failure in knowledge management and accessibility within the youth work sector. It is not merely a shortage of funds, but a critical lack of accessible information about available funds and opportunities. Even if numerous financial opportunities exist, their practical inaccessibility due to poor dissemination and a lack of centralized, user-friendly guidance renders them effectively non-existent for youth workers and young people. Addressing this requires more than just making funds available; it demands proactive dissemination strategies, simplified application processes, and dedicated information platforms or advisory services.

Furthermore, the prevalence of "for show" activities and a perceived lack of practical engagement directly contributes to feelings of eco-anxiety and superficial motivation. When youth perceive environmental activities as merely performative rather than truly practical and impactful, it reinforces a sense of futility regarding the overwhelming nature of the problem. This absence of tangible action and visible impact can exacerbate eco-anxiety, making young people less likely to engage authentically or persistently. Programs must therefore prioritize genuine, hands-on experiences with clear, measurable outcomes, even small ones, to combat feelings of powerlessness and cultivate sustained motivation.

A notable paradox emerges from the discussions: while convenience often influences choices, as one respondent suggests that "people choose ease over the impact", a youth worker's successful "Youth for Biodiversity" project¹ demonstrates that intentionally challenging, immersive experiences can lead to profound commitment and responsibility. This project involved communal living with limited amenities, such as no showers and boiling water for drinking. Despite these deliberate challenges, a respondent describes the experience as "very impactful," fostering "commitment, responsibility, team building," and

¹ Youth4Biodiversity project, part of the "Planet4B" Horizon project (Project Number: 101082212).
<https://www.cge-erfurt.org/2025/03/12/youth4biodiversity-a-journey-into-conservation/>



leading to participants going to great lengths to properly separate trash. This suggests that "ease" is not always the primary driver if the experience is deeply engaging and meaningful, fostering strong emotional bonds and a clear sense of purpose. Program design should strategically incorporate elements of challenge and immersion that build resilience, foster deeper connections, and provide a tangible sense of accomplishment, thereby cultivating a more profound and lasting commitment to sustainability.

3. Effective Strategies and Methodologies for Engaging Young People

Youth workers have identified several strategies and methodologies that prove most effective in motivating and engaging young people in sustainability and climate action. These approaches consistently emphasize active participation, structured support, and thoughtful communication.

Experiential and Participatory Learning

A strong consensus emerges around the efficacy of experiential and hands-on learning. One migrant youth worker in Thuringia states unequivocally that a "participatory approach is always the best" because young people "know best what's better for them". This involves emphasizing "really, really hands-on practises" and "small actions," such as river cleaning or farm visits, as youth "learn much more by doing" than from purely theoretical instruction. The direct involvement allows for observation, reflection, and ultimately, behavioral change.

Crucially, activities should be designed to be enjoyable and foster emotional connections. One respondent highlights that initiatives should be "fun at first" to "open up the sphere to reflect one's own actions". Another interviewee reinforces this, stressing the importance of creating an "emotional bond with the topic" by bringing young people into nature and ensuring they have fun. This positive experience creates lasting memories and intrinsic motivation. Creative approaches, such as the "Dramacademy Kids Camp"² project mentioned where children aged 10-14 created theatre performances on sustainability topics, also proving highly engaging. A professional guided this process, ensuring that ideas emerged from the children themselves rather than being imposed, fostering genuine expression. Immersive experiences, like the "Youth for Biodiversity" project, which involved communal living with limited commodities, demonstrated how challenges can foster deep commitment and responsibility when combined with a strong sense of purpose.

Structured Support and Guidance

Effective engagement also relies on clear structure and consistent support. One youth worker from Erfurt emphasizes that projects need a "very clear understanding of what the

² <https://next-level.world/en/projects/dramacademy-kids-camp-2023-2/>



project is" to allow participants to engage and identify with its purpose. Clear goals and task divisions are crucial for effective implementation. Maintaining "regular effort to always get people in action" is vital, as long breaks can lead to a loss of interest. This necessitates "constant work of like a small group to initiate" and maintain momentum.

A critical element is the presence of a "coach" or "consultant". The interviewee clarifies that this role is not necessarily a leader but someone who provides "skill sharing," inspiration, and answers questions, particularly concerning regulations or practicalities. This guidance is essential for building confidence, as many young people "don't know that they can be very effective". Breaking down large projects into "little steps and milestones" also helps young people see tangible progress, keeping them motivated and preventing feelings of overwhelm.

Communication and Framing

The way environmental issues are communicated significantly impacts engagement. One respondent advocates for an approach that "invite[s] people that they are really, they feel... invited and they feel inspired," rather than scaring them with urgent, fear-based messages like "we need to, we have to" about climate change.

Sustainability education should also adopt a "holistic point of view," connecting environmental aspects with social and economic justice. Two youth workers interviewed suggest demonstrating "how other communities are affected by climate change," making the topic more relatable and highlighting its broader implications. People tend to connect more deeply when topics relate to their personal lives and daily actions. Another professional consulted adds that presenting large problems as "small, manageable actions" helps to deconstruct eco-anxiety and combat feelings of overwhelm. Finally, another interviewee advises a non-judgmental approach, emphasizing that it's "not about shaming each other" but rather about reflecting on actions within systemic contexts.

The overwhelming consensus among youth workers points to experiential, hands-on, and participatory learning as the most effective method for engaging young people. This approach is particularly powerful when combined with a positive, non-judgmental, and emotionally connective framing of environmental issues. This indicates a fundamental shift away from traditional didactic teaching towards a more facilitative engagement. Effective engagement moves beyond simply conveying information; it prioritizes active participation, direct experience, and the cultivation of positive emotional connections within a supportive, non-judgmental environment. Program design should therefore focus on creating immersive, enjoyable, and collaborative experiences that allow youth to discover their agency and intrinsic motivation, rather than relying on fear-based messaging or purely theoretical instruction.

Furthermore, the role of a "coach" or "consultant" is crucial for translating youth interest into sustained action. This support provides structure, answers questions, and builds confidence, especially for larger-scale initiatives. Without this guidance, even well-intentioned ideas may not materialize due to fear of regulations or a lack of organizational know-how. Youth possess ideas and motivation, but a lack of practical guidance, knowledge of bureaucratic processes, and self-confidence acts as a significant barrier to scaling their initiatives. A coach or consultant fills this gap by providing practical know-how, demystifying processes, and empowering youth to overcome perceived obstacles. Investing in training and integrating such coaching roles into youth environmental programs is therefore essential, moving beyond simply providing resources to providing the human capital necessary to activate and sustain youth-led action.

The following table summarizes the key characteristics of successful youth engagement strategies, drawing from the experiences shared by the interviewees.

Strategy/Methodology	Principle/Mechanism	Illustrative Example
Experiential Learning	Learning by Doing; Tangible Results	River Cleaning, Farm Visits, Youth for Biodiversity
Participatory Design	Youth Ownership; Relevance	Youth defining "own goals" in river cleaning
Positive & Emotional Connection	Fun; Memory Creation; Intrinsic Motivation	Drama Academy, Youth for Biodiversity (communal living)
Structured Coaching/Mentorship	Skill Sharing; Confidence Building; Overcoming Hurdles	Coach in Generation Europe River Cleaning
Clear Goals & Milestones	Manageability; Visible Progress	Breaking projects into "little steps"
Holistic & Relatable Framing	Intersectional understanding; Personal relevance	Connecting environment to social justice, daily life
Non-Judgmental Approach	Safe space for reflection; Systemic awareness	Avoiding shaming in discussions
Consistent Effort	Sustained engagement; Momentum	Regular meetings/actions (e.g., weekly)

Table 1: Key Characteristics of Successful Youth Engagement Strategies

This table synthesizes the qualitative observations into actionable principles, illustrating why certain methods are effective. For practitioners and policymakers, this provides a clear



framework for designing and supporting programs that are proven to engage youth effectively, making the report highly practical and useful.

4. Successful Initiatives: Case Studies and Key Success Factors

Several initiatives were highlighted by youth workers and community leaders as successful examples of engaging young people in sustainability and climate action, offering valuable lessons on effective methodologies and critical success factors.

The "Generation Europe" River Cleaning Initiative

One community leader interviewed described a highly effective project from the Next Level e.V.'s "Generation Europe" program³, where a group of young people chose to clean a river from trash.

- **Environmental Challenge:** This initiative directly addressed local trash pollution in a river, a tangible and immediate environmental problem.
- **Youth Involvement:** Young people were coached to define their "own goals" for the project, leading them to perceive it as "their own product". They subsequently organized a "big clean-up day" and successfully cleared a section of the river.
- **Success Factors:** A crucial element was the presence of a "coach" or "consultant" who provided a "safe environment to organise something" and answered questions, thereby building confidence and practical know-how. The strong sense of "youth ownership," where participants viewed the project as "their own product," fostered immense pride and commitment. The initiative's "tangible impact"—the visible results of a cleaner river—provided immediate positive reinforcement. Furthermore, the project gained broader recognition, inspiring others and earning a nomination for a sustainability prize in Erfurt. A clear concept and well-defined task divisions also contributed significantly to its effectiveness.

The Community Garden (Erfurt)

This initiative, recognized with the "Thuringian Nature Conservation Prize" in 2024, focuses on establishing and maintaining a green space with active engagement from children and young adults.

- **Environmental Challenge:** It primarily addresses biodiversity loss in urban environments and mitigates the urban heat island effect by enhancing natural river valley areas.
- **Youth Involvement:** Young people, including two 25-year-old educators, were instrumental from the "early start in autumn 2021," with one focusing on PR and both

³ <https://generationeurope.org/en/>



being "key on raising the first money for the garden by CrowdFunding". Children also participated for one season.

- Success Factors: Fostering an "inner willingness" and responsibility among participants, leveraging diverse skills, and providing "Free time to get to know each other better and to connect (not work)" were key. Challenges included "personal fights" (addressed by refocusing on the "greater vision") and overly strict rules (solution: "Be open").

"Greencademy" Hands-on Activities

The series of "Greencademy"⁴ Erasmus+ Youth Exchanges (by Next Level e.V.) demonstrated the power of practical engagement in fostering environmental awareness.

- Environmental Challenge: The activities aimed at general environmental awareness and promoting sustainable practices.
- Youth Involvement: Participants exhibited significantly "much more enthusiasm and much more into doing" when activities were practical and experiential. Examples included visiting a farm, participating in river cleaning, or making chocolate.
- Success Factors: The "hands-on approach is the key factor that contributed to the success". This reinforces the principle that young people "learn much more by doing" than through purely theoretical information, leading to deeper engagement and understanding.

"Dramacademy Kids Camp"

One youth worker highlighted the "Drama Academy" as a successful initiative that leveraged creativity for environmental education.

- Environmental Challenge: The project addressed various sustainability topics through artistic expression.
- Youth Involvement: Children aged 10-14 years created theatre performances on sustainability themes, employing a creative and engaging approach. A professional guided the creative process, ensuring that the ideas and narratives originated from the children themselves rather than being imposed.
- Success Factors: The initiative's success stemmed from its fun, creative, and positive experience, allowing children to explore and express their understanding of sustainability in their own unique ways.

"Youth for Biodiversity" Project

Another youth worker detailed the "Youth for Biodiversity" project as a particularly impactful initiative.

⁴ <https://next-level.world/en/projects/greencademy-2024/>



- **Environmental Challenge:** This project focused on biodiversity prioritization, fostering engagement with nature, and promoting sustainable living practices.
- **Youth Involvement:** Ten young people of diverse nationalities spent a weekend in a nature reserve under intentionally challenging conditions, including limited commodities (no shower, boiling water for drinking, communal sleeping arrangements). They participated in activities such as hiking, mindfulness sessions, outdoor cinema, and reflective discussions.
- **Success Factors:** The "immersive communal living" experience, despite its challenges, fostered "commitment, responsibility, team building" among participants. The project successfully created a strong "emotional bond with the topic" and lasting "memory" through fun and direct connection with nature and peers. Activities were designed to spark deep reflections on human impact on the environment. A testament to its impact, participants were so committed that they transported their trash back to Erfurt for proper separation, demonstrating a profound sense of responsibility.

Community leader's Repair Workshop and Urban Gardening Projects

A youth worker's ongoing initiatives also exemplify successful, community-based approaches to sustainability.

- **Environmental Challenge:** His repair workshop directly addresses waste reduction and promotes a circular economy, while urban gardening projects contribute to local food sustainability and green spaces.
- **Youth Involvement:** The repair workshop operates as an "open format for skill-sharing," welcoming participants to learn repair techniques. His urban gardening projects involve partial cooperation with schools, bringing students directly into hands-on cultivation.
- **Success Factors:** The open and accessible format, emphasis on skill sharing, and regularity of the repair workshop contribute to its sustained engagement. The urban gardening projects benefit from dedicated volunteer-led efforts and partial integration with formal education.

The success of initiatives like the river cleaning project, which not only achieved a tangible environmental outcome but also gained broader recognition through a prize nomination and inspired others, highlights the potential for local, youth-led actions to influence wider societal narratives and potentially policy. This demonstrates that grassroots efforts are not isolated but can generate positive feedback loops and amplify their impact. Such recognition can significantly influence public perception of youth capabilities, garner support from local authorities, and potentially inform future policy decisions. It shows that effective grassroots



initiatives can contribute to a broader shift in societal attitudes and priorities regarding climate action, demonstrating the power of youth agency to create ripple effects.

However, a recurring challenge is the long-term sustainability of these initiatives due to the "instability of personal circumstances," such as young people moving for university or other life changes. This implies a critical need for stable, overarching "umbrella" or "hub" structures that can provide continuity and support even as individual participants change. Individual projects, no matter how successful, often lack long-term viability due to their reliance on transient individual commitment. An "umbrella" organization or hub provides the institutional memory, stable resources, and continuous support structure that allows initiatives to persist and evolve even as individual participants come and go. Therefore, funding and policy should prioritize the creation and strengthening of such stable, long-term support structures rather than solely focusing on one-off project grants. This ensures that the knowledge, networks, and impact generated by youth initiatives are retained and continue to grow over time.

5. Needed Support and Resources for Youth Workers and Programs

Youth workers and survey respondents consistently articulate a clear need for enhanced support and resources to improve the quality and reach of sustainability education programs and to better empower young people. These needs span financial, informational, capacity-building, and structural dimensions.

Financial Support and Accessibility

Direct financial support for youth initiatives is repeatedly emphasized as crucial. There is a pronounced call for more "free" opportunities and camps, particularly to ensure accessibility for children from less privileged or non-academic backgrounds. Beyond project-specific grants, interviewees highlight the fundamental need for proper, consistent funding for programs and stable, secure jobs for youth workers themselves. This financial stability is seen as essential for youth workers to dedicate consistent effort and expertise to program development and implementation. Survey respondents from Thuringia also requested "Financial support for green projects" (4 mentions).

Information and Guidance

A significant gap exists in the accessibility of information. An interviewed youth worker notes that while financial opportunities are available, young people and youth workers often lack clear informational sessions on "how actually you can get funds," including practical details like specific links, platforms, and step-by-step guidance. This information is often perceived as "just like words blown away" rather than actionable advice. A youth worker interviewed



further highlights the absence of a central "hub of information transfer" in cities, observing that groups currently work "on their own" and information about ongoing projects is "not very Compact organised". This extends to practical guidance on "knowledge about regulations" for larger-scale projects, which can deter youth from pursuing ambitious initiatives. Survey data from Thuringia shows that "Lack of knowledge on how to get involved" was the most common barrier to participation (6 mentions).

The critical information gap, repeatedly highlighted by the absence of clear guidance on funding and the lack of a central "hub of information transfer," points to a significant systemic failure in knowledge management and accessibility within the youth work sector. This is not merely about a lack of funds, but a lack of accessible information about available funds and opportunities. This information asymmetry means that even if resources exist, they are effectively inaccessible to youth workers and young people due to poor dissemination and a lack of centralized, user-friendly guidance. This systemic issue requires solutions focused on creating accessible, centralized, and clearly articulated information pathways for funding, resources, and best practices. This could involve online platforms, dedicated advisory services, or regular public information sessions.

Capacity Building for Youth Workers

There is a clear demand for enhanced professional development for youth workers. "Green competence development" and "extra education" are needed to define what it "really mean[s] to have green skills" and how to effectively tackle environmental sustainability. A respondent advocates for training that adopts a "holistic point of view," enabling youth workers to integrate environmental aspects with social and economic justice. A youth worker suggests opportunities for youth workers to "learn from the best," particularly from experienced experts in outdoor education, to serve as role models and enhance their practical skills. A youth worker interviewed also stresses the importance of proper objectives and advance preparation in program development, indicating a need for structured training in program design and management. Survey respondents from Thuringia also highly requested "More education and workshops on climate change" (9 mentions).

The call for "green competence development" and learning from "experts in outdoor education," coupled with the need for "secure and stable" working conditions for youth workers, indicates a clear demand for the professionalization of youth environmental education. This involves establishing formal training pathways and ensuring sustainable career opportunities for youth workers in this field. It suggests that relying on volunteers or ad-hoc training is insufficient for high-quality programs. Instead, there is a need for investment in developing accredited training programs for "green skills" in youth work, creating stable job opportunities, and fostering a professional community of practice. This



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long-term investment in human capital is crucial for improving the quality and reach of sustainability education.

Structural and Organizational Support

Interviewees also highlight the need for more robust structural and organizational support. One of the respondents points to the necessity of "stable organization" and a clear "head" for consistent leadership and sustained effort in projects. He also emphasizes the need for "more stable structures" to facilitate regular cooperation between schools and non-formal education projects, bridging the existing gap. Access to suitable "places to meet" and physical land for projects is identified as a major challenge, particularly in urban areas. Edisona notes that better coordination within projects is needed, with a clear "head of the thing" to effectively coordinate tasks and ensure individual responsibility among team members. Survey respondents from Thuringia also desired "More involvement from schools or youth organizations" (7 mentions) and "A stronger community of young people engaged in climate action" (6 mentions).

6. The Role of Local Authorities and Policymakers in Fostering Youth Climate Action

Local authorities and policymakers are identified as having a pivotal role in fostering youth climate action, extending beyond mere financial provision to encompass systemic and cultural influence.

Direct Support Mechanisms

Youth workers consistently call for direct support mechanisms from policymakers. Edisona explicitly recommends that policymakers "Offer training for youth workers" in environmental sustainability, recognizing this as a crucial investment. Authorities are also urged to announce and facilitate access to funding opportunities for youth environmental initiatives, perhaps through regular "public meetings for example once in a month" to ensure information reaches youth workers effectively. A respondent adds that authorities should help groups find "places to meet" and secure funding, while another youth worker from Thuringia stresses the need for more "summer camps" and opportunities to ensure broad accessibility. The provision of proper, consistent funding for programs and the establishment of "fixed jobs" and "good working conditions" for youth workers are seen as fundamental for sustainable engagement.

Policy and Systemic Influence

Beyond direct grants, policymakers hold significant sway in shaping the broader environment for sustainability. They need to demonstrate greater "cooperation and openness" to working with youngsters and youth workers; Edisona specifically notes that policymakers in Thuringia



are "not that cooperative". This indicates a critical disconnect between the grassroots needs and the political will or capacity at the local/regional level, which acts as a significant systemic barrier to progress. Addressing this requires not just new policies, but a fundamental shift in political culture towards greater openness, collaboration, and responsiveness to youth sector needs.

A youth worker advocates for environmental education to become a "crucial part of school" curricula, moving beyond being solely an NGO-led initiative to a fundamental component of formal education. A respondent emphasizes that policymakers play a crucial role in influencing the "narrative of sustainability," highlighting its benefits (e.g., community building) and consistently reminding the public of its importance. Sustainability needs to be consistently on the agenda for all policy decisions, particularly regarding infrastructure investments, public transport, and urban planning.

A youth worker interviewed suggests that policymakers implement "certain rules or laws," such as supermarket regulations to reduce plastic packaging, and impose "higher taxes" on environmentally harmful practices. Concurrently, they should provide incentives for sustainable choices, such as deposit systems for bottles. This approach shapes a more sustainable societal framework through both disincentives and positive reinforcement. A respondent describes this interaction as a "ping-pong game" where politics must demonstrate recognition of scientific information, and citizens, in turn, need to be well-informed to hold politicians accountable.

Survey results from Thuringia indicate that young people feel their voices are not fully heard on environmental issues, with 9 out of 13 respondents stating "Sometimes, but not enough" or "No, I feel ignored". Despite this, an overwhelming majority (10 out of 13) believe young people should have a "bigger role in shaping climate policies and decisions". This highlights a clear desire for greater youth participation in policy-making.

Policymakers' crucial role extends far beyond merely providing financial grants. Their influence encompasses shaping the broader enabling environment for sustainability through narrative control, the integration of environmental themes into formal education, and the creation of structural incentives or disincentives. This necessitates a holistic policy approach, not just ad-hoc funding. Policymakers' impact is pervasive, affecting daily choices and systemic structures. They can create an environment where sustainable choices are easier and more desirable, and where environmental literacy is foundational. Therefore, recommendations for policymakers should be comprehensive, addressing not only direct financial support but also legislative changes, urban planning, educational reforms, and public communication strategies that normalize and incentivize sustainable living.



7. Comprehensive Recommendations for Enhancing Sustainability Education and Youth Empowerment

Based on the extensive insights from youth workers, survey respondents, and best practice analyses in Germany, a multi-faceted approach is essential to genuinely enhance sustainability education and empower young people in climate action. The recommendations span pedagogical shifts, youth agency empowerment, youth worker support, and critical systemic and policy changes.

Shift in Pedagogical Approach

A fundamental shift in how sustainability is taught and presented is necessary. Instead of relying on fear-based messaging, programs should "invite and inspire" young people to engage in environmental protection, fostering a sense of invitation rather than obligation. Education should adopt a "holistic and intersectional" viewpoint, integrating environmental aspects with social and economic justice. This means demonstrating "how other communities are affected by climate change," making the topic more relatable and highlighting its broader human implications.

Prioritizing "experiential learning" is paramount. Emphasis should be placed on "hands-on practises" and "small actions" over theoretical instruction, as youth "learn much more by doing". Activities should be designed to "foster positive experiences and emotional bonds," ensuring they are fun, create emotional connections with nature and peers, and build positive memories. Furthermore, a "non-judgmental framing" is crucial; discussions should promote reflection on individual actions without shame, acknowledging the systemic influences on unsustainable behaviors.

Empowering Youth Agency

To truly empower young people, their active involvement in solutions is key. A "participatory design" approach is recommended, where young people are involved in co-creating projects and solutions, recognizing that "they know best what's better for them". Providing "structured coaching and mentorship" is vital. Dedicated coaches or consultants can offer skill-sharing, answer practical questions (e.g., on regulations), and build youth confidence to initiate and scale projects.

To combat feelings of overwhelm, youth workers should help young people "break down complexity," transforming large environmental challenges into "little steps and milestones" to make action feel manageable and demonstrate tangible progress. Critically, fostering "community and belonging" is essential. Creating opportunities for young people to identify with their surroundings and community naturally leads to greater responsibility and collaboration.

Strengthening Youth Worker Support



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The effectiveness of youth programs is directly tied to the capabilities and support of youth workers. Investing in "green competence development" through formal training and professional development is crucial to equip youth workers with specific "green skills" and a holistic understanding of sustainability education. Facilitating "access to expertise" by connecting youth workers with experienced experts in outdoor education and other relevant fields can provide valuable role models and mentors. Importantly, ensuring "stable working conditions," including financial security and stable employment, enables youth workers to dedicate consistent effort and expertise to program development and implementation.

Systemic and Policy Changes

The most powerful overarching recommendation is to integrate sustainability education not as a standalone topic, but deeply within broader frameworks of social justice, community building, and personal development. This approach, leveraging experiential learning and emotional connection, addresses youth's existing priorities and fosters sustained, authentic engagement. When sustainability is presented in isolation, it struggles to compete with more immediate social concerns or personal conveniences. By integrating it with themes like social justice (how climate change impacts vulnerable communities), community resilience (how collective action builds stronger neighborhoods), and personal well-being (the joy of connecting with nature), it becomes inherently more relevant and emotionally resonant. Experiential learning facilitates this integration by allowing youth to feel the connections rather than just intellectualize them. This requires a paradigm shift in curriculum design and program delivery, moving from a purely environmental focus to an interdisciplinary, human-centered approach that positions sustainability as integral to a just and thriving society.

Beyond direct program funding, a critical need is for the development of a robust systemic infrastructure that supports youth workers and initiatives. This includes centralized information platforms, dedicated physical spaces, and formalized professional development pathways, thereby shifting the burden from individual initiative to a supportive ecosystem that facilitates long-term, scalable impact. The identified gaps in clear guidance on funding, the lack of a central "hub of information transfer," and the difficulty of finding physical spaces for projects, coupled with the absence of secure and stable working conditions for youth workers, highlight systemic deficiencies. These deficiencies mean that even highly motivated youth and capable youth workers struggle to initiate, sustain, or scale projects effectively. The impact remains localized and often short-lived due to individual burnout or lack of institutional memory and support. Therefore, policymakers and funding bodies should prioritize investments in building this foundational infrastructure. This includes developing digital platforms for resource sharing, establishing community hubs or green spaces for youth projects, and creating sustainable career paths for youth environmental educators.



Such systemic support is vital for moving from fragmented, short-term projects to a cohesive, scalable, and enduring movement of youth climate action.

The following table provides actionable recommendations for enhancing youth climate action in Germany, categorized by area and target stakeholder.

Recommendation Area	Specific Recommendation	Target Stakeholder(s)	Rationale/Expected Benefit
Program Design & Delivery	Shift from fear-based to invitational/inspirational messaging	Youth Workers, NGOs, Educators	Fosters intrinsic motivation, reduces eco-anxiety, increases genuine engagement.
	Integrate sustainability with social/economic justice	Youth Workers, NGOs, Educational Institutions	Increases relevance, connects to youth's existing priorities, promotes holistic understanding.
	Prioritize hands-on, experiential learning activities	Youth Workers, NGOs	Enhances practical skills, deepens understanding through doing, promotes behavioral change.
	Design for positive experiences & emotional connections	Youth Workers, NGOs	Creates lasting engagement, fosters a love for nature, builds community bonds.
	Adopt non-judgmental approach to individual actions	Youth Workers, NGOs, Educators	Encourages open dialogue, reduces shame, promotes collective responsibility.
Youth Agency Empowerment	Implement participatory project design & co-creation	Youth Workers, NGOs	Increases youth ownership, ensures relevance, builds leadership skills.
	Provide dedicated coaching & mentorship support	Youth Workers, NGOs, Local Authorities	Builds confidence, offers practical guidance, helps navigate bureaucratic hurdles.
	Break down large challenges into manageable steps	Youth Workers, NGOs	Prevents overwhelm, demonstrates progress, sustains motivation.
	Cultivate community & sense of belonging	Youth Workers, NGOs, Community Leaders	Fosters responsibility, encourages collaboration, strengthens local initiatives.
Youth Worker Empowerment	Invest in "green competence" development & training	Local Authorities, Educational Institutions, NGOs	Equips youth workers with specialized skills, improves program quality.
	Facilitate access to expert role models & mentors	Local Authorities, NGOs	Provides practical learning, inspires best practices, enhances professional growth.
	Ensure stable & secure working conditions for youth workers	Local Authorities, Funding Bodies, NGOs	Attracts and retains talent, enables consistent effort, reduces burnout.



Policy & Systemic Reform	Establish centralized information hubs for resources	Local Authorities, Funding Bodies	Improves access to funding, best practices, and project guidance; reduces isolation.
	Allocate dedicated physical spaces for youth projects	Local Authorities, Urban Planners	Overcomes land scarcity, provides consistent venues for hands-on activities.
	Institutionalize environmental education in formal curricula	Educational Ministries, Schools	Builds foundational knowledge, ensures widespread exposure, normalizes sustainability.
	Promote proactive policy dialogue & cooperation with youth sector	Local Authorities, Policymakers	Integrates youth perspectives, ensures policies are responsive to grassroots needs.
	Implement policy incentives & regulations for sustainable choices	Local Authorities, Government	Shapes societal behavior, makes sustainable options more accessible/desirable.
	Fund evaluation & dissemination of project impacts	Funding Bodies, NGOs	Ensures accountability, facilitates replication of successful models, informs future policy.
	Prioritize quality & depth of engagement over quantity of activities	Funding Bodies, NGOs	Leads to more lasting impact and genuine behavioral change.

Table 2: Actionable Recommendations for Enhancing Youth Climate Action in Germany

8. Conclusion

The comprehensive analysis of surveys with young people, interviews with youth workers, and best practice initiatives in Germany reveals a significant potential for youth engagement in climate action, underpinned by a generally high level of environmental awareness. However, this potential is often constrained by a complex interplay of psychological, systemic, and cultural barriers. Young people grapple with eco-anxiety and a sense of futility, exacerbated by a perceived lack of practical, impactful opportunities and an information deficit regarding resources. The preference for convenience and an underlying blame culture further complicate widespread, sustained participation.

Despite these challenges, the effectiveness of experiential, hands-on, and participatory learning is unequivocally demonstrated. Initiatives that foster emotional connections to nature, provide structured coaching, and break down complex problems into manageable steps prove most successful in cultivating genuine and lasting engagement. The success of local, youth-led projects underscores their capacity to inspire broader societal shifts and influence policy.

To fully harness this potential, a comprehensive, multi-layered intervention is required. This necessitates a pedagogical shift towards inspiring, holistic, and action-oriented education. It



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demands robust support for youth workers through professional development and stable working conditions. Crucially, systemic reforms from local authorities and policymakers are indispensable. This includes establishing centralized information hubs, providing dedicated physical spaces, integrating environmental education into formal curricula, and implementing policies that incentivize sustainable choices while actively cooperating with youth organizations. Prioritizing the evaluation and dissemination of successful programs is also vital to ensure accountability and facilitate the replication of best practices.

Ultimately, empowering the next generation for a sustainable future requires a collaborative effort that transcends individual initiatives. By building a supportive ecosystem that fosters a deep sense of community and belonging, and by strategically addressing the identified barriers, Thuringia can cultivate a generation of young people who are not only aware but are truly empowered agents of change in the fight against climate change.

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