

Intergenerational justice and youth participation



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Executive summary

This report explores the topic of intergenerational justice, youth perspectives on environmental and societal concerns, and youth participation mechanisms across Europe.

Intergenerational justice

Academic literature frames intergenerational justice as the ethical responsibility to meet present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet theirs, emphasising distributive, procedural, and recognitional dimensions. However, a purely forward-looking, distributive approach risks technocratic decision-making that overlooks historical contexts, inherited burdens, and ethical considerations, potentially perpetuating inequalities. A more holistic perspective integrates past, present, and future obligations, acknowledges historical injustices, and embeds restorative justice alongside distributive and procedural strategies.

The youth involved in this study largely echo these insights. They understand intergenerational justice as the obligation to consider long-term consequences of today's actions, particularly in environmental and climate contexts, while also recognising the importance of addressing structural inequities and historical responsibilities. Youth often frame intergenerational justice as both ethical and practical: they are aware of their dual role as current stakeholders and proxies for future generations. However, they emphasise that this proxy role is conditional — meaningful participation, transparent feedback, and institutional support are required for them to endorse acting as representatives of future generations. Youth further stress that intergenerational justice is strengthened through dialogue across generations, fostering empathy, mutual understanding, and shared responsibility.

Youth as key stakeholders

Recognising youth diversity is essential to avoid homogenising their perspectives. When meaningfully included, their engagement enhances transparency, accountability, and innovation, while fostering long-term civic participation and skill development. Youth are also disproportionately affected by today's policies and have a right to shape decisions that impact their futures. Nevertheless, tokenistic participation, power imbalances, socio-economic inequalities, and mismatches between youth engagement preferences and formal policy processes remain major barriers.

Youth articulate a high awareness and nuanced understanding of the interconnections between ecological, social, and political dimensions of sustainability. Their concerns span local and global issues — from air quality, green spaces, and mental health to biodiversity loss, deforestation, and unsustainable consumption patterns — highlighting both personal and collective stakes in the future. Importantly, youth stress that solutions must be integrated: technical fixes alone are insufficient, and meaningful action requires the combination of social, ecological, and governance interventions.

Diverse mechanisms of participation

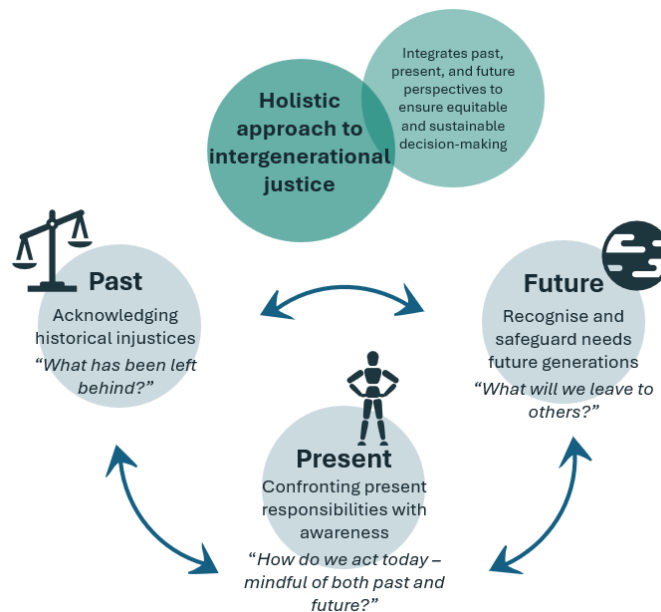
Mechanisms for including youth in environmental and climate decision-making are being tested across Europe. The practices vary between countries and decision-making levels, including the European Youth Dialogue, Local Conferences of Youth (LCOY), Youth Climate and Nature Councils, local Youth Councils and Commissions, and Youth Participatory Budgeting. Capacity building programs, strategies to boost youth's trust in institutions and youth impact assessments are also being used to integrate young and future generations' concerns into policy making. Strengthening intergenerational dialogue, accountability, capacity, and diversity in participation are needed to foster intergenerational justice in decision-making.

Key insights and recommendations

The overarching findings point to five policy recommendations for fostering intergenerational justice and youth engagement, for local regional, and national government, as well as EU-level:

- **Ensure constructive and action-oriented intergenerational dialogue** – Prioritise co-created spaces for exchange across generations, ensuring youth are partners rather than token representatives.
- **Invest in generational capacity development** – Strengthen capacities of both youth and decision-makers to understand and act on intergenerational issues.
- **Build trust and accountability** – Embed youth engagement in continuous, transparent processes that demonstrate how their input informs policy.
- **Increase diversity and inclusion** – Address self-selection biases and ensure that participatory mechanisms reach marginalised and less represented youth.
- **Operationalise holistic intergenerational justice** – Ensure institutional representation for future generations and embed these in long-term planning and impact assessments.

Operationalising a holistic approach to intergenerational justice (see figure below) requires institutional representation for future generations, systematic intergenerational dialogue, long-term planning frameworks, inclusive decision-making structures, and accountability mechanisms. Together, these strategies enable youth concerns to translate into meaningful, policy-relevant action, fostering governance that is sustainable, equitable, and attentive to the needs of past, present, and future generations.



Source: by authors

Overarching recommendations and practical steps towards intergenerational justice

(source by authors)

Key Recommendation	Key insight from the study	Practical steps
Prioritise intergenerational dialogue 	Dialogue between generations is key. Responsibility for intergenerational justice should not solely fall on youth and should be seen as a shared responsibility across generations.	Focus on the co-creation of formal mechanisms for intergenerational dialogue, where youth perspectives are integral to policy and decision-making. Youth should be on equal footing and considered key partners, rather than bearing the full weight of the issue.
Invest in intergenerational capacity development 	Capacity-building efforts for intergenerational governance must extend beyond youth. While many programs focus on youth, decision-makers also need strengthened capacities.	Create spaces for mutual learning. Mentor programs can be useful; youth can act as mentors as well. Older generations should be willing to test, learn, and adapt decision-making structures to better reflect intergenerational issues and needs.
Build trust and accountability 	Short-term engagement and tokenistic practices undermine youth trust in governance. Trust between youth and governments requires long-term commitment and transparency.	Integrate youth voices into decision-making as a continuous process. Establish transparent feedback mechanisms to show how youth input has been incorporated, which recommendations have been acted upon, and why others have not. This demonstrates that youth voices are genuinely valued.
Increase diversity 	Avoid self-selection bias: Current participation mechanisms often favour self-selected, privileged youth, leaving marginalised groups underrepresented.	Collaborate with schools and implement youth impact assessments to reach the whole generation. Use youth citizen panels as alternative mechanisms. Inclusive methods for engaging less privileged youth are needed to complement existing participatory processes.
Operationalise holistic intergenerational justice 	Intergenerational justice requires attention to present, future, and past obligations. Youth engagement alone is insufficient without structural and procedural support.	Institutionalise offices or advisory bodies for future generations. Integrate sustainability metrics and long-term impact assessments. Ensure participation mechanisms are inclusive, account for historical responsibilities, and enable meaningful youth influence.



1. Introduction

1.1 Intergenerational justice in a global sustainability context

In response to the existential threats posed by the triple planetary crisis – climate change, pollution and biodiversity loss – the European Union (EU) strives to transition from unsustainable production and consumption patterns to a climate-neutral, circular and sustainable economy by 2050. This ambition constitutes the core of the European Green Deal (EGD) and supports the EU’s commitment to the Paris Agreement to limit global warming to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels. However, long-term visions for a sustainable Europe are currently under threat as environmental crises are coinciding with multiple socio-economic and geopolitical challenges (European Environment Agency, 2025). Given the increased focus on defence and competitiveness, it is crucial to remember that the EU’s green ambitions are essential to its security, resilience and prosperity – especially amidst these turbulent times. Intergenerational justice draws attention to the unsustainability of the current short-termism. Likewise, the 8th Environmental Action Programme (EAP) prioritises the long-term objective to achieve well-being within planetary boundaries, a climate-neutral circular economy, and a significant reduction of existing inequalities. With the 8th EAP, the EU thus “sets the pace for ensuring the prosperity of present and future generations globally, guided by intergenerational responsibility” (Decision (EU) 2022/591 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 6 April 2022 on a General Union Environment Action Programme to 2030, 2022).

Delivering on these commitments necessitates sustainability transitions that radically change our ways of living, consuming, and producing. Given the dire outlook for most environmental trends, facing Europe’s complex sustainability challenges on a systemic level remains indispensable. Whilst urgently required transitions offer opportunities for the resilience and competitiveness of the EU, they also entail challenges and bear the risk of disproportionately affecting vulnerable people and places. Since the EU is committed to “leave no one behind”, it is imperative to prioritise justice in sustainability transitions for present and future generations.

1.1.1 Sustainability transitions and intergenerational justice

Sustainability transitions can be considered just when “processes of transformative change ‘improve the quality of life of current and future generations, both human and non-human, within ecological boundaries while eliminating injustices that are triggered or exacerbated by unsustainability and its underlying causes’ (Avelino et al., 2023)” (European Environment Agency, 2024, p. 4). Thus far, the European Environment Agency (EEA) has emphasised justice across the dimensions of distribution, procedures, recognition, and restoration (European Environment Agency, 2024a). These dimensions of justice are enhanced by the consideration of additional aspects including intersectionality, spatiality, and temporality (European Environment Agency, 2024b). Specifically, temporality highlights the importance of exploring considerations for *intergenerational* justice further. Despite the growing interest in intergenerational justice, the concept lacks the specificity needed to operationalise it in the context of sustainability transitions.

That is why the EEA is concerned with developing knowledge on intergenerational justice with an initial focus on the contributions of youth, whose perspectives have hitherto been marginalised. The reasons for this initial focus are further explicated in this report.

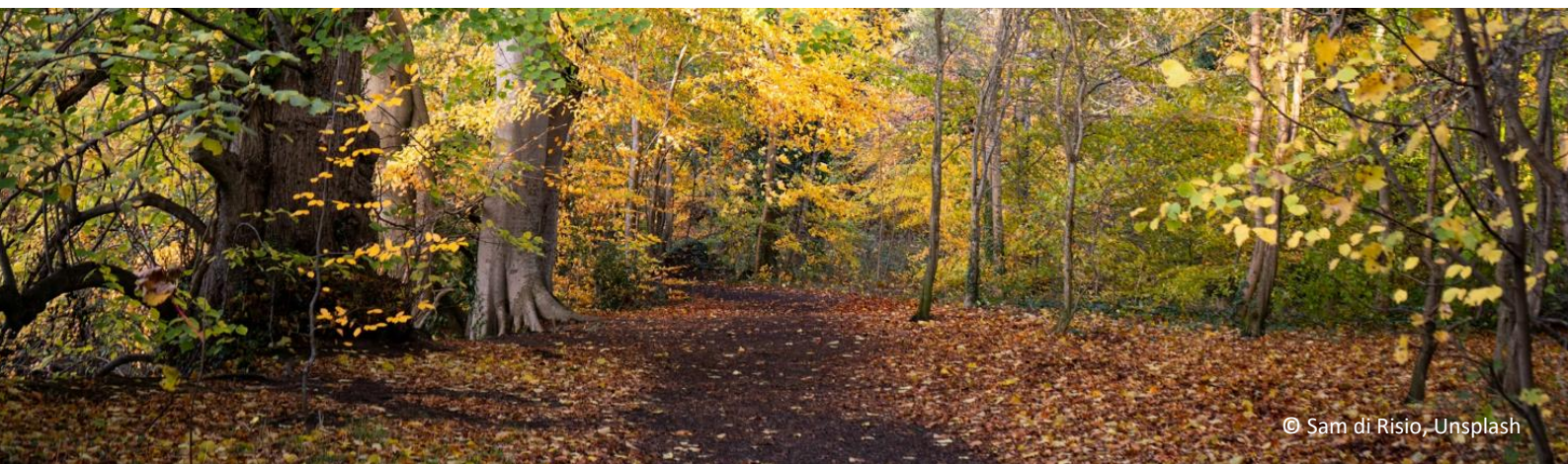
Whilst the EEA concentrates its efforts on *intergenerational justice in the European context of environment and climate*, the European Commission (EC) recently launched a process to develop a European Intergenerational Fairness Strategy. As part of her political guidelines for 2024 to 2029, Ursula von der Leyen stated that “We must also ensure that decisions taken today do not harm future generations and that there is increased solidarity and engagement between people of different ages” (von der Leyen, Ursula, 2024). To this end, Glenn Micallef was appointed Commissioner for Intergenerational Fairness, Youth, Culture and Sport, and all Commissioners were asked to hold a first Youth Policy Dialogues within the first 100 days of their mandate to integrate youth views on the political agenda (see also Chapter 4.2.2). Whilst the EC’s efforts to scope an Intergenerational Fairness Strategy are driven by societal concerns across various dimensions, the EEA is uniquely positioned to develop knowledge on intergenerational justice and youth perspectives in the context of the triple planetary crisis, i.e., climate change, pollution and biodiversity loss.

1.2 A reader’s guide

The report aims to build knowledge within the EEA considering the focus of the current European Commission on intergenerational fairness and on the involvement of youth in the work of the different Directorates General.

The report provides examples of how public officials at different levels of governance have enabled access to democratic decision-making and governance for the youth and unborn generations to increase their ability to feed into and influence decision-making in the field of sustainability in Europe. This includes case studies of mechanisms that have been implemented thus far and documentation of any implications or impacts they have had on decision-making and sustainability to date. In addition, the report considers the role that youth activism has played in influencing the European agenda on sustainability.

The report consists of three individual parts, which concentrate on i) intergenerational justice (Chapter 2); ii) diversity in youth concerns and organisations (Chapter 3); and iii) case studies on youth participatory mechanisms (Chapter 4). Policy recommendations seek concrete ways to enhance intergenerational justice for the future (Chapter 5). The methodology and data behind the studies are described in Chapter 6.



2. Intergenerational justice

2.1 Conceptualisations of intergenerational justice and equity

“Sustainable development seeks to meet the needs and aspirations of the present without compromising the ability to meet those of the future”

Brundtland Report 1987

The highly influential report “Our Common Future” by the Brundtland commission marks an important shift in global discourse: besides laying the foundation for the understanding of sustainability in terms of an interconnectedness between economic, social and environmental goals, it also brought about an intergenerational perspective to decision-making (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987). It underscored the ethical responsibility of current generations to ensure that future generations inherit a world that can meet their needs and aspirations. It is this understanding of intergenerational equity that has found its way into decision-making and that has been influencing especially climate and environment related policy and decisions (e.g., Ohlsson & Skillington, 2023; Weiss, 2021). However, as Ohlsson & Skillington (2023, p. 224) underscore: “[t]he need for equity between generations is clearly recognised although what intergenerational justice actually means and how it will be asserted is not clarified”.

The increasing interest in the intergenerational perspective correlates with growing concerns over the escalating impacts of climate change, pollution and biodiversity loss in Europe and across the world (Knappe & Renn, 2022). Decades of greenhouse gas emissions have triggered a global climate crisis, pushing the planet beyond its safe operating limits - known as planetary boundaries - within which humanity can thrive without causing irreversible damage to the Earth system (Kotzé & Knappe, 2023; Planetary Boundaries Science (PBScience), 2025; Rockström et al., 2009; Steffen et al., 2015). This profound human-driven transformation has led scholars to define the current geological epoch as the Anthropocene (Crutzen, 2002; Pickering et al., 2022; Zalasiewicz et al., 2019). These developments have intensified debates about the ethical implications of leaving future generations to bear the burden of current unsustainable choices. In this context, intergenerational justice has emerged as a key framework to highlight the injustices both caused by and resulting from human-induced issues such as climate change (Knappe & Renn, 2022).

2.1.1 Temporal dimensions of justice

Intergenerational justice is predominantly understood “as a concern for the welfare of future generations” (Golub et al., 2013) in relation to social and ecological, or as the “duties that present citizens owe to the young and unborn generations” (Thompson, 2009). In this conceptualisation that is most frequently used in science and policy and inspired by the Brundtland report (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987), intergenerational justice is often understood as a demand for distributive justice, where present generations bear a duty not to pursue policies that maximize benefits for themselves at the

cost of the well-being of latter generations (Knappe & Renn, 2022). Here, an explicit relation between present and future is made, emphasising the impact that decisions have on the future.

Reciprocity between present and future

The Brundtland report made the first explicit introduction of the element of equity, defined in terms of abilities to meet needs, in governing the relations between generations (Bertram, 2023). Following this definition of intergenerational equity, the concept has become subsumed into various preceding principles on environmental governance and development, including the principle of sustainable development, the precautionary principle, and most recently, the rights of future generations. In doing so, the Brundtland report inspired an understanding of intergenerational equity that has fostered long-term planning and precautionary action (Bertram, 2023). To date, this ethical relationship of responsibility between present and future has been operationalised via sustainability goals, as well as regulations on debt and use of public goods. A similar ethical logic is found in Rawls' "just savings principle," which frames intergenerational justice as a matter of fairness between generations, requiring that each generation preserves sufficient resources and institutions to sustain just conditions for the next (Rawls, 1999). This understanding of intergenerational justice places stronger emphasis on the reciprocal relation between the present and future, arguing that current generations have duties to save for the future, just as they can expect future generations to uphold and build upon the institutions and values they inherit. While Rawls acknowledged that actual reciprocity between generations is not possible in the strict sense, he proposed a "chain of obligations" where each generation contributes to justice out of a sense of fairness, not direct benefit. The Rawlsian way of understanding intergenerational justice opens up to understanding intergenerational justice in both a distributive manner, as well as through recognition and procedural dimensions.

Beyond present-future relations

However, Thompson and a diverse group of scholars have been calling for conceptualisations of intergenerational justice that take even a step further and **extend beyond the present-future** relation to also include past obligations, decisions, and entitlements (Golub et al., 2013; Thompson, 2009). They argue that the present-future focus is narrow and risks being unjust by ignoring, overlooking or even reproducing past injustices. Instead, acknowledgement of relations to the past helps to recognise what burdens and debts have been inherited (Golub et al., 2013), but also what entitlements and duties the past has left (Thompson, 2009). A view of the past is crucial to operationalising restorative justice and enabling actions to address historical injustice but also includes a view of accountability for the past in the present and towards the future.

The temporal framing of intergenerational justice has significant implications for how justice itself is understood (see **table 1**). **A linear Present → Future framing**, as found in the Brundtland Report and many sustainability discourses, primarily **lends itself to distributive justice**: the idea that current generations must avoid causing harm and ensure a fair share of resources and opportunities for those who come after. Moving toward a **reciprocal Present ↔ Future framing** expands this logic by recognising future generations not just as passive recipients, but as morally relevant participants in shared political and ecological systems. **This opens space for considerations of procedural and recognition justice** — ensuring that diverse voices today (such as youth) are included in decisions that affect long-term futures, and that future generations are institutionally represented. Finally, adopting a **Past ↔ Present ↔ Future perspective** adds a **restorative dimension**, acknowledging how historical injustices, exploitation, or exclusion shape present inequalities and future vulnerabilities. It introduces obligations of repair and historical accountability, linking justice not only to foresight, but also to memory and continuity across generations.

Table 1. Diverse conceptualisations of intergenerational justice and their operationalisation

Source: own elaboration

Temporal orientation	Present → future	Present ↔ Future	Past ↔ Present ↔ Future
Conceptualisation used by whom	Dominant conceptualisation, used in Brundtland report and many policy frameworks (e.g. SGD's)	John Rawls and other liberal philosophical accounts that consider fairness between overlapping generations	Janna Thompson and relational/communitarian approaches to historical and intergenerational justice
Understanding of justice	Need-based, focused on avoiding harm to future generations and enabling them to meet basic needs.	Rawlsian conception of “justice as fairness” suggests that each generation owes a fair share to the next	Relational and historical justice: duties to honour, repair, and continue the moral and institutional legacy.
Intergenerational relations based on	Stewardship and responsibility of the present to the future	Reciprocity between overlapping generations: future people as hypothetical co-citizens	Mutual obligations across generations, emphasises memory, historical accountability, and continuity
Operationalisation	Distributive justice elements, goal setting, sustainability metrics; often policy driven (e.g. emissions targets)	Introduces recognition and procedural elements of justice by featuring the ‘voice of future generations’, alongside the distributive focus.	Introduces restorative justice elements – alongside distributive, recognition, and procedural – by focussing on historical narratives and obligations arising from them
Limitations	Lacks connection to the past and can be interpreted in a very instrumental or technocratic manner.	Lacks attention to the historical dimension, risks reproducing or overlooking past injustices. More a moral-philosophical exercise.	Can be difficult to implement in formal policy and lead to disagreements over who should bear responsibility for past actions.

2.1.2 Societal interpretations

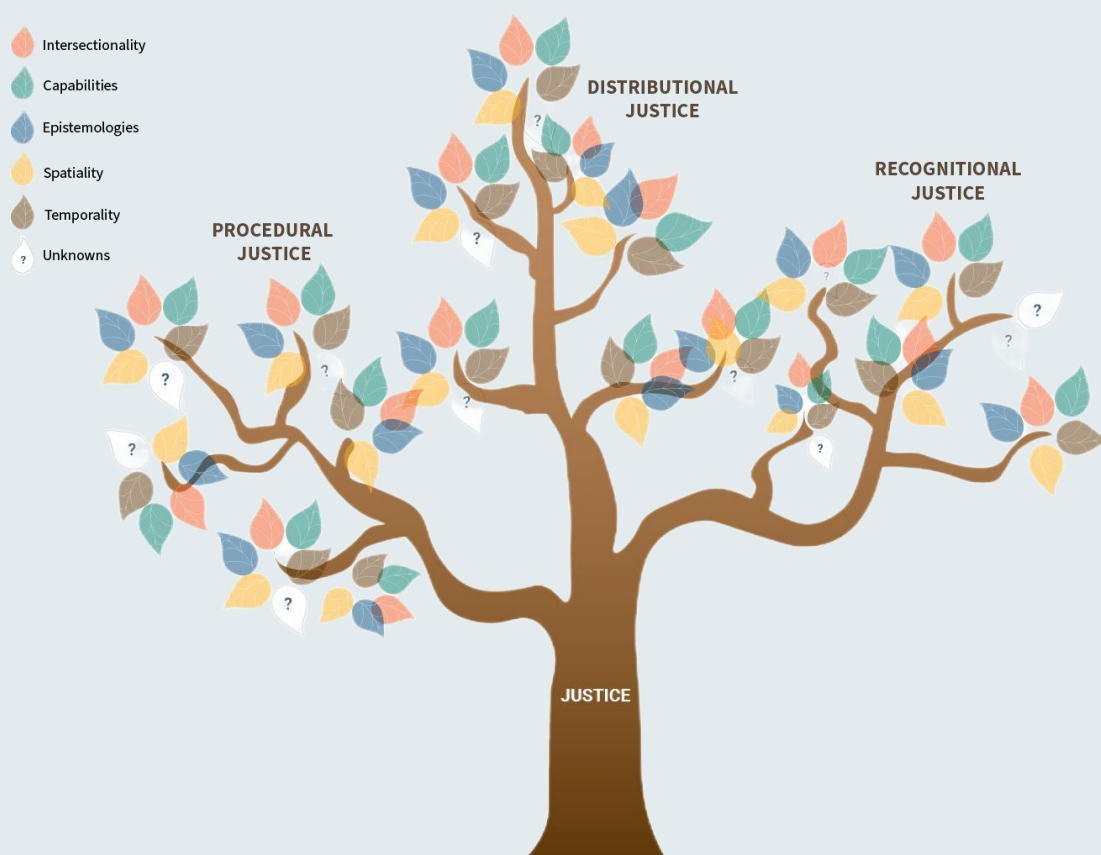
A growing body of scholars and activists argue, and policymakers increasingly acknowledge, that intergenerational justice extends beyond distribution and call to include procedural, recognitional, and restorative dimensions (Knappe & Renn, 2022; United Nations, 2013, 2024). This means ensuring fair and inclusive decision-making across generations (procedural), acknowledging and respecting diverse cultures and perspectives (recognitional), and addressing historical injustices that shape present and future harm to human and non-human systems, including through mechanisms of repair (restorative) (European Environment Agency, 2024a; McCauley & Heffron, 2018). These dimensions together frame justice as a reciprocal relationship between generations, where the present not only owes duties to the future, but also responds to obligations inherited from the past.

Especially in policy the importance of recognition justice and procedural justice for intergenerational aims has been increasingly acknowledged, with some policy communities leading the way. A good example is the Welsh Well-being of Future Generations Act 2015. The Act mandates public bodies to consider long-term impacts and to involve diverse communities in decision-making processes, institutionalising both inclusive participation and the formal representation of future generations through the Office of the Future Generations Commissioner. In doing so, it offers a concrete model for how procedural and recognition justice can be expanded beyond intra-generational concerns to include those not yet born, thus operationalising intergenerational justice. Similarly, the European Commission has now voiced the ambition to engage young voices in decision-making, as captured in the European Youth Strategy (2019-

2027) as part of the European Green Deal. Because of that, youth are increasingly formally included in consultations and dialogues, as well as more explicitly recognised as representing future generations.

Box 1. Justice dimensions in sustainability transitions

The European Environment Agency identifies four key dimensions of justice essential for equitable sustainability transitions (European Environment Agency, 2024a). Here, the understanding of justice is strengthened by considering the three core dimensions of justice through the interplay between them and five *concepts* of justice that make the picture more complete.



Distributional Justice

Focuses on the fair allocation of costs and benefits arising from environmental policies, ensuring that no group bears disproportionate burdens or reaps unequal advantages.

Procedural Justice

Emphasises inclusive decision-making processes, where all stakeholders, especially marginalised communities, have a voice in shaping policies that affect them.

Recognitional Justice

Involves respecting and valuing diverse cultures, identities, and perspectives, acknowledging the unique contributions and needs of various groups.

A dimension that can be seen as operating across these dimensions, rather than as a separate branch, is **restorative justice**. Which refers to the addressing of past and present harms to people, species, and ecosystems. It focuses on repairing relationships and rectifying injustices through reparative actions. When applied in a contextual and reflexive way, these dimensions can guide the development of policies that accelerate sustainability, while meaningfully taking justice and equity into account.

Figure 1. Justice dimensions in sustainability transitions.

Source image: EEA report 12/2024. 'Just sustainability transitions – From Concept to Practice'

These are promising steps forward in the operationalisation of intergenerational justice, as they emphasise the reciprocal relation between present and future and lay the groundwork for more robust intergenerational engagement in decision-making and governance. However, when it comes to also connecting intergenerational justice to historical dynamics, there are only few real-world experiences that exemplify that and that are connected to severe, systemic historical injustices. Truth and Reconciliation Commissions are a notable example of that: they seek to uncover past injustices, listen to those affected by it, and propose ways forward on correcting (some) of the wrongdoings and preventing histories from being repeated (Svård & Ibhawoh, 2024).

2.2 Enabling intergenerational justice

2.2.1 Youth as proxies for future generations

Questions of intergenerational justice relate to the **permanent asymmetry in power relations between the current and future generations**. Those presently alive can influence the conduct and wellbeing of future people by affecting their desires, circumstances, and opportunities. At the same time, future people do not have the potential for exercising power over presently living people (Meyer, 2021). The higher vulnerability of future generations to climate change impacts has sparked an interest among those who identify as constituents of this group and those who bear concern over their well-being. For instance, recent extreme weather events such as the 2018-19 droughts and the 2021 floods in Europe raised public awareness of climate threats and galvanised climate protests across the continent (Knappe & Renn, 2022; Kousky, 2021). Moreover, climate change and broader natural capital depletion are only exacerbating other widening intergenerational political and socio-economic inequities - such as high levels of unemployment, increasing government debt per capita, and rising housing costs - that threaten the current and future well-being of younger generations (OECD, 2020).

Although the debate on intergenerational justice is gaining momentum, it is not always clear what is meant by “future generations”, as it can be understood in different ways. For example, it can refer to those who are not yet born or to those who are not yet full citizens (Caney, 2018). Policy discourse tends to focus on the former group: that is the unborn generations. The UN Declaration on Future Generations defines this group as “all those generations that do not yet exist, and who will inherit this planet” (United Nations, 2024, p. 52). Similarly, in the development of the Intergenerational Fairness Strategy, the European Commission specifies that future generations refer to “those who are not born yet” (EC, 2025). In the backdrop of this popular understanding of future generations, Knappe and Renn (2022) point out that intergenerational justice is usually understood as the relationship between the currently living generation and unborn future generations. From this perspective, youth representing the transition between the present and the future generations are not necessarily accounted for.

However, recent youth (climate) activism has been characterised by claims of youth representing the future generations. Citing the ongoing depletion of resources that generations that will live in the coming decades would otherwise inherit, youth are borrowing climate and environmental justice lexicon to invoke the idea of ‘stolen futures’, and to reframe intergenerational justice from a far-off concern to an urgent and concrete demand on current policy makers (Knappe & Renn, 2022). Youth are essentially underscoring intergenerational justice as a notion that directly and concretely affects them as much as it does some abstract unborn future generations (Knappe & Renn, 2022).

2.2.2 Enabling intergenerational dialogue

Another key question is whether and how present actions should be judged based on their impact on future generations. What are the moral and ethical grounds on which we assess and weigh the needs of those currently alive against the potential needs of future people? (Meyer, 2021). This question is at the core of the current sustainability crisis since youth today and those yet to be born, particularly in the Global

South, are disproportionately affected by issues such as climate change, despite contributing least to its causes (e.g., Sanson & Bellemo, 2021). The principle of intergenerational justice posits that current generations must maintain a threshold of freedom for future generations, ensuring that their choices are not unduly restricted by present-day decisions (Ferretti, 2023). This underlines the necessity of sustainable policies that consider long-term impacts on future generations, advocating for a redistribution of freedom through responsible environmental management (Sugirman, 2023).

Intergenerational dialogue has been emphasised as being an important part of intergenerational justice. Such dialogue underscores the fact that youth are not solely responsible for decision-making that relates to future generations. A rigid “generational discourse”, in which generations are considered distinct from each other and associated with different features or interests, can lead to differentiated provision of and increasingly to competition for resources along generational lines (Honkatukia & Rättälä, 2023). Yet, different generations are linked to each other through family bonds, shared experiences and often similar norms, values and interests, including regarding the future (OECD, 2020). Research indicates that intergenerational dialogue fosters a collaborative environment for discussing environmental sustainability, allowing youth to voice their concerns and critiques regarding economic prioritisation (Rushton et al., 2024). This dialogue not only enhances understanding between generations but also encourages the integration of youth perspectives into educational frameworks and policymaking.

Intergenerational cooperation, dialogue and learning are effective tools for active listening to youth and for challenging the still common undermining of their views (Honkatukia & Rättälä, 2023). For older generations, youth perspectives on transformative pathways can contribute to innovative solutions (Barracough et al., 2021; Kaljonen et al., 2025; Kowasch et al., 2021; Pickering et al., 2022). In a workshop where young professionals explored desirable futures for humanity and nature, participants underscored innovative economic systems favouring sharing and sustainable technological solutions (Barracough et al., 2021). The multiple court cases around the world on climate change issues further testify to the utility and effectiveness of intergenerational collaboration (Honkatukia & Rättälä, 2023).

Achieving intergenerational justice requires not only recognising the disproportionate impact of climate change on youth and future generations but also ensuring their meaningful inclusion in policy processes. This requires an understanding of intergenerational justice as more than ‘just’ protecting future generations. Instead, it calls for an understanding of intergenerational justice that acknowledges how past and present actions influence the future generations, making intergenerational justice a shared responsibility. This shifts the responsibility of intergenerational justice away from youth and to a shared duty with older generations, which in turn ensures more meaningful participation of youth in decision-making.

2.3 Exploring youth’s understanding of intergenerational justice

Youth are increasingly viewed as a key proxy for capturing the ‘future’ dimension of intergenerational justice. However, when engaging with a group of youth that represent other youth by being involved in climate youth organisations in a workshop on intergenerational justice and participatory governance (see chapter 6 for methods), they critiqued the ways of involving youth in decision-making, arguing that it is tokenistic and does not lead to development of reciprocal relationship between the present and future. The following review shows that diverse conceptualisations of intergenerational justice, and their varying temporal understandings, frame what is considered important for enabling intergenerational justice.

To explore ways to avoid ‘tokenistic’ engagement of youth and enable policy processes that are intergenerationally just, we set out to explore how different youth representatives understand and operationalise intergenerational justice, and to gain insight into the temporal dimensions they associate with this notion. We asked these representatives about their understanding of intergenerational justice via interviews and a survey. We also conducted an in-depth case study analysis of selected youth participatory mechanisms across Europe, such as Youth Climate Councils, Local Conference of Youth, Local

Youth Councils and Youth Participatory Budgeting Mechanisms. The insights materialising through these avenues were validated and extended during a multi-stakeholder workshop comprising 26 youth representatives from across Europe. Chapter 6 further elaborates on the study methodology.

It is important to highlight here that engaging with youth representatives implies several trade-offs and biases (such as affinity and socio-economic biases), and that their perspectives may not necessarily capture the full range of views held by youth from different backgrounds or contexts. However, efforts to mitigate these biases were deliberately made, ensuring that the contributions presented below offer important insights into youth perspectives on intergenerational justice. Grasping youth understanding of intergenerational justice is useful for two reasons: 1) it clarifies how the way intergenerational justice is conceptualised shapes its operationalisation, and 2) it supports the generation of insights on how youth participation in decision-making can be improved when intergenerational justice is taken as a starting point.

2.3.1 Youth's understanding of intergenerational justice

According to findings from the interviews and workshop, the predominant definition of intergenerational justice among youth reflects a mix of a need-based, *"do no harm to future generations approach"* (similar to the definition used in the Brundtland Report) and the Rawlsian conception of "justice as fairness" across generations, grounded in moral and ethical imperatives. The youth operationalised these understandings through distributive, recognitional, and procedural strategies. Accordingly, the temporal framing of intergenerational justice centred on present and future needs and actions. However, although not a predominant framing, the need to consider past injustices – like colonial histories and their legacies – was mentioned by a few youth representatives during interviews and acknowledged as crucial to a holistic framing of the concept during multistakeholder workshop discussions.

Youth understandings of intergenerational justice were grounded in viewpoints relating to the unsustainability for the future of today's decisions and practices in the climate and environmental arenas. They emphasised the existence of serious challenges in these domains, particularly stemming from inadequate action on abating global greenhouse gas emissions, resulting in climate change, and negatively impacting forests and biodiversity, food systems, and water and air quality. They stressed that the cost of inaction in mitigating contemporary climate and environmental challenges risks ecological collapse and threatens their well-being and that of generations to come. Therefore, for the youth interviewed, intergenerational justice implied acknowledging and considering the long-term consequences of today's decisions for both current and future generations. Intergenerational justice was specifically linked to the idea of securing a good life across generations within planetary boundaries. A representative of the *'Local conference of youth, Germany'* put it as follows:

'The concept of intergenerational justice implies that different generations are not turned against each other but rather that a mutual understanding is fostered. In regard to the climate crisis, this implies that current generations should not live at the expense of future generations. Instead, the focus should be on jointly developing solutions that cater to the needs of all generations.'
(Interviewee, 2025)

Beyond meeting the needs of present and future generations, participants framed intergenerational justice as an ethical and moral imperative to ensure a good and sustainable life for different age groups within the current generation, and across the present and future generations. Youth positioned themselves as constituting both present and future generations, considering their current and future vulnerability to the consequences of today's decisions. The age range of people considered as young or youth varied broadly, from as low as 10 to 35, reflecting the blurred boundaries of youth in this context. Many saw this representation of both present and future as requiring present-day sacrifices to ensure a liveable planet for future generations, arguing that future generations should enjoy the same rights and quality of life as those living today.

During the multistakeholder workshop, youth also highlighted that intergenerational justice, unlike climate action, is often perceived as less politically charged, which could allow for broader consensus and even non-partisan support. At the same time, they cautioned that for the concept to be fully operationalised, it would need to be mainstreamed across all Commission Directorates-General, rather than being confined to a single portfolio. This reflected a view that intergenerational justice must be treated as a systemic concern, central to EU policymaking rather than an isolated theme.

Distributive and recognitional strategies toward intergenerational justice

While the well-being of current and future generations was emphasised as central to intergenerational justice, participants critiqued the dominant growth-centric approaches to measuring well-being, particularly the reliance on GDP (Gross Domestic Product), which they found insufficient. They reflected that the growth-oriented basis of past climate and environmental actions has contributed to contemporary environmental destruction, characterised by deforestation, biodiversity loss, and pollution. These actions, they argued, were grounded in a 'purely utilitarian and anthropocentric' understanding of the role of nature, with limited regard for its intrinsic value. Participants called for alternative metrics for measuring well-being that more holistically reflect nature-society interdependence.

They also viewed the making of more sustainable policy choices when dealing with climate and environmental questions as central to achieving intergenerational justice. Examples such as clean energy transitions, promotion of sustainable nutrition, increase in access to green spaces, and improved urban mobility were outlined. However, they identified obstacles to sustainability efforts, including a perceived lack of political courage, short-termism of political decisions which revolve around election cycles, and absence of a shared long-term agenda that is consistent with the long-range interests of future generations. Yet optimism was also present: youth pointed to the availability of scientific knowledge and technological tools as enablers to more ambitious sustainability actions. However, they cautioned against overreliance on technical solutions, that may entrench current systems of overproduction and overconsumption, and their associated negative socioecological impacts.

Youth perspectives on intergenerational justice extended beyond climate and environmental concerns to include political and economic aspects. They emphasised the significance for future generations of the decisions made regarding public debt and investments. They highlighted the risk of decisions in these areas exacerbating the existing generational wealth and well-being gaps. From their perspective, pursuing intergenerational justice requires decisions that promote positive civic outcomes, for a wide range of communities, across present and future generations, explicitly invoking notions of both distributive and recognitional justice.

Workshop participants reinforced these perspectives by pointing to the need for alternatives to growth-centred measures of progress, arguing that justice requires redirecting resources towards youth and communities rather than furthering capitalist accumulation. They also stressed that youth participation must reflect the diversity of Europe's populations, noting that current opportunities tend to privilege already engaged and well-connected groups while leaving many voices unheard.

Procedural strategies toward intergenerational justice

Youth also related the prospects of intergenerational justice to how societal challenges are tackled, alluding to procedural justice. The representatives engaged underscored that realising intergenerational justice relies on meaningful involvement of youth and their needs and concerns in decision-making processes. They voiced interest in and felt capable of contributing to such processes based on their lived experiences and/or expertise, and yet still felt that they and their concerns are not meaningfully included. When youth get a role in decision-making, it is often quite tokenistic or symbolic. For instance, this often implies that they have no voting power. There is also usually no formal feedback or accountability mechanism to ensure that their recommendations are considered and that they are informed about outcomes.

To enhance meaningful youth involvement, the representatives highlighted the need for a clear role in climate and environmental policy processes. Some underlined the value in having a representative for future generations, who could be young or old, in such processes. Having specific representatives of future generations in broader policy spaces would ensure that the impacts of policies on future generations are assessed and that the results are considered. They referred to the institution of a Commissioner for Youth and Future Generations in the European Commission as one such step in the right direction. Youth also noted the need for alternative and innovative forms of engagement that extend beyond the traditional political structures, which they often felt to be non-inclusive (e.g. in terms reaching people diverse social background and levels of education). Furthermore, acknowledging that not all youth have equal access to participatory opportunities, they stated the need for intragenerational equity in youth engagement.

Beside involvement in climate and environmental policy processes, the importance of youth participation in broader civic life was emphasised as central to intergenerational justice. Some youth suggested the need for youth voting rights in civic processes, even before reaching the official voting age. While youth emphasised their potential role when discussing intergenerational justice, they also envisioned its full operationalisation as a shared responsibility across age groups, highlighting the value of intergenerational dialogue and collaboration. However, some maintained that the primary burden should lie with today's decision-makers.

The workshop discussions further emphasised accountability and follow-up. Participants drew attention to the Danish Scientific Council's practice of maintaining a public database to track what happens with citizen inputs into decision-making, identifying this as a model that could strengthen trust in youth engagement processes. They also called for intergenerational dialogues at both national and local levels across EU countries, underlining that procedural justice depends on sustained, inclusive dialogue and feedback rather than ad hoc consultation.

Temporality of intergenerational justice

In the majority ways that the interviewees and workshop participants spoke about the concept of intergenerational justice, it was primarily framed around present and future needs and required actions. However, a few representatives also referenced the need to reckon with past climate-related injustices and their implications for operationalising Intergenerational justice. They highlighted that intergenerational justice is contingent not only on addressing current and future obligations but also on acknowledging the root causes of existing injustices and historical responsibilities. A representative of an international youth organisation put it as follows,

"Intergenerational justice is a concept that builds on both recognition of the responsibilities for what has caused injustices but also is a concept that calls for action". (Interviewee, 2025)

Along these lines, interviewees criticised the intergenerational justice discussions that blame older generations for ruining the planet, instead of calling for collaboration across age groups. They envisioned many opportunities for learning from previous generations and exchanging with older generations. They highlighted the progress on women's rights achieved by previous generations, as an example of how present generations could change undesirable practices as well, to ensure a better quality of life for future ones. In increasingly taking the past into account in conceptualising intergenerational justice, participants were pointing to relational/communitarian approaches to this concept.

While intergenerational justice was broadly acknowledged as a significant concern, participants noted that it is not always central to youth-led discussions or conferences. This was, for instance, observed in the context of the Local Conference of Youth in Germany and the Polish Youth Climate Council, where members reported that intergenerational justice did not constitute a core focus of discussions.

In addition to the interview findings, the workshop surfaced proposals to address past and ongoing harms. A particularly striking suggestion was the creation of a planetary truth and reconciliation commission to disentangle historic and present climate injustices. This reflects a growing view among youth that intergenerational justice requires not only anticipating the future but also reckoning with the legacies of past decisions.

2.4 Key insights on intergenerational justice

Youth perspectives on intergenerational justice

Our findings show that youth are aware of the contemporary framings of intergenerational justice and the possibilities for its operationalisation through distributive, procedural and recognitional strategies. They highlighted weaknesses in the political system in developing and implementing these strategies, particularly within procedural mechanisms. While youth are often positioned as proxies for future generations, our findings show that this proxy role is not uncritically accepted. Youth only endorse acting as representatives of future generations when procedures and mechanisms exist that allow them to meaningfully influence decisions, ensure their input is taken seriously, and facilitate accountability and feedback. In other words, the proxy role is conditional: without supportive institutional structures, youth perceive the role as largely symbolic or tokenistic.

The study also underscores the importance of intergenerational dialogue as a procedural mechanism. Youth highlighted that meaningful engagement requires opportunities for interaction and exchange across generations, fostering mutual understanding, empathy and collaboration. Such dialogue not only strengthens youth participation but also supports shared responsibility for decisions with long-term impacts. Regarding the temporal basis of intergenerational justice, youth predominantly focused on present and future needs and actions. However, there was emerging recognition of the value of incorporating past injustices into both conceptualisations and operationalisation of intergenerational justice. For example, there was suggestion of establishment of a planetary truth and reconciliation commission to disentangle historic and present climate injustices was made. This more holistic framing emphasises the ethical and moral responsibility of present generations, not only to avoid harm to the future but also to address structural inequities and historical legacies.

Operationalising intergenerational justice

Operationalising a holistic view of intergenerational justice requires attention to both structural and procedural mechanisms. The literature highlights several entry points. First, institutional representation of future generations is crucial. This can take the form of dedicated offices, commissioners, or advisory bodies tasked with assessing long-term impacts of policies and ensuring youth perspectives are included (e.g., the Welsh Well-being of Future Generations Act, EC 2025). Youth in our study emphasised that such roles are essential for legitimising their proxy position and enabling meaningful input.

Second, intergenerational dialogue should be systematically embedded in decision-making processes. This involves creating forums where youth, policymakers, and older generations can exchange perspectives, learn from each other, and co-develop solutions. Evidence from participatory governance suggests that such dialogue not only enhances recognition and procedural justice but can also lead to more innovative, widely supported policy outcomes (Barraclough et al., 2021; Honkatukia & Rättilä, 2023).

Third, policies should adopt long-term planning frameworks that explicitly account for present, future, and, where relevant, past obligations. This includes integrating sustainability monitoring, social and environmental impact assessments, and mechanisms for accountability and feedback on policy outcomes. Youth stressed that seeing tangible responses to their input is vital for sustaining engagement and ensuring intergenerational fairness.

Finally, literature underscores the need for inclusive and equitable participation, going beyond tokenistic consultation. Operationalising intergenerational justice requires attention to intragenerational equity, ensuring that marginalised youth are represented, and that decision-making structures are accessible, transparent, and responsive to diverse voices. These steps together form the foundation for translating a holistic conceptualisation of intergenerational justice into actionable, policy-relevant mechanisms (Figure 1).

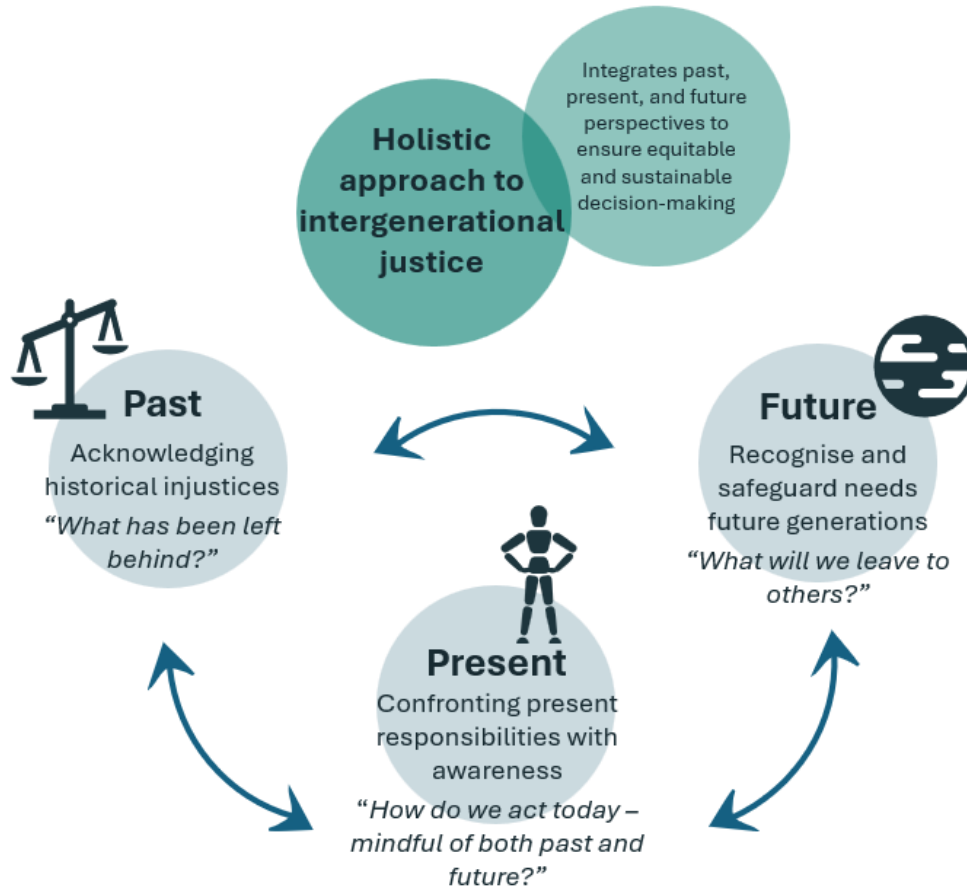


Figure 2. Holistic approach to intergenerational justice.

Source: Developed by the authors



4. Why focus on youth?

4.1 Youth as advocates of social and environmental change

Youth have been at the forefront of promoting justice and social change (Box 2) (Quiroz-Martinez et al., 2005; Riemer et al., 2014), engaging with issues across governance, academia and grassroots movements (e.g., Grady-Benson & Sarathy, 2016, Fisher, 2019, Yona, 2019; Yona et al., 2020), yet they remain largely unrecognised as key actors (Honkatukia & Rättilä, 2023; Huttunen & Albrecht, 2021; Pickard, 2019; Wood & Kallio, 2019). Despite their active engagement, youth have been underrepresented in decision-making processes and have been offered limited opportunities to express their views on issues that affect them (Narksompong & Limjirakan, 2015). When engagement does occur, it tends to favour knowledgeable and confident youth, often overlooking less informed or vulnerable youth (Narksompong & Limjirakan, 2015). The active, informed, voluntary and inclusive involvement of youth in decision-making— both locally and globally – is essential to ensuring that youth’s voices are meaningfully included in environmental governance issues, such as climate change.

It is good to remember that youth do not think and act in unison in relation to sustainability (Oinonen et al., 2025). While studies show that most youth are uninvolved or minimally involved in public affairs and that most active participants are not representative of the general population (e.g., Amnå & Ekman, 2014; Checkoway, 2011; Checkoway et al., 2005), research also indicates that youth are increasingly taking a stronger civic engagement role and are requesting new governance systems and new roles in them (O’Brien et al., 2018; Sloam et al., 2022; Zurba et al., 2020). Rather than seeking to have their voices heard, many youth pursue even more active and impactful modes of engagement that influence the policies and frameworks that shape societal change at both local and global levels (Zurba et al., 2020).

Numerous inspiring examples arise from the climate sector, where youth have engaged at different levels: organising campus fossil fuel divestment campaigns, leading international movements such as the Global Climate Strike, and initiating other forms of activism and community action aimed at impacting emissions policies (Yona et al., 2020). Younger generations are increasingly drawn to online activism, protests, ecological consumption, and other non-conventional participation forms (Huttunen & Albrecht, 2021; Oinonen & Paloniemi, 2023; O’Toole, 2016; Pickard, 2019). Many youth consider their engagement as more influential in areas of social action, including environmental and racial justice, neighbourhood issues, community planning, and public advocacy (Checkoway et al., 1995). In addition to activism amongst youth, also public officials at different levels of governance are increasingly testing out novel forms of participatory mechanisms in engaging youth in decision-making (Harada, 2023; Pušnik & Banjac, 2023; Schugurensky & Mook, 2024; Wilson et al., 2024).

Box 2. Surveys on environmental behaviour and competencies of youth

Youth in the EU are among the strongest advocates for environmental and climate action. According to the OECD/EU study on sustainability competences, most 15-year-olds (78%) are aware of climate change, but awareness alone does not always translate into pro-environmental behaviour. Socio-economic background and parental influence are strong factors shaping both awareness and engagement. Some gender differences exist, with boys reporting more awareness of issues like nuclear waste and GMOs, while girls were more attentive to water scarcity, biodiversity, and air pollution (OECD/EU, 2022a). The study also highlights that competencies such as collaborative problem-solving, digital literacy, and financial literacy strengthen youth's ability to apply their environmental knowledge, linking sustainability with the skills needed for the green and digital transitions (OECD/EU, 2022b).

Surveys show that youth place a somewhat higher priority on climate change than older generations. In the 2023 Eurobarometer on climate change, 80% of youth (15–24) saw climate change as a *very serious* problem (vs. 77% EU average). Youth were more likely to expect the EU to lead on climate action (59% vs. 56%), more confident in the benefits of green transition for energy security and competitiveness (83% vs. 75%), and more likely to see the costs of inaction as higher than investments. They were also more critical of the adequacy of government measures (75% vs. 67%). In lifestyle choices, younger citizens were more open to environmentally friendly travel (14% vs. 11%) and less attached to material assets like houses and cars (Eurobarometer, 2023).

The 2024 Eurobarometer on the environment confirms these trends. Youth showed more support for solutions such as research and innovation, education, restoring nature, and stronger enforcement of environmental laws. They also expressed high expectations that public authorities (80% vs. 74%) and companies (90% vs. 91%) should pay for cleaning up pollution. Youth reported stronger awareness of plastic and food waste compared to older groups and were more likely to choose reusable or recycled packaging. On water issues, youth responses emphasised pollution and climate change as key threats, and they expected more EU-level measures to address them (Eurobarometer, 2024).

In short: Youth consistently demonstrate higher concern for climate and environmental issues, greater openness to behavioural change, and stronger support for ambitious EU-level action. Yet, awareness must be matched with key skills and competences if this potential is to translate into impact (OECD/EU, 2022b).

4.2 Key reasons to include youth perspectives

Youth are now actively asserting their rights in governance arenas (Kotzé & Knappe, 2023). Youth activists, such as those in Generation Climate Europe, have effectively utilised digital platforms to advocate for intergenerational justice, emphasising the need for transparency and accountability in climate policies (Aiello & Martino, 2024). Their discourses highlight the importance of youth perspectives in shaping sustainable practices and policies, aiming to challenge the status quo and promote a more inclusive decision-making process.

According to studies, the way society perceives youth significantly influences their lived experience (Thew et al., 2022). As Thew and colleagues point out, youth contributions are often not recognised, and a narrow perspective on perceiving youth as “citizens in the making” diminishes the contributions they could have (see also Kallio, 2016). Enabling youth to access information, represent and meaningfully take part in decision-making processes, fulfils their rights to inclusion in society (Gibbons, 2014; Narksompong & Limjirakan, 2015). Furthermore, youth and yet unborn generations are not only in a disadvantageous position, but they also bear a disproportionate and negative impact from environmental disasters and hazards (Cox et al., 2019; Kousky, 2016; Peek et al., 2018; Sanson & Bellemo, 2021). To illustrate, children who were under ten years old in 2020 are expected to face nearly four times as many extreme events by 2100 if global warming reaches 1.5°C, and five times as many if it rises to 3°C (Luthen et al., 2021).

As Choonara et al. (2018) sum up, one of the important aspects of meaningful youth engagement is capacity development. In addition to acquiring new skills, youth can gain valuable experiences and can

leverage the newly learned skills by informing and educating other youth, campaigning, advocating and taking a lead in different initiatives (Narksompong & Limjirakan, 2015). Youth can be good messengers to different groups (Riemer et al., 2014). In addition to individual benefits, youth participation can provide indirect benefits to the community and for the society as a whole (Head, 2011; Lorenz, 2023). Studies report increased knowledge of youth and community concerns that can lead to more feasible and targeted solutions (Frank, 2006). As Rana et al. (2020) point out, young voices can bring perspectives that would not be identified by senior scientists. On a broader level, fostering youth participation and active citizenship is crucial to shift towards a culture of sustainability (Riemer et al., 2014). Ho et al. (2015) argue that youth have been more impactful in creating social change than they have been credited for.

Box 3. Operationalisation: Who do we mean, when we say Youth?

Youth is a population group mostly defined by age, although there is no universally agreed international definition of it. In the European national legislations, “youth” or “young people” usually include people aged 15–24 or 15–29. For statistical purposes, the United Nations has defined youth as those persons between the ages of 15 and 24 years (United Nations, 2025), while the EU considers the age range of 15–29 (Council of Europe and European Commission, 2019). The United Nations convention on the Rights of the Child states that a human being below 18 years of age is considered a child (United Nations, 1989).

Therefore, youth is a fluid concept, and the perceptions and roles of youth evolve over time and vary depending on the context. For example, Barratt Hacking et al. (2007) argue that the phase between childhood and adulthood is blurred, and thus it is not meaningful to set a fixed age-span for it. Even at the same age, youth are at different developmental stages and have varying opportunities to participate and enact agency. This blurred or “liminal” (Wood, 2012) stage of life is associated with restricted political agency, as the spaces and opportunities for participation are often controlled by older generations and defined by an older generation agenda (Kallio & Häkli, 2011; Taft & Gordon, 2013). In addition, the definition of ‘youth’ varies from country to country according to the influences of socio-cultural, institutional, economic and political factors as youth comprise a heterogeneous group diverse in age, gender, religion, socio-economic status and levels of physical, emotional and cognitive maturity (Narksompong & Limjirakan, 2015).

Acknowledging the fluidity of the concept, we operationalise youth in the broader sense: as people aged between 15–29. We operationalise ‘youth organisations’ as any social movement, organisation, or association with a membership primarily consisting of individuals aged 15 to 29. We focus on those organisations operating within the European Union with a primary focus on climate change or environmental degradation.

According to Riemer and colleagues, civic engagement may shape the way youth perceive themselves as active citizens during the phase of identity formation (Riemer et al., 2014). Accordingly, in the context of civic engagement, meaningful participation and empowerment of youth can prevent marginalisation (Fernandez and Shaw 2013). Studies conducted in different European countries (Brügger et al., 2020; Budziszewska & Głód, 2021; Kowasch et al., 2021a) state that youth activism has increased the sense of agency of youth, offering a platform for expressing their concerns and frustrations (Thew et al., 2022). However, at the same time, activities such as climate strikes also involve challenges such as burnout, balancing activism with other life aspects, and managing peer-group dynamics (Budziszewska & Głód, 2021). Youth policies and youth-related studies have paid too little attention to the links between participation and the overall well-being of youth (Honkatukia & Rättälä, 2023). Supporting youth inclusion in decision-making also means a need to better understand the emotional and mental well-being of young participants navigating the complexities and challenges of societal governance (Thew et al., 2022).

4.3 Barriers to including youth in decision-making

Thew et al. (2022) call for the consideration of power imbalances that have an impact on youth social interactions. Despite the increasing individualism of politics, social class differences as well as other demographics still shape youth’s ability to participate in politics. A study based on a survey of youth aged

18–34 across 9 European countries confirmed the existence of major class inequalities in political participation and broader political engagement among youth across Europe (Grasso & Giugni, 2022). The framing around youth political participation should be viewed as a “socially interactive process” that acknowledges such inequalities that need to be acted upon and enables conflict resolution, and reconciliation of competing interests (Thew et al., 2022).

Wong et al. (2010) raise the same issue and recommend paying attention to broader social structures. They propose the need for young- and older generation partnerships, in which concerns and benefits are mutual, and the ownership in decision-making processes is shared. This notion speaks to the importance of intergenerational dialogue in support of justice. To succeed and achieve the set objectives, both groups need skills and knowledge that support processes of working together. Moreover, both groups need to acknowledge the skills of the other. Cox et al. (2019) argue that these aspects are relevant for understanding the meaning of sustained and meaningful youth engagement. Following this rationale, also Lorenz (2023) understands youth participation in policymaking as collaboration between youth and other stakeholders, occurring at various stages and involving different forms of participation to co-create solutions to societal challenges that directly affect their lives.

Effective youth engagement in sustainability transitions requires capacity and awareness also from the side of older generations. Narksompong & Limjirakan (2015) suggest that barriers to authentic inclusion of youth in practice include:

- remaining on a superficial level, youth included in one-time discussions that have a limited effect on policy decisions (consultations at best),
- refusal to share power with youth in adult-led organisations and the belief that youth are not capable and responsible partners,
- not enabling and engaging youth appropriately, missing the opportunity to support the development of effective participation skills among youth.

Another major barrier to youth engagement is voting age. EU Member States set their minimum voting age nationally. This is 18 years for most countries, although it is set at 16 years in Austria, Belgium (on request), Germany and Malta and at 17 in Greece. In an interesting court case in New Zealand in 2022, the Supreme Court “issued a declaration of inconsistency against electoral legislation that excluded persons aged sixteen and seventeen years from voting on account that such a measure breaches the right to be free from age discrimination” (Breen, 2023, p. 299). This decision was the immediate result of youth activism.

Even when youth are considered in decision-making processes, their views are often not reflected in outcome statements or closing plenaries of global forums (e.g., Dickson-Hoyle et al., 2018). Addressing these power imbalances, a study on youth involvement in COP climate negotiations reported that youth were often assigned tokenistic roles by both the UNFCCC Secretariat and governments (Yona et al., 2020). Another often-raised issue relates to funding, namely, the inequitable division of resources. Often, the limited resources set aside for youth lead to volunteering and unpaid student work (Yona et al., 2020). From the civic education perspective, the challenges reported in the literature concern a lack of networking/relationship building opportunities for youth with formal actors and institutions; failure to plan inclusive and accessible programmes; lack of training for educators and inability to adapt programmes suitable for the environment of youth (Law & Atkinson, 2021).

There are voices that plead for change in attitudes and for willingness to make youth involvement more substantial. As Sitas and colleagues argue, amplifying youth voices by mobilising existing capacities in different organisations is an untapped potential (Sitas et al., 2022). This report includes a list of existing organisations, both youth-led and youth-centred, that can be contacted and collaborated with to improve the connection and cooperation with youth. A community experiment in Austria showed that supportive structural conditions, including political backing and resource allocation, supported effective youth

engagement (Fischer & Radinger-Peer, 2024). The study found that direct communication and collaborative decision-making with policymakers significantly enhanced youth participation and influenced regional development. Also, youth see value in engaging across different phases in research processes (Ballard et al., 2017; Ford et al., 2012). Indeed, inclusion increases the sense of value in one's work by having meaningfully contributed to real-world projects (Ballard et al., 2017).

However, youth need to be provided support in acquiring and strengthening the skills needed for effective participation (Narksompong & Limjirakan, 2015; Zimba et al., 2021) and participatory approaches need to be facilitated to ensure that youth voices are incorporated in the processes they take part in (Haynes & Tanner, 2015). In other words, higher levels of participation are called for to make participation more meaningful and appealing to youth.

4.4 The diversity of youth

While youth are increasingly considered key actors to include in governance and decision processes, they are often still treated as a single, homogeneous group. This oversimplification overlooks the complex diversity within youth populations, mirroring the diversity of the global population, and risks failing to address the varied needs and perspectives of youth. Recognising and embracing this diversity is crucial for meaningful youth inclusion, ensuring that decision-making processes genuinely reflect the multiplicity of voices and experiences among youth.

4.4.1 Mapping the diversity of youth organisations and interests

To create some more insights, we have mapped 50 youth-led climate initiatives for their aims, geographic spread and constituency (see chapter 6 for detailed methodology). This mapping already shows a rich diversity in terms of how the organisations approach climate, but also their geographic focus. The mapping is not intended to be comprehensive, since the mapping was conducted through a snowballing selection method but is intended to illustrate the diversity within a relatively small sample of organisations.

Table 2. Different geographic scopes of the mapped environmental youth organisations

source: own synthesis

Scope	Meaning	#	Example organisations
Global	Mention of 'global', 'world', or 100+ countries	15	Climate Cardinals, Fridays for Future, Earth Guardians
European	Operates across Europe and additional countries	8	Youth and Environment Europe, YES-Europe, SOS-International
National	Operates within a single country	27	Jonge Klimaatbeweging (Netherlands), Za Zemiata Mladi (Bulgaria)

For example, the mapping shows the majority of youth organisations are focused on the national scale (**Table 2**), aiming to voice their climate-related concerns to national decision-makers in both the public and private sectors. In some instances, these national organisations also have a more formal connection to national level decision-making. About a third of the organisations have a global focus, with some being the parent organisation of a few nationally oriented organisations. For example, Fridays for Future, the global organisation vs. Fridays for Future Italia. From the sample collected, about 1/6th have a European focus.

When analysing the aims and focus of the youth organisations, it becomes evident that while climate is often the main topic of concern, it is approached in highly diverse ways. While some focus on advocating for climate action, others approach it through the issue of biodiversity loss and nature protection, and others focus on youth empowerment, positioning youth inclusion in decision-making as their main entry

point to this complex issue (**Table 3**). Most organisations cover 3 to 4 themes, with climate action, youth empowerment, and justice being the most common.

What is visible is that global organisations tend to have a broad thematic range, covering topics like climate action, youth empowerment, policy influence and networking (e.g. UNESCO Youth CAN). As such they blend activism, advocacy and education. National organisations, however, tend to have a stronger focus than others on policy advocacy, education and institutional reform. An example is Youth for Climate – Belgium, which focuses on education. Organisations like these more often mention an interest in systemic change alongside policy engagement. They can also be more specialised on specific themes that are of relevance to the local scale, such as biodiversity or nature protection (e.g., Natur Og Ungdom – Norway). The multi-regional organisations tend to be more coalition-driven and emphasise governance, coordination, and empowerment (e.g. Generation Climate Europe).

Table 3. Different thematic foci of the mapped environmental youth organisations

source: own synthesis

Theme	Description	#	Example Organisations
Climate Action & Justice	Tackling the climate crisis through protests, policy, and advocacy	33	Fridays for Future, Zero Hour, Kolektiv Z
Environmental Education	Informing and educating youth and the public on climate, sustainability, and biodiversity	8	Climate Talk, Earth Uprising, Climate Cardinals
Youth Empowerment & Participation	Elevating youth voices in climate governance, negotiations, and policy	23	Jonge Klimaatbeweging, JongRES, UNESCO Youth CAN
Policy Influence & Governance	Working directly with or lobbying policymakers at local, national, and international levels	10	Changemaker, BUNDjugend, Jeunes Ambassadeurs pour le Climat
Networking & Coalition Building	Acting as platforms or coalitions of youth organisations to amplify collective impact	11	Generation Climate Europe, Arctic Youth Network, EYEN
Biodiversity & Nature Protection	Focused on ecosystem protection, conservation, and rewilding	4	Global Youth Biodiversity Network, European Young Rewilders
Just & Equitable Transitions	Emphasising justice (social, intergenerational, global south–north equity) in climate solutions	20	XR Youth, Milieudéfensie Jong, Loss & Damage Youth Coalition
Sustainability in Higher Education	Working with universities and students to integrate sustainability	5	Netzwerk N, Oikos, Climate Students Movement
Intersectional Climate Justice	Highlighting links between climate, gender, race, decolonisation, or socio-economic justice	3	Kolektiv Z, Spire, World Saving Hustle
Grassroots Activism & Mobilisation	Organising marches, strikes, festivals, direct action	13	Youth for Climate, XR Youth, Greve Climática Estudiantil

There are also some organisations that explicitly seek to include and give voice to marginalised groups. While there is only a small subset that makes explicit mention of this, there is still some diversity among them. First, there are a number that emphasise the importance of the connection between the Global North and South when considering climate issues. For example, the Climate Cardinals focus on multilingual access to climate-related documents to enable equity in climate education for non-English speakers. The Loss & Damage Youth Coalition, which is an organisation made up of youth from both the Global South and North, focuses on Global South priorities in climate negotiations.

Second, a few groups focus on the inclusion of indigenous and traditional communities. Such as the Earth Guardians, a global network that focuses on leadership among marginalised and often indigenous youth, using education and activism to amplify their voices. Similarly, the UNESCO Youth Climate Action Network, another global network, has specific aims to include indigenous groups in its network. While some organisations explicitly mention their focus on including marginalised groups, many others use inclusive language in their aims and organisational descriptions. This includes terms such as ‘intersectional justice’ (e.g. Kolektiv Z – North Macedonia) or ‘equity’ and ‘just transitions’ (XR Youth).

4.4.2 Analysis of youth engagement on social media

This diversity among youth organisations also influences how they interact with their constituents and how they communicate about climate issues. For some insights into their communication strategies, use of words and tone, we have done a more in-depth analysis of four youth organisations: Youth and Environment Europe (YEE), Climate Students Movement (CSM), Fridays for Future Italy (FFF Italy), and Jonge Klimaatbeweging (JKB). This analysis shows distinct strategies for climate communication and mobilising their constituents. It shows insight into their goals, value orientations and theories of change, providing a little insight into how youth organisations aim to shape public discourse and mobilise others to take climate action.

Goals and motivations

YEE and the CSM present themselves primarily as incubators of climate leadership. Their digital presence centres on empowerment, mentorship, and long-term skill-building. These organisations see the climate movement as requiring durable infrastructure: communities of practice, spaces for reflection, and supportive peer networks. Their Instagram content reflects this emphasis, often highlighting youth-led initiatives, peer learning, and capacity development.

In contrast, FFF Italy and JKB embrace a broader and more urgent public-facing mission. Their communication strategy prioritises the dissemination of scientific knowledge, policy updates, and activist narratives. They leverage social media not just to inform but to incite action—organising strikes, promoting petitions, and highlighting international climate events. These groups are positioned at the intersection of climate education and civic activism, using digital platforms to scale up mobilisation efforts and foster public visibility.

Emotional tone and levels of engagement

The emotional tone and value orientations play a critical role in the ability of youth organisations to mobilise support and foster participation. The Instagram strategies of the four analysed organisations show divergent approaches to communicating climate urgency and connecting to their audiences.

FFF Italy and JKB adopt an emotionally charged tone that blends urgency with empowerment. Their content often conveys urgency, concern and frustration about climate inaction—melting glaciers, collapsing ecosystems, extreme weather events—while also drawing connections to personal experiences, such as heatwaves and floods. These emotional appeals are framed within a narrative of *hope and agency*: offering followers actionable steps they can take to address these crises and positive climate news. In contrast, YEE and CSM foster emotions of connection and motivation by celebrating partnerships, showcasing success stories and promoting engagement. By highlighting young leaders, they aim to inspire people and create further connections.

These tonal differences are reflected in each group’s engagement strategy. FFF Italy and JKB actively cultivate high engagement through diverse and interactive content formats—infographics, videos, expert panels, protest invitations, and real-time event coverage. Their posts regularly invite comments, shares, and participation, creating two-way communication channels that help sustain active and growing audiences. YEE and Climate Students Movement, by contrast, maintain a more community-based strategy for engagement. Their posts often highlight internal achievements or organisational developments and are less likely to invite direct interaction from followers.

4.5 Youth environmental concerns for the future

4.5.1 Environmental concerns

To inform decision-making today, it is important to understand the (environmental) concerns youth have in relation to the future. Concerns capture both what worries an individual, but also what is important to them. A large number of operational definitions and empirical measures of environmental concern have been developed (Cruz & Manata, 2020). One of the most popular theories argues that environmental concern arises from three different value orientations: egoistic, social-altruistic, and biospheric, which relate to concerns about the consequences of environmental degradation for the self, other people, and other-than-humans (biosphere), respectively (Schultz, 2001; Stern & Dietz, 1994).

- **Egoistic orientation:** environmental concerns that are driven by how issues might result in personal consequences. For example, how pollution or climate change might affect one's health or quality of life. Based on such an orientation, people might support policies to reduce pollution to improve personal health.
- **Social-altruistic orientation** includes environmental concerns that focus on the well-being of people, including current and future generations. They can stem from a desire to protect communities and ensure equity and justice. Based on this orientation, people might advocate for climate action to safeguard vulnerable communities from natural disasters.
- **Biospheric orientation** emphasises the intrinsic value of the natural world and the interconnectedness of all living beings. This perspective concerns the impact of environmental degradation on ecosystems, biodiversity and the planet as a whole. Based on this value orientation, people will support actions that protect biodiversity and mitigate harm to the biosphere, independent of human benefit.

Individuals can exhibit multiple value orientations at the same time – although one might be dominant, the degree to which each of these orientations influences their behaviour can vary based on culture and context. For example, one might care about their personal well-being (egoistic) but still support conservation efforts out of a recognition of human-nature relations (biospheric). Overall, these orientations can be used to better understand the motivations behind youth's environmental concerns and actions, enabling to better target communities and individuals with messaging or invitations to participate.

In this report, we conceptualise **environmental concern** as the combination of what individuals worry about and what they consider important in relation to climate change and environmental degradation. We operationalise environmental concern through the three key value orientations: egoistic, social-altruistic, and biospheric. Recognising that individuals can hold multiple, sometimes overlapping value orientations allows us to better understand the motivations driving youth's environmental concerns and activism. This conceptualisation helps tailor approaches that resonate with diverse communities and motivates participation in environmental actions, addressing both the ethical motivations behind youth's climate concerns and the practical implications of their engagement.

4.5.2 Environmental concerns of environmentally active youth

To better understand youth environmental concerns, we conducted surveys, case studies, interviews, and a multi-stakeholder workshop with environmental youth organisations (see chapter 6 for methods and data). Using the framework of egoistic, socio-altruistic, and biospheric value orientations, we categorise the concerns according to the dimension they most strongly reflect (**Table 4** shows an overview). This categorisation highlights dominant orientations, while acknowledging that many concerns overlap across values.

Table 4. Synthesis of youth concerns categorised by biospheric, socio-altruistic, and egoistic concerns

source: own synthesis

Biospheric concerns	Socio-altruistic concerns	Egoistic concerns
Rising greenhouse gas emissions & climate crisis	Injustice in global climate impacts & lack of accountability	Diminishing environmental quality in daily life
Loss of biodiversity, deforestation & ecosystem degradation	Unequal vulnerabilities & social justice gaps	Mental health issues & climate anxiety
Anxiety about political movements undermining climate action	Unsustainable consumption & mobility	
	Declining social cohesion & weak support for vulnerable groups	
	Education systems that fail to prepare for civic engagement	
	Unequal opportunities & intergenerational inequalities	
	Lack of meaningful youth engagement in policy	

Concerns predominantly rooted in a biospheric value orientation*Rising greenhouse gas emissions and the climate crisis*

Concern over high greenhouse gas emissions and the related climate crisis featured prominently in interviews. Youth emphasised the urgent need to curtail greenhouse gas emissions and postulated a range of options, including imposing higher taxes on emissions-intensive products and companies, accelerating the energy transition, and more broadly pursuing more ambitious climate policy. Along these lines, some participants expressed support for the polluter-pays principle to hold high emitters accountable for their emissions. They also asserted the need for more climate-friendly investment strategies and acknowledged that this may require reforming existing legislation on government debt.

Loss of biodiversity, deforestation, and degradation of ecosystems

Youth highlighted ecological degradation, deforestation, wildfires, biodiversity loss, and poor animal welfare as pressing environmental issues. They emphasised the need to protect natural habitats and maintain the integrity of ecosystems, recognising the intrinsic value of nature and the risks that environmental degradation poses to both people and the planet. High energy use was also cited as a driver of environmental harm, contributing to broader ecological decline and threatening the planet's long-term resilience.

Anxiety about the rise of political movements

Youth also highlighted the rise of right-wing extremism as a major concern, particularly due to its perceived adverse effects on climate action. Threats to democracy, especially considering recent geopolitical developments, were a source of anxiety.

Concerns predominantly rooted in a social-altruistic value orientation*Injustice in the global distribution of climate impacts and the lack of accountability*

The interviewees recognised the potentially negative side-effects of climate and environmental responses and stressed the importance of integrating social justice - both within Europe and in relation to the global South - into efforts. Implementation of a climate bonus for the people most economically affected by carbon pricing was highlighted as an example.

Unequal vulnerabilities within societies, especially for marginalised groups

In the backdrop of uneven vulnerabilities to climate change and climate responses within and across regions, several youth emphasised the increasing convergence of climate and social justice. However,

youth also expressed frustration at the apparent lack of political will and a general decline in momentum for addressing climate change.

Unsustainable patterns of consumption and mobility

Concern was expressed about the quality of local environments and urban issues affecting communities, including inadequate accessible green spaces and exposure to air pollution. They stressed that environmental degradation has wider societal consequences, impacting vulnerable groups and communities unevenly. Youth also highlighted intergenerational inequities, frustration over short-term decision-making dominated by older generations, and disparities in wellbeing and opportunities, emphasising that fairness and equity should guide environmental and social policies.

Declining social cohesion and weak support for vulnerable populations

Participants were also concerned about broader societal challenges like homelessness, domestic welfare, urban accessibility, and safety in public spaces. Emphasis was placed on the needs of vulnerable and marginalised groups, including LGBTQIA+ youth. There were also concerns about the erosion of social cohesion, particularly affecting these already marginalised groups, and the lack of adequate support networks.

Education systems that fail to prepare youth for civic engagement and climate literacy

Youth also raised several interconnected social issues. They identified problems with current school and education systems, including in relation to school curricula, classroom facilities and amenities, and the relationship between schools and their communities. Education systems were criticised for failing to adequately prepare youth for civic participation. A lack of education in democracy and insufficient awareness of climate issues was identified as key shortcomings. As a response, interviewees recommended enhanced democracy education and non-formal climate education initiatives, which they viewed as essential for building societal support for necessary climate protection measures. One of the groups interviewed had indeed proposed changes to the curriculum on climate education, that include innovative non-formal climate education, to a responsible government Ministry.

Unequal opportunities and intergenerational inequalities

The issue of intragenerational equity was also raised: not all youth have equal opportunities to participate, and structural inequalities often prevent the most marginalised from being heard. That said, a few youth also expressed concern about the broader lack of active citizenship among their peers, viewing this as a challenge to youth political efficacy. Institutionally, fragmented youth policies were seen as a major barrier to integrating youth perspectives across sectors.

An ageing population was also seen as problematic, as it often leads to an overrepresentation of older people and their interests in political decision-making. The overrepresentation of older people in decision-making was suspected to relate to the apparently short-term decisions around public debt and investments, which may have long-term negative impacts on younger generations. Many indeed identified a widening generational gap, expressing frustration over disparities in well-being and quality of life between younger and older populations.

A pervasive concern among youth was the lack of meaningful engagement in policy processes and decision-making. Many interviewees felt that their capacity and willingness to contribute were not adequately recognised. Participants called for the development of novel engagement approaches, such as youth-led social assessments. They noted that social, children, and youth impact assessments already exist as tools for informed decision-making and could be better utilised. These findings align with the climate action demands of children and youth worldwide, as published by YOUNGO, the official youth constituency of the UNFCCC. In their COP28 Global Youth Statement (GYS), youth called for an inclusive approach to climate governance that recognises both the impact of the climate crisis on their demographic and the need for systemic, radical action, that meaningfully involves youth (YOUNGO, 2023). However, youth noted disagreement between youth and policymakers regarding appropriate methods of engagement.

Some youth preferred engagement in policy processes through ways independent from traditional, often exclusionary political mechanisms. However, policymakers reported difficulty in integrating the outcomes of these alternative forms of engagement into more traditional policy processes.

Concerns predominantly rooted in an egoistic value orientation

Diminishing environmental quality in daily life

Youth were concerned about environmental quality in their daily lives, including access to green spaces, exposure to air pollution, and the health impacts of climate change. Beyond these immediate personal effects, they expressed a desire for a sustainable, liveable future for themselves and for generations to come. A central concern across these issues was securing a good life within planetary boundaries, reflecting the importance of personal well-being and quality of life.

Mental health challenges & climate anxiety

The mental health of youth emerged as a significant concern. Participants linked the mental health crisis to a combination of factors, including climate anxiety, armed conflicts, the cost of youth activism, and a general loss of faith in a better future. An interviewed youth council representative summarised this and related concerns as follows:

"Young people are constantly exposed to crisis narratives (war in Ukraine, climate crisis, drug use among youth, etc.), particularly via social media and smartphones, which deepens their anxiety and lack of faith for a better future. To make it worse, the supporting mechanisms maintained by adults are too slow and resources are inadequate. It may take months, even years to get help, "unless you start throwing chairs or cutting yourself". [...] the opportunities of young people to take meaningful action for sustainability are limited, which causes young people to believe that they do not have a meaningful future ahead." (Interviewee, 2025)

Youth further highlighted the cost of participation on their well-being. They explained that engaging meaningfully in policy processes often requires a significant investment of time and energy, making it difficult for youth to balance participation with other responsibilities. This burden can have negative effects on their mental and overall health.

4.6 Addressing concerns: proposals from youth representatives at the workshop

While the previous section outlined concerns driving youth initiatives, workshop discussions went further by asking how these concerns might be addressed. These conversations revealed both creative ideas for action and structural obstacles that currently hinder meaningful youth participation in decision-making. Three broad themes emerged:

Youth participation and accountability in governance

- Participants emphasised the need for listening and empathy in youth engagement, coupled with accountability and follow-up mechanisms. Without transparency about what happens to youth input, trust in democratic processes is undermined.
- Examples such as the Danish Scientific Council's public database were cited as good practices that could be adapted at the EU level.
- Calls were made for regular intergenerational dialogues at national and local levels across the EU, moving beyond one-off consultations to ongoing processes.
- Participants stressed that youth participation must be inclusive, reaching beyond the "usual suspects" to reflect diverse socio-economic, geographic, and political backgrounds.

Climate and intergenerational fairness as central priorities

- Climate action was consistently framed as the core of intergenerational fairness, requiring systemic change across policy domains.

- Some argued that intergenerational justice is less politically charged than climate policy, offering an entry point for broader consensus and collaboration.
- Youth called for mainstreaming intergenerational justice across all Commission Directorates-General, not limiting it to a single office or strategy.
- Creative proposals included a planetary truth and reconciliation commission to acknowledge past climate injustices and a stronger institutional framework for holding high emitters accountable.

Education, representation, and systemic change

- Participants identified education as both a barrier and a solution. Current systems fail to equip youth with democratic literacy and climate knowledge, but reforms could empower future generations. Suggestions included integrating sustainability and democracy into curricula, non-formal education, and new forms of political training (“political academies”).
- Broader systemic reforms were also proposed: lowering the voting age in Member States, reorganising Commission responsibilities inspired by models in Wales or Scotland and even adopting a four-day workweek with dedicated time for community participation.
- Importantly, participants stressed that youth are not a homogenous group: political diversity exists, and youth should not be automatically equated with “future generations” or assumed to be uniformly progressive or climate oriented.

The workshop underscored that youth are not only concerned about the future but also have concrete ideas for how to address intergenerational challenges. However significant obstacles remain, particularly the lack of formal accountability in youth participation and the limited inclusivity of current engagement practices. To move from concern to action, youth called for systemic reforms in governance, education and representation that would enable them to play a meaningful role in shaping sustainable and just futures.

4.7 Key insights on youth and their climate and environmental concerns

Youth concerns reveal both a high level of awareness and a nuanced understanding of the interconnections between environmental, social, and political dimensions of sustainability. Their priorities span local and global scales—from air quality, green spaces, and mental health to biodiversity loss, deforestation, and unsustainable consumption patterns—demonstrating both personal and collective stakes in the future. These concerns are deeply relational, reflecting awareness of how individual behaviours, systemic structures, and political decisions shape outcomes across communities and generations. While the involvement of representatives from environmental and climate youth organisations inevitably constitutes a selection bias toward very informed youth, the deliberate inclusion of diverse organisations, including those working with marginalised groups, ensure that the findings provide valuable insights into the breadth of youth concerns.

The analysis shows that youth see solutions to their multi-dimensional concerns as necessarily integrated: technical fixes alone are insufficient and meaningful action must combine social, ecological, and governance dimensions. Procedural and structural barriers – such as short-term political cycles, unequal access to participatory spaces, and tokenistic engagement – were cited as obstacles to translating concern into impact. At the same time, youth identified avenues for change such as more inclusive governance, intergenerational dialogue, and equitable policy interventions that consider both current and future generations, and reforms to education systems that equip young people with democratic literacy and climate knowledge.

Overall, the findings on climate and environmental concerns voiced by engaged youth echo findings documented elsewhere in the literature. This suggests that the key challenge does not lie in a lack of awareness or articulation of priorities among youth, but rather the creation of responsive, inclusive and accountable systems that can translate concerns into action.



6. Mechanisms of participation

6.1 Diversity of mechanisms for youth participation

Youth's participation in decision-making has been a topic of ongoing discussion, and governments are beginning to implement measures to enhance youth engagement in decision-making. A study in 34 OECD countries found several examples including youth advisory bodies, strategies to boost youth's trust in institutions and tools like impact assessments to integrate young and future generations' concerns into policy making (OECD, 2020). However, these efforts are fragmented. As of 2020, no country had a dedicated intergenerational justice strategy, and relevant commitments were spread across various policies, requiring better coordination (OECD, 2020).

In literature, several classifications exist to describe the different ways of promoting participation in decision-making. The ladder of participation framework (Arnstein, 1969; Hart, 1992; Raisio et al., 2022; Torfing et al., 2019) is perhaps the most famous one, which has been extended to different contexts including youth participation (Tamm et al., 2024). The classification highlights the nuanced nature of youth participation, emphasising that youth engagement is not a one-size-fits-all approach and includes a range of different forms with varying implications and effects. In practice, the different forms of participation support one another. The ladder of participation is usually described as starting from informing decision-making, and extending to consultation, engagement and co-creation (Table 5). Capacity development has been identified as important in the context of youth participation (Alanko, 2020; Conner & Cosner, 2016; Harada, 2023).

Informing can consist of practices of sharing information with youth and raising their awareness through campaigns, publications, or social media. **Consultation** is perhaps the most common way to engage with youth in political decision-making. In practice, this means inviting youth to consultations and hearings with policymakers, stakeholders, or communities to provide input on decisions. For example, youth organisations can be invited to give statements on policies or on drafting of laws concerning them. The consultation of youth through digital channels is also worth highlighting. For instance, in Finland, a nationwide (e)-consultation of youth was arranged for their views on tightening the country's climate law (Varsaluoma et al., 2023).

Youth's formal **engagement** in decision-making has been increasingly formalised into youth councils, commissions, or advisory boards (see e.g., Alanko, 2020; Augsberger et al., 2024; Conner & Cosner, 2016; Cushing & Van Vliet, 2017; Harada, 2023; Percy-Smith, 2010; Taft & Gordon, 2013). Via these bodies, youth can directly engage and interact with decision-makers through partnerships, councils and other forms of collaborations. The global success of youth councils has been associated with the mechanism's flexibility and transferability, and research has highlighted youth councils' potential to engage and empower youth to participate while also recognising their limitations (Augsberger et al., 2024). By engaging in formal

councils, youth benefit from **capacity building** and expansion of social networks (e.g., Alanko, 2020; Conner & Cosner, 2016; Harada, 2023). The rationale for starting youth councils has shifted towards developing youth's leadership skills and understanding of democratic processes, while previously the idea has been to seek solutions to youth-related problems (Cushing & Van Vliet, 2017). However, the situation is scattered, and the formal ways of participation differ substantially between the different states, locations and organisations.

Table 5. Overview of mechanisms for (youth) participation.

Source: Tamm et al. (2024)

Purpose of participation	Informing	Consultation	Engagement	Capacity development	Co-creation
Definition	Sharing information and raising awareness through campaigns, publications, or social media.	Participating in consultations and hearings with policymakers, stakeholders, or communities to provide input on decisions.	Actively engaging with decision-makers through partnerships, councils or collaborations, to influence policies.	Developing leadership and negotiating skills, understanding of democratic processes and strengthening of networks.	Co-creating environmental solutions by working independently or with older generations to develop and implement new initiatives.
Examples of participatory activities	Information and social media campaigns, awareness raising	Targeted hearings, knowledge gathering and sharing	Youth councils, commissions, partnerships, youth delegates,	Peer-to-peer networks, capacity building programmes, mentorships	Implementation of new initiatives and projects

Studies have shown that these official platforms, such as youth councils, are not alone adequate to support youth's participation in society (Kallio & Häkli, 2011; Percy-Smith, 2010; Taft & Gordon, 2013). Not all youth are able to, or willing to, participate in these formal channels (Kallio & Häkli, 2011) which may also reinforce social inequalities (Augsberger et al., 2024) as they tend to favour knowledgeable and confident youth (Narksompong & Limjirakan, 2015). Youth may have a different understanding of meaningful democracy and thus may consider arenas such as youth councils as constraining, elitist and non-representative (Biesta et al., 2009; Oinonen et al., 2025; Taft & Gordon, 2013).

As a response, the **co-creative** modes of participation seek more practical and concrete routes for environmental solutions by working independently or with older generations to develop and implement new initiatives. Youth are most likely to feel empowered and connected when they consider themselves to be partners with older generations in community organisations (Zeldin et al., 2017). Providing spaces which are not always controlled by older generations or defined by an older generation agenda, but which also allow youth to take action for issues they feel passionate about is key to supporting the role of youth as agents of change (Percy-Smith & Burns, 2013).

A growing number of youth have also engaged in alternative or broader ways of enacting agency which may operate outside the older generation-controlled systems (Kallio, 2018; Luhtakallio et al., 2024). This "off the radar" democracy (Walsh & Black, 2018), "Do-It-Ourselves" politics (Pickard, 2019) or "everyday activism" (Walker, 2017) emerges in various forms and spaces, which are determined by the youth themselves (Percy-Smith, 2016). These include climate strikes - spaces where youth politicise the urgency of climate action and systemic change toward intergenerational equity - and climate litigation, where they

seek accountability for future generations through existing national and international legal frameworks (Budziszewska & Głod, 2021; Kotzé & Knappe, 2023; Kowasch et al., 2021b). The activism may also give impetus for the more formal ways of participation, and when studying youth concerns and participation, both ways of participation should be evaluated together.

We have not included education in **Table 5** when describing the different mechanisms for youth participation. Education has broader goals than participatory mechanisms, although various methods of participation are often used in education. It is important to understand the school system as an integral part of a democratic society and building up youth's agency. Schools can 'provide space for participation' in activist initiatives and incorporate critical engagement with sustainability issues in the curriculum (Kowasch et al., 2021b). Some of our case studies were also rooted in the school system (see chapter 4.2). Action-oriented or agency-centred sustainability education, which enhances youth's action competence and equips them to be capable environmental actors, is particularly central to advancing youth engagement in a culture of sustainability (Dittmer et al., 2018; Koskela & Paloniemi, 2023). The same applies to democracy education (Luhtakallio et al., 2024).

6.2 Mechanisms for including youth in decision-making

Mechanisms for engaging youth in decision-making are being tested across Europe. The practices vary between countries and across decision-making levels. There is rising interest but no coherent institutional mechanisms to engage youth in decision-making. In what follows, we summarise findings from case studies, where we investigated the formal participatory mechanisms built for involving youth in decision-making at the UN, EU, national and local levels.

6.2.1 UN: YOUNGO as a mechanism of involving youth to UNFCCC decision-making

UN sees intergenerational equity as a key principle of climate action enshrined in the Paris Agreement. In this context, youth are seen as a group vulnerable to climate change, occupying a particular unique position in the policy space since their lives will overlap the most with current policy windows. The YOUNGO is established as the official children and youth constituency of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) for strengthening intergenerational justice by establishing procedures that allow children and youth to formally bring their voices to the UNFCCC climate negotiations and processes. As a participatory mechanism, YOUNGO aims to involve youth in decision-making on climate issues, but problems exist with respect to inclusion, representation, access to decision-making, and well-being of the participating youth.

In the spectrum of participation mechanisms, YOUNGO activities are primarily about engagement and capacity development. Key YOUNGO initiatives include UN Climate Change Conferences of Youth (COYs) that take place at local, regional, and global levels (LCOYs, RCOYS, and GCOYs) (See box 10). They seek to bring youth voice to climate policies while also building the capacities of youth to engage in climate governance spaces in various ways. The Global COY includes youth as country delegates but also encourages youth participation in all aspects of the conference, for example as volunteers and coordinators. There is also a program, training youth to become negotiators, meaning that they could negotiate on behalf of their government, which is one way to get more young perspectives into politics. YOUNGO seeks to avoid hierarchies in its activities and encourages initiatives. For example, any member is welcome to establish a new thematic Working Group in case there is none on a certain theme already. Thus, YOUNGO also includes characteristics of co-creation.

Experiences of the YOUNGO activities have been documented in the Youth Stocktake study (YOUNGO 2023) that emerged in parallel with the UN Global Stocktake. While the Global Stocktake reviewed where countries and stakeholders are making progress to meet the goals of the Paris Agreement, the Youth Stocktake assessed the progress of the UNFCCC youth inclusion agenda through YOUNGO. According to the study, YOUNGO has actively worked to solve the challenge that many youth miss meaningful inclusion

and instead experience marginalisation, especially those from developing and least developed countries. However, persistent challenges and barriers to inclusion exist regarding various logistical and representational issues. Even for those youth who make it to the annual UN Climate Change Conferences, tokenism and “side-lining” have prevented youth from accessing key decision-making spaces, thereby blocking youth representation in climate policy.

Over the years, organisers of COYs have been fostering strategies to enhance inclusion, for example, by using different languages and reaching out to vulnerable groups. The conferences of youth attract a diverse group of participants, which suggests that efforts have been made to make the events inclusive and welcoming. The main barriers to participation in L/R/GCOY processes include resources and financial constraints, lack of awareness and limited information about these processes, lack of political and government support, as well as language and cultural barriers.

Box 4. YOUNGO

YOUNGO is the official children and youth constituency of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). It is a global, independent, self-organised network that contributes to shaping the intergovernmental climate change policies and seeks to empower children and youth to formally bring their voices to the UNFCCC processes.

Youth are defined as individuals aged up to 35 years old. In addition, the members of YOUNGO include youth-led organisations, groups and delegations working with climate change-related issues. The YOUNGO roles and institutions don't have any designated or de facto decision-making power. Instead, they function as facilitating and supporting elements in the work of the wider YOUNGO constituency.

YOUNGO seeks to represent the voice of youth globally through Global Youth Statement (GYS) that is built on inputs from youth in Conferences of Youth (COYs) at local and regional levels. The GYS is prepared annually and presented at the annual UN Climate Change Conference (COP) as well as at the Global Conference of Youth organised in the eve of the COP. The local, regional and global COYs seek to bring youth voice to climate policies while also building capacities of youth to engage in climate governance spaces. There are operational teams working on the COYs, communications and awareness, and thematic Working Groups (WGs) that focus on different aspects of the UNFCCC negotiations and beyond. The WGs work to ensure that perspectives of young and future generations are considered in the international decision-making processes. Moreover, YOUNGO members observe and report on climate negotiations and the implications of their outcomes.

It has been relatively common that government representatives participate in the youth climate conferences. This is seen to indicate a positive trend towards government recognition of the importance of youth engagement in climate action. However, challenges remain such as bureaucracy and gatekeeping by institutions, lack of support from government departments and inadequate resources to implement ‘youth’ initiatives. The challenges also include unpredictability of political landscapes and competing priorities within governments. Clear communication channels with government representatives are needed, as well as increased feedback and response. Resolution of these challenges is essentially in the hands of governments. However, recommendations were compiled to increase the potential impact of COYs:

- the organisers could seek to accommodate more interventions from youth e.g. by upscaling local level consultations.
- paying attention to the specificity of recommendations and language of inputs, and
- seeking scaling through collaboration with like-minded individuals and organisations.

Over the years, there have been challenges with coordination. For example, once the COP Presidency received two distinct youth statements, one from the YOUNGO constituency and the other from Youth4Climate. In addition, well-being challenges have arisen, as the participating individuals spend extensive hours with responsibilities in planning events, coordinating activities, and mobilising resources

in parallel to their personal and professional commitments. This study emphasises the importance of promoting awareness among youth about the significance of mental health and keeping life in balance.

To support the development of meaningful youth engagement, a monitoring and evaluation framework has been produced as a next step after the stock take. The framework includes 1) A checklist for the UN climate conference Parties to track youth inclusion, 2) A survey on youth participation in Local, Regional and Global Conferences of Youths, their influence on climate policies and the nature of stakeholders' collaboration during the conferences and 3) Global Youth Statement (GYS) tracker, a tool to assess the influence of youth demands on the outcomes of climate negotiations. The tracker documents the evolution of the GYS over time, assesses the impact of youth inputs, and holds Parties accountable for their commitments.

6.2.2 Mechanisms for Youth participation at the EU level

At the EU level, several initiatives have been established to enhance youth participation. The European Youth Dialogue (EUYD) (See Box 5) and the current Youth Policy Dialogues (See Box 6) are insightful cases to illustrate the success and challenges of participatory mechanisms at the European level. Both initiatives illustrate that consultation serves as the primary mechanism to enable the participation of youth, while the European Commission is also exploring other ways of giving youth a stronger voice.

The European Youth Dialogue

The EUYD is a formal mechanism that enables youth and youth organisations to consult and discuss with policy- and decision-makers. It was initially established as the 'Structured Dialogue' as part of the EU Youth Strategy 2010-2018. Following the subsequent Youth Strategy for 2019-2027, the EUYD aims to give youth a voice in policy-making processes. During the 18-month work cycles, events, conferences and consultations are conducted at national and EU level. Since 2019, the themes for each cycle have been inspired by the European Youth Goals, which were an outcome of the 6th cycle of the EUYD.

Since National Youth Councils partake in National Working Groups at each EU Member State, the EUYD facilitates the participation of youth along with the international non-governmental youth organisations (INGYOs). A review of the nine cycles of the EUYD (2010-2022) by the EC and the Council of Europe finds that the EUYD enables meaningful participation of youth. It highlights that the EUYD "is perceived as a very good opportunity to structure youth engagement activities and to ensure that youth are consulted on a continuous basis" and that the EUYD is "an important opportunity for youth to get involved in the debate about EU policy and issues relevant for them and their peers" (Lonean et al., 2024, p. 7).

Box 5. EU Youth Dialogue

The EU Youth Dialogue (EUYD) is a formal mechanism to include the voices of organised youth in the development of EU policies. Each dialogue consists of an 18-month work cycle with a thematic focus set by the Council of Youth Ministers. Whilst the EUYD does not explicitly define youth, participation is open to youth and INGYOs.

During each work cycle, consultations, events, and conferences are organised. At EU Member State level, National Youth Councils participate in National Working Groups. At EU level, the EU Youth conferences aim to condense recommendations by youth. The primary mechanism of the EUYD is consultation, i.e., inviting youth to participate in conferences and hearings with policymakers and other stakeholders to provide recommendations for policymaking regarding youth.

The Youth Policy Dialogues during the first 100 days of the new mandate of the current European Commission

In addition to the EU Youth Dialogue, the current European Commission has set up the Youth Policy Dialogues. In her political guidelines (von der Leyen, Ursula, 2024), the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, asked all Commissioners to arrange Youth Policy Dialogues within the

first 100 days of their new mandate and annually thereafter. Coordinated by the Commissioner for Intergenerational Fairness, Youth, Culture and Sport, Glenn Micallef, every Commissioner held dialogues with youth groups in early 2025 and across 12 EU Member States. Active participants included about 400 youth aged 16 to 30 and selected in line with inclusivity and diversity criteria.

Prior to the Youth Policy Dialogues, participants were provided with background notes on the topic and key points for reflection by the Directorate-Generals (DGs). Most of the DGs also held preparatory meetings to brief the participants in advance. In addition, side events and follow-up activities were organised. The discussions of the Dialogues focused on the topics of relevance to the portfolio of each Commissioner. Each DG also compiled the input gathered from the participants during the Dialogues into a report, which is publicly available on the European Youth Portal (EU Youth Dialogue, 2025). In June 2025, the DG for Education and Culture (DG EAC) published a general report on the dialogues, including its main takeaways based on the reports submitted by each DG. In this general report, five overarching themes were identified as relevant to the mandate of the Commission:

1. A Safe Union
2. A Competitive and Sustainable Union
3. A Democratic and Digitally Fit Union
4. A People-Centred and Social Union
5. A Global Union.

In conclusion and as a way forward, the participants' consensus on the importance of democracy, resilience, adaptability, and sustainability of the EU were highlighted along with an emphasis on social equity, competitiveness, and global cooperation. Following up on this first round of Youth Policy Dialogues, it is stated that the youth's input should feed into policy actions of the European Commission.

In the meantime, and in line with the Commission's 2024 – 2029 political guidelines, the [European Commission President's Youth Advisory Board](#) was established following the adoption of the Commission Decision on 25 June 2025. It brings together 28 young representatives, representing the 27 EU Member States' National Youth Councils and the European Youth Forum. They are invited to advise the Commission on policies relevant to youth. This latest initiative highlights the willingness of the European Commission to engage more directly with young representatives and give them a stronger voice.

Box 6. The Youth Policy Dialogues

As developed on the webpage of the [Youth Policy Dialogues](#), this initiative from the current EU President, Ursula von der Leyen, aims to “encourage youth to express their views on EU policy initiatives by interacting with Commissioners and to integrate youth views in the EU's political agenda”. The dialogues are designed with the objective of fostering open discussions, sharing insights, and building connections between the young participants and the European Commission. Through this engagement, and by focusing on pressing issues, the process aims also to empower youth by engaging them more directly in democratic life.

The participatory mechanisms for youth at the EU level currently focus on consultation with an active advisory role recently added, thus giving youth a stronger voice as part of the EU democratic process. While these participatory mechanisms are positive steps for cross-generational involvement in policymaking and are overall considered a success, a greater institutionalisation and dedicated follow-up structures are the next and important step forward to enhance their impact.

6.3 Youth Climate Councils and LCOYs as ways of engaging youth at the national level

Youth Climate Councils (YCC), are being established in several EU Member States, including Denmark, Poland and Finland (see Boxes 7-9). Likewise, Local Conferences of Youth (LCOY) have been organised in several European Countries, following the model set by the UN YOUNGO (Box 4. The German Local

Conference of Youth constitute Europe's biggest climate conference for the youth and was held for the first time in 2019 (Box 10). In many EU Member States Youth Councils include specific environmental or climate sections, but no explicit national-level Youth Climate Councils (see Appendix 2).

6.3.1 Youth Climate Councils

For this analysis we conducted case studies on the Danish, Polish and Finnish Youth (Nature and) Climate Councils. The Danish Youth Climate Council was the first one established in the world in 2019 (Box 7) under the Ministry of Climate. The Danish Youth Climate Council has a certain degree of independence, influencing decision-makers both via formal policy suggestions during the annual two meetings with the Minister as well as through informal actions, including public speeches and articles in national media. The Polish Youth Climate Council was established soon after in 2020 (Box 8). In Poland, the Youth Climate Council serves as an advisory body under the Polish Ministry of Climate and Environment. The Finnish Council is named as Youth's Nature and Climate group (NUOLI) (Box 9). NUOLI was established in 2023 during the revision of climate law. However, it was decided not to include NUOLI in the law, which already included the Finnish Climate Change Panel¹ and the Sámi Climate Council (Saamelainen ilmastoneuvosto)² to support procedural justice in the climate policy (see also European Environment Agency, 2024b, pp. 49-50). Instead, the youth group was established under the Prime Minister's Office to support different ministries more broadly in the participation of youth in the planning, implementation, and impact assessment of policies. In addition to NUOLI, Finland has also a Youth Agenda 2030 group, which works under the Finnish National Commission on Sustainable Development Sustainability Development Committee.

Box 6. Danish Youth Climate Council

The Danish Youth Climate Council (YCC) is a national advisory body established in 2019 by the Ministry of Climate, Energy and Utilities in collaboration with the Danish Youth Council, aiming to strengthen youth participation in climate policymaking. Its formation was sparked by a public ministerial commitment during a live TV debate. While administratively under the Ministry, the YCC operates with considerable independence, often engaging critically in public discourse.

The YCC consists of 14 members aged 18–29, serving staggered two-year terms to ensure continuity. The council strives for gender and background diversity, though it remains skewed towards urban and capital-area youth. Members represent a good mix of political, environmental, social, and faith-based organizations and their academic and professional backgrounds span marine biology, law, green finance, energy, agriculture, politics, activism, education and international climate forums. Members volunteer in ten thematic working groups meeting biweekly (mostly online), with full council meetings every 4–6 weeks, plus occasional retreats and workshops.

Youth can join the YCC either through an open application process or by nomination. Half of the members (7) are selected via an open call, with candidates first reviewed and shortlisted by the Ministry and then interviewed and chosen by the current council members. The other half (7) are nominated by youth organisations and appointed by the Danish Youth Council's board. This dual approach combines individual and organisational representation, aligning with Harada's (2023) recommendation to include both politically active youth and more typical, everyday youth to enhance inclusivity and legitimacy.

The YCC operates through formal as well as informal participation mechanisms. Formally, it submits biannual policy recommendations to the Minister and engages in direct dialogue through letters and urgent meetings. Informally, the YCC engages in public advocacy through media, events, school visits, and workshops, complementing its policy work with outreach. Despite structured access to decision-makers, participation outcomes remain uncertain due to the absence of formal feedback mechanisms, mirroring concerns raised by Harada (2023) about local youth councils, where lack of feedback undermines youth

¹ <https://ilmastopaneeli.fi/en/etusivu-en/>

² <https://saamelainenilmastoneuvosto.fi/>

motivation and trust. The YCC is supported administratively by 2 part time Ministry student workers, which has restricted their capacity to engage more broadly, especially with local youth councils. In 2025, they secured external funding for a small secretariat, which should help them to increase their support to local councils like the one in Aalborg.

The recruitment of members varies between the Councils. In Denmark the recruitment is done in two different ways to ensure access to individuals as well as representatives of youth organisations: half of the 14 members are selected in collaboration of the Ministry of Climate and the Youth Climate Council, whereas the other half is selected by the Danish Youth Council from applicants from its member organisations. In Finland the recruitment is fully organised by the Youth Council. In Poland the Ministry of Climate and Environment organises the recruitment, where youth need to apply for a council spot. The members of each council are aged between 18–29, 18–25, and 17–24 years in Denmark, Finland, and Poland, respectively.

Box 7. Youth Climate Council, Poland

The Youth Climate Council in Poland serves as an advisory body under the Polish Ministry of Climate and Environment. The Council's responsibilities include providing opinions on issues related to climate, energy, and the environment within the Minister's jurisdiction, and offering potential solutions as well as fostering and promoting eco-friendly and climate-conscious attitudes among youth. Furthermore, the council aims to promote youth knowledge on topics such as climate, energy, and the environment. It serves as a platform for discussion, exchanging experiences, proposals, and ideas among youth from across Poland. The Polish Youth Climate Council was established in 2020 and has recently started its third term in December 2024. The re-election of council members is foreseen for 2026.

The Council may consist of 16 to 26 young individuals from diverse backgrounds with the common goal of fostering climate protection. Any individual with Polish citizenship currently residing in Poland, who on the day of the announcement of the recruitment is at least 17 years old but not yet 27 years old is eligible to participate. Members of the Council elect a presidium, which consists of the chairman, two vice-chairmen, the secretary and the spokesperson. Members of the Council are selected through recruitment in accordance with the recruitment regulations published on the website of the Ministry of Climate and Environment. Council meetings are convened at least once a month, either virtually or in person at the Ministry of Climate and Environment's headquarters.

Participation in Youth Climate Councils includes engagement, consultation, and capacity building. The Councils are by definition independent, but the way in which they are connected to decision-making varies between countries. In Denmark, where the Council has been in place the longest, the procedures are well established. The mandate of the Youth Climate Council is to give recommendations to the Minister of the Climate, and they are guaranteed to meet with the Minister at least twice a year. In practice, the Danish YCC writes recommendations and statements on issues under preparation and communicates its own concerns to the Minister. They also consult experts from the Ministry on questions related to their work in 10 thematic working groups. In terms of informal impact, they engage in public speaking and write articles, which can sometimes be critical of the Minister and the Ministry. Similarly, the Polish Youth Climate Council provides opinions on issues related to climate, energy and the environment, especially regarding proposed policy changes, strategies, and legislative updates within the Ministry of Climate and Environment's jurisdiction. The Polish Youth Climate Council works closely with the different departments of the Ministry. The members of the Danish Youth Climate Council also highlighted the importance of negotiations and working with the administration to get insights on topical policy issues, and to build capacity for impactful policy work. The members embrace the direct relationships, but pointed out that:

"The process where the Danish YCC is lagging is in the feedback mechanism. If you can call it like that. So we don't have that much accountability in knowing how they use the recommendations we give them. [...] We're trying to tell them that it's really important for us if you can come back to us and tell us where and how you're using our recommendations. And also, if they should be in

a bit of a different format with for it to be more usable for you and stuff like that.” (Interviewee, 2025)

In their work the members of the Danish Youth Climate Council highlight the importance of finding a balance in finding the right tone of voice for criticism and ways of being heard to find solutions. The same balancing act came forth in the interviews with the members of the Finnish NUOLI group. Both the youth and the public officials underlined the integrity of the group to decide upon their activities and means of participation. The group has independently decided to invest in the yearly Local Conference of Youth (LCOY) as their key way of engagement. The NUOLI group has presented the Youth statement, co-created in the LCOY, to the President, Prime Ministers, other Ministers and members of the parliament. According to the interviews, however, the representatives of the Ministries and the Prime Minister’s Office would like to see NUOLI more engaged in the preparation of specific policies. Here, the views and needs of the policy planners and NUOLI differ a bit with respect to means of participation. The general statements are harder to integrate into specific legislations, whereas the youth group want to have the freedom to express the concerns of youth as they experience them. Participation in several committees and planning processes is also time-consuming. The members of the Youth Climate Councils have their jobs and studies to take care of, which the Ministry representatives are also aware of.

Box 8. Young People’s Nature and Climate Group NUOLI, Finland

Young People’s Nature and Climate Group NUOLI¹ was established in 2023 under the Prime Minister’s Office. The goal of NUOLI is to support different ministries in the participation of youth into the planning, implementation and impact assessment of policies.

NUOLI consists of 19 selected members. Any youth of 18–25 years of age can apply to become a member. No prior participation in a non-governmental organisation is required, rather expertise on the subject matter is emphasised. The Finnish national Youth Council Allianssi selects the members according to the applications prioritising diverse expertise and representation of different regions.

The yearly Nature and Climate Conference (LCOY) is a key means to involve other youth to the activities of the group. The LCOY is organised together with the major youth organisations in Finland to discuss environmental and climate issues. In 2024 circa 400 11–29-year-old youth participated in the conference, after which they published the Finnish National Youth and Child Environment Statement (Local Conference of Youth, 2024).

Members can influence issues related to climate, energy, and the environment through direct engagement with the Minister, deputy ministers, and other high-ranking officials from the Ministry of Climate and Environment. Additionally, there is a chance to review and provide input on key documents developed within the Ministry. These include proposed policy changes, strategies, and legislative updates within the Minister’s jurisdiction. The Council operates in working groups, which are established based on a questionnaire that is distributed among the council members upfront. Following the process, the Council is approached by the Ministry and given the possibility to state its opinion on draft legislative documents. The Council then decides whether it would like to provide an opinion or not. In case it decides to do so, the working group that deals with the respective topic, prepares a draft opinion that is voted on by all council members prior to submitting it to the Ministry.

In Finland, various ministries utilise the possibility to work with NUOLI, yet some of the ministries are not aware of the council’s existence. In Finland, the Ministry of Environment has been a pioneer in developing the participatory mechanisms for youth, children, and the elderly, especially during Sanna Marin’s government (2019-2023). The Ministry of Social and Health also have an ambitious strategy for children’s rights and representation. Yet, other ministries are lagging. The policy planners interviewed hence emphasised the importance of learning and collaboration between the Ministries in developing the practices further. On this topic of unequal development across institutions, the member of the Danish Youth Climate Council put it directly:

“In general, in my mind, you shouldn't set up youth engagement processes, youth inclusion process and all that kind of stuff, if you don't have the ones who should be receiving these kinds of inputs on board with you. [...] When you set this up, but the people who should receive it are not aligned with it [...] then it would be better, in my mind, not to have it. Because if you have it where the ones in power don't want to get the input, then you would just harm the trust of these youth, these youth's trust in the system.” (Interviewee, 2025)

Both the members of the Danish and Finnish Councils emphasised how they are learning and developing engagement by doing. They underlined the high motivation and expertise as an asset of the group. The Youth Climate Councils provide multiple possibilities to learn political decision-making and policy planning. In this manner, Youth Climate Councils act as an important means for capacity development. Many of their members have a background in political parties and a high ambition to participate in societal decision-making, also as a profession. One of the stated goals of the Polish Youth Climate Council is to advance youth knowledge on topics such as climate, energy, and environmental issues, and to serve as a platform for discussion, exchanging experiences, proposals, and ideas among youth from across Poland. All Youth Climate Councils have specific working groups, where members can concentrate on specific topics. This is an effective way of building impactful expertise. One of the aims of the Danish Youth Climate Council is also to support the local municipal level Youth Climate Councils (see Box 12). The members of NUOLI, in Finland, appreciated especially the participation from different parts of Finland in the work of NUOLI which strengthens representation across regions and social backgrounds.

6.3.2 Local Conference of Youth

The Local Conference of Youth is another established mechanism to engage Youth in Climate and Environmental matters. LCOYs offer ways for co-creation and capacity building. The outputs of LCOYs are also being used to impact decision-making. We analysed the LCOYs in Germany and Finland.

The LCOY in Germany (Box 10) constitutes Europe's biggest climate conference for the youth and was held for the first time in 2019. In 2024, the German LCOY counted 1600 participants as well as 350 presenters. LCOY Germany is legally supported by BUNDjugend. In the case of Finland, in 2024 the NUOLI (Box 9) was responsible for organising the event together with the major youth organisations, who co-created the program of the conference. In 2024, around 400 individuals between 11- and 29-year-old participated in the Finnish LCOY. LCOYs are politically independent and open to include also politicians or youth groups and organisations that represent a wide societal and political spectrum.

LCOYs greatly rely on discussions but also on the personal relationships built during the conference and their preparation. Members of the LCOY Germany organisational team argue that climate protection can only succeed if a variety of youth can discuss and different opinions are heard. Therefore, they put a strong focus on enabling networking and exchanging ideas and discussing them with scientists, companies, politicians, NGOs and other experts. In addition, LCOY Germany considers themselves a platform for educational work. Through the program contributions, they seek to provide youth with a solid knowledgebase to work together on promoting ambitious and socially just climate protection in line with the Paris Agreement. LCOY Germany is organised by around 60-80 volunteers, aged 15–30 years. Throughout the year, team members work mostly remotely but come together for in-person team weekends multiple times a year. The organisational structure is founded on flat hierarchies and democratic decision-making. Furthermore, the donors do not interfere with the program design and LCOY's political independence.

Throughout LCOY Germany, a variety of formats are employed. The conference offers workshops and interactive lectures to foster knowledge sharing and dialogue. They organise panel discussions and informal chats that provide opportunities for exchanging with decision-makers and enable participants to feel heard and being able to express their concerns. The volunteers try to foster a festival-like atmosphere with musical acts, game nights and karaoke, which enables participants to make new connections and strengthens the bond between them. Additionally, the program includes a variety of open-space sessions

for networking, relaxation, sports, and much more. A "marketplace of possibilities" allows participants to discover organisations, initiatives, and other resources.

Box 9. Local Conference of Youth, LCOY, Germany

Local Conference of Youth (LCOY) Germany constitutes Europe's biggest climate conference for youth. It was held for the first time in 2019. In 2024, the conference counted 1600 participants and 350 presenters. Generally, LCOY Germany seeks to foster connections among the youth, facilitating exchanges with representatives from politics, business, science, and society, as well as providing knowledge and highlighting potential courses of action to address the climate crisis. The conference is politically independent, and it aims to represent a wide range of opinions. It serves as the German branch of the annual Conference of Youth, held before the global UN climate negotiations. The event is recognised by YOUNGO, the official youth constituency under the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). LCOY Germany is organised by 60–80 volunteers, 15–30 years of age.

LCOY Germany addresses youth from all parts of society aged between 14 and 30 years old. Minors aged below 16 may only participate in groups or when accompanied by an adult. Being free of charge for its participants, LCOY Germany is open to any individual fulfilling the age requirements and does not demand prior knowledge. To reduce cost barriers for participation, conference participants are reimbursed for the travel costs and offered free accommodation, usually in school gyms.

LCOY Germany relies on donors for being able to organise the conferences. Since 2020, LCOY is supported by the Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs and Climate Action (Bundesministerium für Wirtschaft and Klimaschutz) based on a resolution of the German Bundestag. Additionally, the last LCOY in 2024 was supported by the Senate of Berlin (the conference's location at that time). The follow-up funding requires continued acquisition.

Throughout the conference, a variety of formats are employed. The conference offers workshops and interactive lectures to foster knowledge sharing and dialogue. They organise panel discussions and informal chats that provide opportunities for exchanging with decision-makers and enable participants to feel heard and to be able to express their concerns. The final report published after each conference provides an overview of the participants' thoughts and concerns that were raised during the conference

Similar formats are utilised in the Finnish LCOY. In 2024, both the Ministry of Environment and the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry had dedicated workshops in the LCOY related to the Mid-term Climate Policy Plan and Food Strategy. The policy planners who participated in the Youth conference highlighted the importance of deliberative discussions held. The conference setting allowed different perspectives to be raised, and disagreements amongst the youth. *"Youth are not homogenous, or such vulnerable group, who are all hit the same way"*, as one of the Ministry representatives summarised. In sum, according to interviewees, the communal aspect of the conference is appreciated by the participants both in Germany and in Finland.

In Germany, after every LCOY, a final report is compiled that provides insights on the participants such as their age structure, speakers that were present, and the activities that were held. Furthermore, the report provides an overview of the participants' thoughts and concerns that were raised during the conference. In the latest LCOY in Finland, the participating youth co-created and published the Finnish National Youth and Child Environment Statement (Local Conference of Youth, 2024). This was a major co-creation effort coordinated by the NUOLI. The members of the NUOLI group underlined that the wide participation of the youth in the conference makes the statement stronger than just being an opinion paper by the NUOLI. In Finland, the statement has been presented both to the Prime Minister and the president. The group is also utilising it in their talks with Members of Parliament.

6.3.3 Youth Councils and Commissions at the local level

Our case studies included three Youth Councils or Commissions that operate at a local level. The Youth Council in the city of Turku, Finland, resembles a traditional youth council for youth aged 13 to 18 years of

age (Box 11). The purpose of the Council is to increase youth's opportunities to participate and to increase dialogue between youth and municipal decision-makers. The Aalborg Youth Climate Council in Denmark was restructured from their existing Youth Council into an advisory body providing recommendations for climate-related municipal decision-making in 2021 (Box 12). The Aalborg Youth Climate Council consists of youth aged 15 to 25. Finally, the Parma Youth Commission acts as a consultative body for the city of Parma and a leader of the European Youth Capital (EYC) project year 2027 – a title which was awarded to the city of Parma, Italy (Box 13).

Box 10. Turku Youth Council

The Turku Youth Council is a formal advocacy group representing the interests of youth in the city of Turku, Finland. The aim is to increase youth's opportunities to participate and develop city services and to increase dialogue between youth and municipal decision-makers.

The Youth Council has 40 members and 10 deputy members. The members are elected through an electronic vote every two years. All youth (aged 13–18 years) living or studying in Turku can vote and stand for election. The election method considers the levels of education so that youth from different schools are represented. Although some members might also be active in a political party, the Council itself is nonpartisan.

Key means for participation include the right to attend, speak, and propose initiatives at the City Council meetings. In addition, the Youth Council makes independent decisions on granting project funding for small projects that youth themselves come up with and execute.

The scope and forms of participation differ in each of the case studies. As a traditional youth council, the Turku Youth Council is well-established, with 40 young council members and 10 deputy members. Their status and role have strengthened recently as they received the right to propose initiatives at the city council meetings. The key actors in rising the status of the Youth Council have been the Youth Council Mentors – as (deputy) representatives of the City Council they've had the power to speak for the Youth Council and support the capacity building of the Youth Council members. Since the Youth Council also makes independent decisions on granting small project funding for youth to plan and execute, the means of participation of the Turku Youth Council include consultation, engagement and co-creation.

Box 11. Aalborg Youth Climate Council

The Aalborg Youth Climate Council was established in 2021 by restructuring the existing youth council to involve youth in climate-related municipal decision-making. The council aimed to serve as an advisory body with 10–15 members, however, active membership has since declined due to turnover and lack of structured and intentional recruitment.

The current members of the Aalborg Youth Climate Council are mostly students, often studying environmental management, aged between 15 and 25. The council originally evolved from a democratically elected youth body, but now relies on informal, peer-based recruitment without a structured application process. High turnover is a persistent issue, driven by the transient student population in Aalborg. The members of the Council see the low visibility and a lack of awareness further limit participation, with many youth unaware of the council's existence or unable to commit due to other responsibilities. Changing this is difficult due to the limited capacity of the three active core group members (students) and passivity of the remaining 2 members (school pupils).

Since the current council lead is a school student with limited experience and time, the monthly meetings are now coordinated by the municipal representative, offering structured support to the council. Efforts to

raise the council's visibility are ongoing, but awareness within municipal departments remains low, undermining its potential influence.

While the council initially meaningfully contributed to the city's climate plan development, its current role is minimal, with participation mostly limited to occasional consultations and symbolic tasks. According to the interviews this frustrates council members who want their concerns to be taken seriously.

Meanwhile, the Aalborg Youth Climate Council was established in 2021 by restructuring the existing municipal youth council. While the initial cooperation with the municipality was strongly focused on co-developing the climate plan, this momentum has faded. After changes in original membership and responsible officials over the years, the number of active participants has fallen short of the initial plans of 10–15 members. Today, the council's role is limited to occasional consultancy on the climate plan and symbolic tasks such as selecting the local sustainability award winner. The new municipal representative is working actively to raise the council's visibility across departments, but awareness remains limited. This also applies to public awareness, and as recruitment remains informal and sporadic, the group has not succeeded in increasing its membership. Council members report that officials often mix them up with other youth groups, treating "youth" as a homogeneous category, resulting in superficial engagement and missed opportunities. Monthly council meetings are now primarily structured by the municipal coordinator, as the current youth lead has limited experience. Though youth-led sessions still occur, they are seen as less effective. Without institutional support or formal recruitment processes, the council, now down to five members, continues to struggle with continuity, outreach, and broader impact.

In comparison, the Parma Youth Commission has a leading role in the EYC 2027. The 27 young commissioners, together with youth and youth organisations from the local area, will lead and manage the EYC year in all its phases in collaboration with the city of Parma and other stakeholders, and they have an extensive catalogue of activities at various levels of participation planned for the coming years. With a political momentum and formal management structure strongly supported by the municipality, the Parma Youth Commission is well-positioned to advance the voice of youth and empower a considerable number of youth to participate.

Box 12. Parma Youth Commission

Parma Youth Commission, established during the candidacy process of the European Youth Capital (EYC), is a consultative body for the City of Parma and a leader of the EYC 2027 project. The aim is to create a community of youth in the Parma region and develop the inclusiveness and attractiveness of the city for youth.

The Youth Commission consists of 27 youth, under 35 years of age, living or born in the city of Parma. The Municipality of Parma selected the young commissioners based on applications. However, one purpose of the Youth Commission is to facilitate the participation of all youth in Parma in the EYC 2027 project, particularly youth from marginalised backgrounds.

The overall EYC project is a major co-design effort, involving the Youth Commission, the city of Parma, and stakeholders such as schools, youth organisations, foundations, and companies. An extensive catalogue of activities has been planned for the coming years, including workshops, training camps, artistic events, showcases and other pop-up activities to reclaim urban space – all led by youth and youth organisations from the local area.

Of the cases studies, the Turku Youth Council is the only one with a clear, regular election cycle. The elections, organised every two years, are particularly visible in schools, and awareness of the Youth Council usually peaks around the election times. However, once the elections have taken place, the Turku Youth Council is more like a closed circle, rarely engaging with other youth. The members or the Council also tend to come from a well-off background. Meanwhile, the practices of joining the Youth Climate Council in Aalborg are still evolving – the original mechanism seems to have been lost in staff and member turnovers, resulting in current sporadic recruitment akin to the snow-ball method (invitation upon

meeting) instead of having a formal established application procedure. The current small group of Council members has lacked capacity to engage with new youth, and there has been limited interest and support on that from the municipality. By contrast, the Parma Youth Commission is part of a major co-creation project, aiming to engage with all the youth in the City of Parma. A core principle of the project has been to “leave no one behind” and to engage marginalised youth, such as youth from migrant backgrounds, low-income families, and those with disabilities. However, the young commissioners themselves are more like young adults (under 35 years of age), and they were selected by the municipality based on applications, which suggests that they represent youth who are already active in society.

The three case studies from the local level highlight great variation in the local-level practices. The Youth Council of Turku underlines the necessity of institutional structures in creating lasting and impactful practices for youth participation. Those are essential for accountability in decision-making. Such structures seem to be broken in the Aalborg case, which probably relied too heavily on the interest and motivation of the original individual members and municipal staff. The case of Parma Youth Commission shows promise for novel forms of co-creations, whose impacts are to be seen in the years to come.

6.3.4 Participatory budgeting

Two youth-focused participatory budgets were explored for this study: the Portuguese National Youth Participatory Budget (NYPB) (Box 14) and the Cascais Youth Participatory Budget (YPB) (Box 15). Despite having no formal political power, democratic innovations like youth participatory budgeting are giving youth a say in how public money is spent. The NYPB and Cascais YPB are good examples of how youth in Portugal are entrusted with generating ideas and making decisions for the benefit of their peers and communities. Portugal itself has an interesting ecosystem of participatory budgeting. A national law issued in 2009 encouraged city councils to adopt participatory budgets and YPBs, and the regional governments of Azores and Madeira also facilitate YPBs. Selecting two cases at different governance scales in the same country allows for fruitful comparison.

Box 13. Portuguese National Youth Participatory Budget

Portugal was the first country in the world to implement a nation-wide Youth Participatory Budget. In brief, a participatory budget is a governance scheme in which a share of the public budget is to be decided upon collectively and includes public deliberation and accountability for the outputs. The Portuguese National Youth Participatory Budget (NYPB) aimed at enhancing democracy by involving youth to present and vote on public investment projects up to €100,000 each throughout the country.

All youth, aged 14 to 30 years, legally residing in Portugal were qualified to submit proposals and vote on the final projects. Participation was open to Portuguese as well as foreign citizens. The project proposals were vetted through a technical analysis, and they received consultation by the public administration. The winning projects, around 7 per year, would then be refined, implemented, and monitored by the regional agencies of Portuguese Institute for Sport and Youth, municipalities, local NGOs and the youth themselves.

Portugal’s NYPB ran for three editions between 2017 and 2019 before being suspended during the COVID-19 pandemic. Before suspension, the mechanism reached 15,000 students from 142 municipalities participating either as project proponents or voters during 2017 and 2018.

The NYPB and Cascais YPB participatory budgets have the same premise and basic structure: youth propose and vote upon ideas that are then implemented using public funds earmarked for this purpose. Both case studies illustrate how youth participatory budgeting is a pedagogical process to create future generations of more conscious and active citizens, to build trust with local government and to recognise youth’s capacity for decision-making. The NYPB enabled youth aged between 14–30 to present and vote on public investment projects up to €100,000 each throughout the country. It ran for three editions between 2017 and 2019 before being suspended during the COVID-19 pandemic. Meanwhile, the Cascais YPB, which began in 2016 and is ongoing, engages even younger children through the school system,

where students in each of the four city parishes can propose and vote on ideas up to €10,000 for their school and €350,000 for their wider school community. At this smaller scale, the YPB process here is much more elaborate and hands-on than the NYPB was.

Regarding key youth concerns, environmental sustainability seemed to be prioritised more by the older youth in the NYPB and slightly less by the students in the Cascais YPB. Most of the winning ideas in the Cascais YPB are concerned with improving school facilities, for example better classroom desks, sports gear, and school radio systems. However, environmental and social issues are also a priority for students. For example, student ideas have addressed homelessness, domestic violence, animal welfare, green spaces, and sustainable mobility. In the NYPB, environmental sustainability themes were highly represented amongst winning projects (e.g. native forest restoration, plastic recycling, bike-sharing service).

Three additional topics are interesting to consider regarding the NYPB and Cascais YPB: stability and trust, inclusion, and multi-level governance. Firstly, YPBs have a trust-building role between youth and the public sector, and their stability is essential to build trust over time. The NYPB was cancelled after three cycles and thus currently struggles to prove to youth that their participation is a priority nationally. On the other hand, local YPBs like in Cascais remain active, thus continuing participation opportunities on a smaller scale. Secondly, there is little data on the types of youth who are proposing and voting on ideas in the NYPB, and what kinds of students are represented in Cascais' YPB student teams that take charge of the process in their school each year. Since many participation mechanisms are known to run the risk of overrepresenting more privileged social groups, future editions of both youth participatory budgets could give more explicit attention to participant diversity to be more inclusive and representative of diverse viewpoints. Thirdly, the youth participatory budgeting mechanism would really flourish within a comprehensive ecosystem of youth organisations, local NGOs, schools and universities and local, regional and national government agencies. Multi-level governance of Portugal's various participatory budgets has meanwhile been a challenge because there is no set of rules governing how local, regional and national participatory budgets interact. A comprehensive set of guidelines for multi-level YPBs could assist local, regional and national YPBs in avoiding thematic and geographic overlaps and better synergise with each other.

Box 14. Cascais Youth Participatory Budget

Starting in 2016, the city of Cascais, Portugal, began its Youth Participatory Budget (YPB) to allocate public funding for local development ideas proposed by school children. The goals of the Cascais' YPB are to encourage personal and social development, to develop greater involvement in school and community culture, and to bring youth voices into local policymaking.

The YPB is rooted in Cascais' school system, and it is open to all the students in participating schools distributed throughout the municipality. In the YPB process, students brainstorm ideas, analyse their technical feasibility, and vote for ideas to be implemented in their school and in the wider community. Each school has €10,000 for implementing the winning idea yearly, while the community ideas within the general Cascais Participatory Budget go up to €350,000.

Although older generations initiate and facilitate the YPB process, a team of students from each school lead the YPB process for one year, including moderating the brainstorming sessions and reviewing the YPB rules and presenting them to the mayor. Other students participate in generating the ideas and voting on them. Students (and teachers) also take part in trainings and interclass meetings for capacity development.

6.4 Key insights on mechanisms of youth participation

Across Europe, several forms of youth participatory mechanisms are being tested. The participation mechanisms vary from consultation to co-creation, highlighting the wide spectrum of participation (Table 6). According to the case analysis, the institutionalisation of the mechanisms as part of decision-making structures takes time. All the cases underline the need for novel decision-making structures and capacity development as part of impactful participation.

Table 6. Mechanisms of participation utilised across the cases of youth participation reviewed

source: own synthesis

	Informing	Consultation	Engagement	Capacity development	Co-creation
United Nations (UN)					
YOUNGO					
European Union (EU)					
Youth dialogue					
Conference on the future of Europe					
National level, EU Member States					
Youth Climate Council (DK)					
Youth Climate Council (PL)					
Young People's Nature and Climate Group (FIN)					
Local Conference of Youth (GER)					
National Youth Participatory Budget (PT)					
Local level					
Turku Youth Council (FIN)					
Aalborg Youth Climate Council (DK)					
Parma Youth Commission (IT)					
Cascais Youth Participatory Budget (PT)					

The case studies underline **accountability and trust** as a key area of further development. The Danish Youth Climate Council has for example developed certain well-functioning institutional structures to reach out to political decision-making; the feedback mechanisms could be further developed. In the Cascais Youth Participatory Budget, accountability is demonstrated when students' top-voted ideas undergo a student-led feasibility check. If the school director or municipality rejects an idea on legal or technical grounds, the justification must be passed on to the idea proponent. Accountability of the older generations to the students is deemed very important. Furthermore, to build trust between youth and governments, a stable dedication to participation mechanisms over time is needed. Short-term or one-off engagement

sprints do not build trust or belief that youth voices are important. Participatory mechanisms hosted at different governance levels can build resilience here. For example, when the Portuguese National Youth Participatory Budget was cancelled, local-level initiatives in youth participatory budgeting remained.

Furthermore, the members of the Youth Climate Councils underlined the importance of **decision-makers' engagement** as well. As argued by council members, the functionality of the Council greatly depends on decision-makers' willingness to take recommendations into account, otherwise participation is useless. The accountability of youth councils, hence, requires acknowledgement of intergenerational justice. Our interviewees underlined that youth should not be treated as a specific vulnerable group, but as equals to others in decision-making:

"We should be as equal, listened to as other lobbyists. [...] In a perfect world, we shouldn't have any youth panels or youth engagement committees or youth delegates, youth councils or anything like that, because youth would just be sitting equal, have equal access to the decision making." [representative of Youth Climate Council, 2025]

The case studies also showcase the importance of **capacity development** as part of the functioning of the mechanisms. In youth participatory budgeting initiatives, youth learn important skills like idea generation, proposal development, moderation, self-expression, negotiation and teamwork. Meanwhile, the councils and commissions offer youth important learnings on how political decision-making and democracy work, and the possibility to create networks. Here, both peer-to-peer networks and intergenerational dialogues are important. LCOYs are good examples of peer-to-peer networks, where activists and youth organisations can meet and build momentum together. Youth Council Mentors (Turku) offer key learnings on such recently institutionalised actors and why they are needed to act between youth and formal older generation-controlled decision-making. As politicians, the Mentors have the power and leverage to speak for and strengthen the role of youth in decision-making and, at the same time, support youth's capacity building by guiding them through the system.

These features in youth councils and commissions may turn out to reproduce unwanted features: fostering citizens who will assume leadership roles as policymakers within the system, rather than transforming the system (Conner & Cosner, 2016; Taft & Gordon, 2013). To avoid this reproduction, capacity building should be fostered in both ways. Furthermore, the older generations in power should be willing to test, learn and change the structures of decision-making. The case of Parma youth commission and the Cascais Youth Participatory Budget show how, with a strong political momentum and municipal support, it is possible to strive for and achieve ambitious goals regarding youth participation and empowerment. However, the opportunities for such projects remain.

Many of the mechanisms of youth participation, studied here, **rely on self-selection**, i.e., that youth themselves actively get involved in the participatory process (e.g., youth councils, participatory budgeting). This practice may reinforce the overrepresentation of already privileged groups. (Falanga, 2024) also points out concerns around self-selection bias in participatory governance mechanisms, with people from privileged backgrounds being more likely to take part. One possibility, as demonstrated by the Cascais Youth Participatory Budget, is to tie the mechanism closely to the school system, and even to the curriculum. Additionally, developing novel forms of engaging a wider representation of youth, for example in local planning or climate policy decision-making processes, together with the schools, would be one way forward (Cebrián et al., 2025; Oinonen et al., 2023). The interviewed youth emphasised that such a move would require major changes in how we see the societal goals and roles of education systems.

Getting explicit knowledge about the concerns of youth regarding specific policy issues requires their own assessment methods. Social impact assessments as well as children and youth impact assessments are already established methods in many EU Member States, and readily available. Likewise, citizen panels and assemblies, also targeted to youth (Bullon-Cassis et al., 2025; Mallon et al., 2025), are being utilised to greater extents to widen deliberative democracy (Lorenzoni et al., 2025).

Key insights on mechanisms of youth participation

The use and development of these assessments should be widened to support evidence-based decision-making. Meanwhile, due to their reliance on self-selection, youth councils, commissions, and participatory budgeting schemes cannot represent the whole generation. Alternative methods of engaging with less privileged youth are needed to complement the existing network of formal participatory processes. Furthermore, in a representative democracy youth's right to vote should be taken into consideration, for example the lowering of voting age.



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8. Overarching recommendations for policy that enables intergenerational justice

Our findings across the three main areas—intergenerational justice (chapter 2), youth concerns (chapter 3), and participatory mechanisms (chapter 4)—highlight the relational and multidimensional understanding youth have on intergenerational justice, sustainability, and decision-making. Recognising this diversity is essential for policy to reflect their diverse concerns. Youth representatives articulate their concerns in ways that reveal a strong awareness of environmental and societal challenges and a nuanced understanding of systemic drivers, possible solutions, and the ethical dimensions of decision-making. Their priorities reflect both personal stakes and collective responsibility, emphasising the inseparability of ecological, social, and governance issues. Addressing these concerns requires integrated solutions that combine technical, social, and governance approaches.

Youth engagement in decision-making is central to operationalising intergenerational justice. While youth are often positioned as proxies for future generations, our findings show that they accept this role conditionally: only when supported by meaningful mechanisms that allow their input to influence decisions, ensure accountability, and provide feedback. Intergenerational dialogue emerges as a key procedural mechanism that fosters mutual understanding, empathy, and shared responsibility across generations. Moreover, by taking a more holistic view to intergenerational justice – one that recognises past injustices and structural inequities, alongside present and future obligations – the ethical and moral grounding of intergenerational justice are strengthened, in turn enhancing youth engagement.

The participatory mechanisms studied provide both opportunities and limitations. Institutionalised structures, such as youth councils, participatory budgets, and advisory bodies, can foster capacity building, networks, and sustained engagement. However, challenges persist, including self-selection bias, short-termism, and limited feedback or accountability from decision-makers. Effective mechanisms require political will, structural support, and inclusive design to ensure equitable participation for less privileged youth. Capacity-building initiatives must be paired with flexible, innovative engagement opportunities that complement formal structures, enabling youth to contribute substantively while enhancing their understanding of governance systems.

The overarching findings point to five policy recommendations for fostering intergenerational justice and youth engagement, for local regional, and national government, as well as EU-level:

- **Ensure constructive, action-oriented intergenerational dialogue** – Prioritise co-created spaces for exchange across generations, ensuring youth are partners rather than token representatives.
- **Invest in generational capacity development** – Strengthen capacities of both youth and decision-makers to understand and act on intergenerational issues.
- **Build trust and accountability** – Embed youth engagement in continuous, transparent processes that demonstrate how their input informs policy.
- **Increase diversity and inclusion** – Address self-selection biases and ensure that participatory mechanisms reach marginalised and less represented youth.

- **Operationalise holistic intergenerational justice** – Ensure institutional representation for future generations and embed these in long-term planning and impact assessments.

Taken together, these insights suggest that operationalising youth-informed, intergenerationally just policies demands both structural and procedural transformations. Holistic, inclusive, and accountable approaches, grounded in dialogue and mutual learning, provide the foundation for sustainable, equitable, and long-term governance that meaningfully incorporates youth perspectives.

Table 7. Overarching recommendations and practical steps towards intergenerational justice

source: own synthesis

Key Recommendation	Key insight from the study	Practical steps
Prioritise intergenerational dialogue 	Dialogue between generations is key. Responsibility for intergenerational justice should not solely fall on youth and should be seen as a shared responsibility across generations.	Focus on the co-creation of formal mechanisms for intergenerational dialogue, where youth perspectives are integral to policy and decision-making. Youth should be included on equal footing and considered key partners, rather than bearing the full weight of the issue.
Invest in intergenerational capacity development 	Capacity-building efforts for intergenerational governance must extend beyond youth. While many programs focus on youth, decision-makers also need strengthened capacities.	Create spaces for mutual learning. Mentor programs can be useful; youth can act as mentors as well. Older generations should be willing to test, learn, and adapt decision-making structures to better reflect intergenerational issues and needs.
Build trust and accountability 	Short-term engagement and tokenistic practices undermine youth trust in governance. Trust between youth and governments requires long-term commitment and transparency.	Integrate youth voices into decision-making as a continuous process. Establish transparent feedback mechanisms to show how youth input has been incorporated, which recommendations have been acted upon, and why others have not. This demonstrates that youth voices are genuinely valued.
Increase diversity 	Avoid self-selection bias: Current participation mechanisms often favour self-selected, privileged youth, leaving marginalised groups underrepresented.	Collaborate with schools and implement youth impact assessments to reach the whole generation. Use youth citizen panels as alternative mechanisms. Inclusive methods for engaging less privileged youth are needed to complement existing participatory processes.
Operationalise holistic intergenerational justice 	Intergenerational justice requires attention to present, future, and past obligations. Youth engagement alone is insufficient without structural and procedural support.	Institutionalise offices or advisory bodies for future generations. Integrate sustainability metrics and long-term impact assessments. Ensure participation mechanisms are inclusive, account for historical responsibilities, and enable meaningful youth influence.



10. Methods used

This methodology outlines the approach used in this report to explore and present findings on the involvement of youth in decision-making in Europe. The report identifies key concerns voiced by youth, maps relevant youth groups, and examines the mechanisms that allow them to shape environmental policies and decision-making. This chapter details the methods used, which include mappings, media analyses, a survey, interviews, and case studies.

10.1 Mapping and media analysis of youth organisations

A qualitative mapping was conducted to identify and analyse European youth organisations focused on climate change and environmental degradation. The mapping aimed to better understand the organisational landscape, structures, constituencies, and practices of youth-led or youth-focused environmental groups across the European Union. We compiled data by exploring publicly available information from the official websites and social media platforms of relevant youth organisations. The mapping process took place between October 2024 – January 2025, during which we reviewed 51 organisations.

10.1.1 Mapping of youth organisations

Selection Criteria and Operationalisation

To focus the scope of our inquiry, we operationalised "youth organisations" as "Any social movement, organisation, or association operating within the European Union, with a primary focus on climate change or environmental degradation, and a membership base primarily consisting of individuals aged 15 to 29." This definition deliberately centres organisations that are youth-led or explicitly engage youth constituencies in the environmental and climate space. However, we acknowledge several trade-offs and biases inherent to this definition, including:

- **Affinity Bias:** it overrepresents youth already engaged in climate and environmental issues
- **Socio-economic Bias:** it underrepresents marginalised groups due to barriers to participation.
- **Age Limitations:** it excludes individuals under 15 and unborn generations.
- **Visibility Bias:** it excludes organisations that operate primarily offline, focus on local issues, or address climate and environmental concerns as part of a broader agenda.
- **Cultural and Linguistic Barriers:** it may overlook organisations in less accessible languages or culturally distinct forms of activism.
- **Regime-aligning Bias:** It overrepresents organisational activities aligned with institutional norms (other methods probably won't be posted front and centre), potentially underrepresenting disobedient or anti-establishment actions.

To mitigate selection and visibility bias, we deliberately included:

- Intersectional organisations representing marginalised youth (e.g., migrant background, indigenous, working-class, rural, and women-led youth groups);
- Alternative organisations employing grassroots, non-institutional, or disobedient forms of governance and engagement (e.g., youth climate strikes, nonviolent resistance coalitions);
- Accessibility indicators, such as open versus closed leadership structures, membership pathways, and mechanisms for youth voice and participation.

This inclusive approach aims to offer a more nuanced understanding of the landscape of environmental youth activism in Europe, while also acknowledging its limitations.

Data Points Collected

For each organisation, we extracted the following data fields and captured this in an Excel sheet:

- Organisation name
- Main aim or mission
- Constituency (e.g., nationality, age group, gender, class)
- Leadership and representation model (e.g., open participation, elections, appointed leaders)
- Geographical base and operational reach (country, regional or international)
- Network affiliations (e.g., umbrella networks, partnerships, governance institutions)
- Contact information and online presence
- Notes on inclusion in existing consortia and accessibility for follow-up (e.g., surveys)

These criteria allowed for an initial comparative analysis of how youth organisations differ in their structure, constituency, scope, and modes of operation. The analysis supported by AI-assisted text review to help identify patterns and key themes. Based on this mapping we were able to do a simple descriptive analysis of how these organisations differ, already highlighting the difference that exists in a mere group of 50 initiatives.

10.1.2 Media analysis of youth organisations

In addition to the organisational mapping, we conducted a targeted media analysis to explore how selected European youth environmental initiatives communicate their aims, values, and strategies through social media. This component of the study aimed to deepen our understanding of how youth organisations frame climate and environmental issues and mobilise engagement in the digital sphere.

We selected four youth-led environmental initiatives for in-depth analysis, based on their regional diversity, prominence in European youth climate spaces, and active social media presence. For each initiative, we analysed six months of Instagram posts. We focused on Instagram due to its centrality as a communication platform for youth activists. Posts were analysed systematically and coded using a structured Excel spreadsheet with the following analytical categories:

- Target audience – inferred from language, tone, direct tagging, and framing.
- Environmental themes – identifying which aspects of climate change or environmental degradation were discussed (e.g., biodiversity, climate justice, fossil fuel policy).
- Motivations and purposes – exploring the underlying drivers expressed for engaging with these issues (e.g., justice, survival, identity, solidarity).
- Framing: Systemic vs. Event-based – evaluating whether the post addresses broader systemic critique and solutions or highlights discrete events/actions (e.g., a climate strike or petition).
- Emotional resonance – assessing if and how posts evoke specific emotions such as hope, anger, urgency, or solidarity.
- Post purpose – distinguishing between informative, mobilising, celebratory, reflective, or call-to-action types.

- Engagement patterns – examining likes, comments, and shares to identify how engagement levels correlated with content traits.

This content analysis offers insights into how youth environmental movements craft narratives, inspire participation, and position themselves within broader climate discourses. It also provides a complementary lens to the organisational mapping by showing how stated aims and strategies manifest in public communication and affective engagement.

10.2 Interviews on intergenerational justice

To gain deeper insights into how youth activists and youth-led organisations understand and engage with the concept of intergenerational justice, we conducted a small set of semi-structured interviews with five individuals. These participants were all actively involved in youth environmental organisations or initiatives across Europe, selected based on their engagement in climate governance, justice advocacy, or long-term sustainability efforts.

These interviews aimed to explore how youth:

- Interpret intergenerational justice in theory and practice.
- Connect historical injustices and current decision-making with concerns for future generations.
- Understand the representation (or absence) of youth and future generations in today's governance systems.
- Envision practical and institutional pathways for embedding intergenerational justice in policymaking.

Interview Design and Topics

The interviews opened with introductory questions on personal motivation, youth activism, and how their organisations address justice issues. The core of the interview then focused on intergenerational justice, with key guiding questions such as:

- How do you understand intergenerational justice?
- What past decisions do you see as most impactful on today's injustices?
- How are future generations currently (under)represented in governance?
- What steps could be taken today to institutionalise intergenerational justice?

To support the discussion, we introduced a visual framework (figure 2) representing intergenerational justice as a temporal bridge—linking the past, present, and future—and asked participants to reflect on and respond to this conceptualisation. The visual helped anchor abstract ideas and invited deeper reflection on historical responsibility, present-day agency, and long-term consequences.

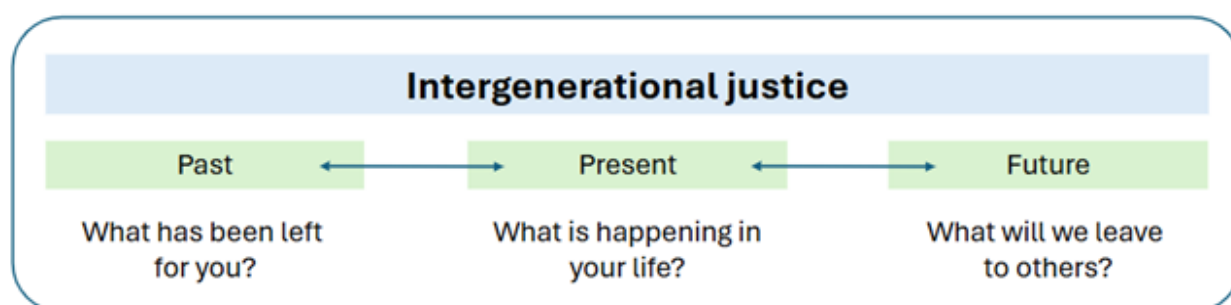


Figure 3. Simplified illustration of intergenerational justice used in interviews

source: by authors

Interviews were conducted online, audio-recorded with consent, and transcribed for thematic analysis. Responses were coded for reference to past-present and present-future dynamics, as well as for concerns

in relation to the past, present and/or future. While the sample size was limited, the interviews yielded rich, qualitative data and allowed for nuanced exploration of how youth understand their role in long-term justice frameworks.

10.3 Case studies of youth participation

To get a sense of how and what kind of participatory approaches have been used across Europe, we conducted case studies on mechanisms of youth participation in environmental decision-making. The goal was to identify examples of good practice in youth participation. What are the strengths and weaknesses of each participatory approach to enable and support youth's participation in decision-making regarding environmental issues?

10.3.1 Mapping and selection of case studies

Mapping of the participatory mechanisms was done in several stages. First, we examined the European Commission's website Youth wiki in which European countries' youth policies are presented. From the website we were able to find preliminary information from EU countries. To complement the listing, we utilised ChatGPT (the question was: *what kind of participation mechanisms are there in X (=European country) for youth engagement in climate and environmental policies?*) and Google searches (the search terms were *youth and engagement and environment and X* and *youth and council and environment and/or climate and X*). In addition, we did a search with the native languages from each country from the Youth Wiki list (except Austria, Netherlands, Belgium, Finland, Denmark, because our team had already identified mechanisms from those countries). The search term was *youth and environment*. We used DeepL and Google translator to translate the search term to the target language.

10.3.2 Case study analysis

The final set of case studies and their level of governance is shown in Table 8. For each case study, we compiled online materials that described the cases, such as reports, webpages, and articles. In addition, we interviewed representatives of public administration that have worked closely with each mechanism, and youth who have participated via the mechanisms. For some cases no interviews were conducted, as there was plenty of online material about them.

Table 8. Overview of case studies on youth participation

source: by authors

Level of governance	Case studies
UN	YOUNGO
EU	Youth dialogue Conference on the future of Europe
National level	Youth Climate Council, Denmark Youth Climate Council, Poland Young People's Nature and Climate Group, Finland (+LCOY) Local Conference of Youth, Germany The National Youth Participatory Budget, Portugal
Local level	Turku Youth Council, Finland Aalborg Youth Climate Council, Denmark Parma Youth Commission, Italy The Cascais Youth Participatory Budget, Portugal

10.4 Workshop on intergenerational justice and youth participation

To complement the report's mapping and analyses, a one-day youth workshop on intergenerational justice and youth participation was organised. The workshop aimed to explore youth perspectives on sustainability governance, identify examples of participatory mechanisms, and foster dialogue between young stakeholders and experts. Insights from the workshop were intended to inform the ETC report and provide recommendations for EU-level policy discussions. The objectives of the workshop were to 1) Co-develop a framing of intergenerational justice from the perspective of youth. 2) Collect examples of youth and future generations' involvement in democratic sustainability governance. And 3) Foster networking and reflection among participants to encourage self-directed follow-up and engagement with EEA activities.

Up to 24 young participants (aged 18–29) were invited from Northern, Southern, Eastern, and Western Europe, with additional participants from nearby Danish universities. Participants were selected to represent diverse experiences in environmental engagement. Several EEA members presented to set the scene for the workshop and two ETC facilitators guided the workshop.

10.4.1 Workshop design and activities

The workshop combined presentations, interactive exercises, guided reflections, and group discussions over the course of a full day. Key elements included:

1. **Introduction and icebreaker** – Participants introduced themselves, engaged in interactive hand-sign responses, and shared initial reflections on environmental optimism, travel choices, and sustainability habits.
2. **Expert presentations** – The EEA provided context on climate risk assessments and just transitions towards sustainability, followed by Q&A sessions.
3. **Guided reflection on intergenerational justice** – A meditation exercise encouraged participants to consider past, present, and future environmental impacts. Participants recorded reflections on flipcharts, forming a basis for group discussions.
4. **Exploring participation practices** – Participants were introduced to mechanisms of youth participation in environmental governance. They shared experiences from their own organisations and reflected on good practices and gaps in participatory approaches.
5. **Group work and peer dialogue** – Participants formed small groups to discuss the role of youth and future generations in decision-making, exploring implementation at EU, national, and local levels. Post-lunch paired walks encouraged cross-group dialogue and consolidation of insights.
6. **Harvesting insights and reporting** – Groups selected symbolic objects to represent key discussion points and reported back in a structured “popcorn-style” format. Final reflections were captured on a central flipchart, including messages directed to the European Commissioner for Intergenerational Fairness.
7. **Closing and next steps** – The workshop concluded with a one-word participant check-out and information on follow-up events, including webinars and networking opportunities.

The workshop provided a participatory, reflexive space for youth to articulate their concerns regarding intergenerational justice and thereby contributing both tangible inputs to the reporting. Outputs from the workshop were the following:

- A post-workshop report and visual summary slides documenting key insights.
- A clustering of participant reflections into thematic areas relevant for the ETC report.
- Strengthened connections between the EEA and a network of environmentally engaged youth.

11. List of abbreviations

Abbreviation	Name	Reference
EEA	European Environment Agency	eea.europa.eu
ETC ST	European Topic Centre on Sustainable Transitions	
DRIFT	Dutch Research Institute for Transitions	drift.eur.nl
SYKE	Finnish Environment Institute	syke.fi
UBA	Federal Environment Agency (Germany)	
ICLEI	ICLEI European Secretariat GmbH	iclei.org
SEI Tallinn	Stockholm Environment Institute Tallinn Centre	sei.org
LCOY	Local Conferences of Youth	lcoy.org
EU	European Union	european-union.europa.eu
EGD	European Green Deal	
EAP	Environmental Action Programme	
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development	oecd.org
COP	Conference of the Parties	unfccc.int/cop
UNFCCC	United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change	unfccc.int
YEE	Youth and Environment Europe	yeenet.eu
CSM	Climate Students Movement	climsatesm.eu
FFF Italy	Fridays for Future Italy	fridaysforfuture.it
JKB	Jonge Klimaatbeweging (Youth Climate Movement Netherlands)	jongeklimaatbeweging.nl
LGBTQIA+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning, Intersex, Asexual and others	
GYS	Global Youth Statement	
COYs	Conferences of Youth	

RCOYs	Regional Conferences of Youth	
GCOYs	Global Conferences of Youth	
EUJD	European Youth Dialogue	europa.eu/youth/dialogue
NUOLI	Young People's Nature and Climate group (Finland)	nuoli.fi
EYC	European Youth Capital	eyc2025.eu
NYPB	National Youth Participatory Budget	
YPB	Youth Participatory Budget	

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