

2023 Policy Briefing: Greenwashing in youth organizations. Ensuring impactful procedures and results.

YouthProAktiv is a coalition of young people promoting a culture of proactivity and entrepreneurship in education and policy. This document was created to communicate to policy makers in a clear and simple manner the importance of combating greenwashing in youth organizations and related non-formal education institutions by ensuring impactful procedures and results.

This policy briefing serves as a strategic instrument for conveying research findings and proposals pertaining to the prevention of greenwashing within youth structures and non-formal education institutions. The primary objective is to advocate for robust sustainability strategies, thereby fostering positive and significant impacts. This briefing is meticulously crafted to elevate awareness among youth stakeholders and young individuals through a qualitative and expert-driven approach.

Summary of key messages and policy recommendations

With this policy briefing, YouthProAktiv brings attention to the persistent challenge of greenwashing within youth organizations and non-formal education institutions, despite the existence of a comprehensive EU Green Governance Framework. Our policy recommendations emphasize the necessity for enhanced information access, legislative progress, adoption of sustainable strategies, incentives to promote green practices, and targeted climate education for youth organizations. These proposals are designed to empower these entities with the knowledge and skills necessary for active participation in sustainable practices and decision-making processes.

1. Introduction to greenwashing:

In several European countries, attempts by political leaders to align human economic activities with planetary boundaries consistently fall short.¹ This shortfall is noteworthy given the increasing global awareness surrounding deceptive environmental claims made by corporations, non-profits, and governments when discussing their environmental and climate strategies.² Despite the growing awareness, greenwashing remains a prevalent challenge.

¹ See Biermann, F.; Hickmann, T.; Sénit, C.A.; Beisheim, M.; Bernstein, S.; Chasek, P.; Grob, L.; Kim, R.E.; Kotzé L.J.; Nilsson, M.; Ordóñez Llanos, A.; Okereke, C.; Pradhan, P.; Raven, R.; Sun, Y.; Vijge, M.J.; van Vuuren, D.; Wicke, B. 2022. Scientific Evidence on the Political Impact of the Sustainable Development Goals. *Nature Sustainability*, 5(9): 795–800, DOI: 10.1038/s41893-022-00909-5

² For a more detailed definition see Nemes, N.; Scanlan, S.J.; Smith, P.; Smith, T.; Aronczyk, M.; Hill, S.; Lewis, S.L.; Montgomery, A.W.; Tubiello, F.N.; Stabinsky, D. 2022. An Integrated Framework to

Coined in the 1980s, the term “greenwashing” originated in the 1960s when major corporations shifted blame for environmental issues onto ordinary citizens. By the 1990s, greenwashing had become a recognized technique in corporate communication. Historically viewed as deliberate corporate strategy, contemporary literature suggests that greenwashing is not necessarily intentional.³

Greenwashing is a term encompassing misleading communications and practices that generate false positive perceptions of an organization's environmental performance.⁴ It takes on various forms, representing a spectrum of objective and subjective realities. It includes falsely promoting an organization's environmental efforts or allocating more resources to present the organization as environmentally conscious than are dedicated to actual environmentally sound practices.

Notably, non-governmental organizations and governments may engage in greenwashing, collaborating in corporate efforts or managing public perceptions of policies and programs. Instances may stem from ignorance of environmental issues and laws or poorly conceived public relations endeavours.

2. The EU’s Green Governance Framework:

Sustainability stands as a paramount focus in the European Commission's educational priorities for 2019-2024.⁵ The emphasis is on fostering a green transition, a transformative process towards an environmentally sustainable and equitable societal development model. This transition encompasses profound changes in key production and consumption systems, infrastructure, societal values, and politics⁶.

The EU's Green Governance Framework comprises a cohesive set of policies and initiatives, from high-level strategies to concrete programs and technical frameworks, all working towards the common goal of achieving a sustainable and climate-neutral continent by 2050.

Key European Policies for Green Transition:

In the recent past, the EU has crafted ambitious education, training, and skills policies aligned with the green and digital transitions. The European Green Deal⁷, introduced in late 2019, serves as a foundational policy initiative aimed at propelling the European economy towards

Assess Greenwashing. *Sustainability*, 14, 4431. Available at: <https://www.mdpi.com/2071-1050/14/8/4431>

³ See Bowen, F. 2014. *After greenwashing: Symbolic corporate environmentalism and society*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.

⁴ See Lyon, T.P.; Montgomery, A.W. 2015. The means and end of greenwash. *Organization & Environment*, 28, 223-249. Available at: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1086026615575332>

⁵ https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024_en

⁶ European Training Foundation (ETF). 2023. Policy Briefing. [Skilling for the green transition](#).

⁷ https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/european-green-deal_en

climate neutrality by 2050.⁸ As a comprehensive roadmap for the EU's climate agenda, it initiates the green transition.

Complementary policies, such as the European Skills Agenda for Sustainable Competitiveness (2020)⁹ and Achieving the European Education Area by 2025 (2020)¹⁰, underscore the imperative of developing a European competence framework on sustainability. The latest emphasizes the necessity of behavioural and skills changes, starting within education systems, to catalyse the green transition. It calls for investments in education and training to increase the number of professionals working towards a climate-neutral economy and advocates for integrating environmental sustainability perspectives across disciplines.

Also, the EU biodiversity strategy for 2030 (2020)¹¹ further accentuates the role of education and training in achieving a climate-neutral continent by 2050. Similarly, the European Skills Agenda for Sustainable Competitiveness (2021)¹² aligns with the European Green Deal objectives, focusing on addressing the skilling requirements of the green transition.

In June 2022, the Council adopted a Recommendation on learning for environmental sustainability¹³, aiming to equip learners with understanding and skills related to sustainability, climate change, and the environment.

Concrete Initiatives and Funding:

Complementing policy actions, the European Commission has launched initiatives such as the Education for Climate Coalition, an integral part of the European Education Area by 2025 and the European Green Deal. This coalition establishes a community of practice for a comprehensive approach to environmental sustainability education.

The European Union offers grants and opportunities to young people and youth organizations for projects and initiatives aligned with sustainability. Programs like Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps prioritize climate-neutral means of cooperation and incentivize carbon-free mobility.

Technical Support and Frameworks:

At a technical level, the Joint Research Centre (JRC) released the European Framework for education for sustainability (the *GreenComp*) in 2022¹⁴. This framework provides a basis for learning for environmental sustainability applicable in any learning context, supporting Member States in greening their education and training systems.

⁸ https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_20_1743

⁹ https://ec.europa.eu/migrant-integration/library-document/european-skills-agenda-sustainable-competitiveness-social-fairness-and-resilience_en

¹⁰ https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_20_1743

¹¹ https://environment.ec.europa.eu/strategy/biodiversity-strategy-2030_en

¹² <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52020DC0274>

¹³ <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-9242-2022-INIT/en/pdf>

¹⁴ <https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/handle/JRC128040>

3. Youth and greenwashing:

European youth have emerged as the driving force behind the global plea for regional and interregional collaboration in sustainable development. Through their tireless efforts, they have propelled the climate crisis to the forefront, capturing global attention and significantly influencing media discourse on environmental issues.

Recent findings from the Eurobarometer on climate change (May – June 2023)¹⁵ underscore the distinct environmental consciousness of young people. Compared to older age groups, a significant 24% of individuals aged 15-24 consider climate change as the most serious global problem. A staggering 81% of this age cohort perceive climate change as a very serious problem, highlighting their acute awareness and concern. In contrast, 66% of respondents in the 25-54 age group have personally taken action to combat climate change, showcasing the distinctive activism of the youth.

Youth-led networks across Europe have become vibrant hubs of sustainable development initiatives, reflecting a localized, cooperative approach to tackling environmental challenges. These networks, driven by young individuals, pilot projects, establish professional connections, and participate in key decision-making processes, thereby shaping influential youth policies and programs. In 2018, over 50,000 young participants from various European regions engaged in the Youth Dialogue process¹⁶, yielding 11 formulated Youth Goals¹⁷. Among these goals, number 10 aspires to create a “Sustainable and Green Europe”, envisioning a society where all young people are environmentally active, educated, and capable of making a positive impact in their daily lives.

In the realm of youth-focused action, Erasmus+ emerges as a pivotal instrument for nurturing knowledge, skills, and attitudes related to climate change and sustainable development. Recognizing the importance of environmental issues, Erasmus+ prioritizes funding for initiatives that, through education, training, and youth and sport activities, foster behavioural changes aligned with sustainable values. Crucially, “environmental sustainability” is identified as a horizontal priority, emphasizing the commitment to contribute to greener societies. As described in the Programme Guide¹⁸:

“Projects should be designed in an eco-friendly way and should incorporate green practices in all their facets. Organisations and participants should have an environmentally-friendly approach when designing the project, which will encourage everyone involved in the project to discuss and learn about environmental issues, reflecting on what can be done at different levels and helping organisations and participants to come up with alternative, greener ways of implementing project activities.”

¹⁵ <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2954>

¹⁶ https://youth.europa.eu/strategy/euyouthdialogue_en

¹⁷ https://youth.europa.eu/strategy/european-youth-goals_en

¹⁸ <https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/erasmus-programme-guide>

3.1 Why greenwashing is affecting youth organisations?

Undoubtedly, there is a growing demand for more environmentally conscious approaches in the development of projects within European Youth Programmes. However, numerous youth organizations, in their pursuit of appealing to an environmentally conscious generation, may either exaggerate or falsely proclaim their commitment to environmental initiatives. This can result in the devaluation of sincere efforts and the erosion of trust.

In the following, we illustrate three examples of practices that, whether intentional or not, align with the definition of greenwashing.

Eco-themed Events Lacking Genuine Sustainability:

Consider a youth organization hosting an “Eco-Friendly Day” with the aim of raising awareness about environmental issues. The event encompasses workshops, lectures, and activities, all dedicated to promoting sustainability. Despite the eco-friendly theme, the event logistics do not uphold the same values. The use of single-use plastics for food and beverages, the absence of waste segregation options, or the distribution of non-sustainable giveaways all undermine the organization's promotion of the event as a green initiative. Unfortunately, such disconnects between eco-friendly themes and actual practices during events are not uncommon in youth organizations.

Social Media Advocacy Without In-House Sustainability:

Another scenario involves a youth organization actively engaging in social media, frequently sharing posts advocating sustainability, eco-friendly habits, and the urgency of combating climate change. However, the physical spaces of their offices or meeting areas may not align with their online messaging. This could manifest as the absence of recycling bins, excessive paper usage, reliance on non-renewable energy sources, or a lack of tangible initiatives supporting their online claims. In the digital age, youth organizations may emphasize online advocacy while neglecting to integrate these values into their daily operations, potentially due to a focus on branding and marketing efforts to attract members, partnerships, and funding.

Misleading Use of Funding:

Some youth organizations may assert that they allocate funds to green initiatives but redirect these resources to other areas, betraying the trust of donors and supporters. This misleading portrayal undermines the genuine efforts of youth organizations to enhance sustainability and minimize environmental harm, deceiving partners who believe they are contributing to positive environmental and social change when, in reality, they are not.

4. Policy Recommendations: towards an integrative and systemic approach

The growing interest of young individuals in environmental information, as they seek to engage and contribute to organizational efforts, underscores the pivotal role of transparency, credibility, and accountability as the foundational pillars of youth organizations. In this vein, fostering critical thinking and systems thinking becomes imperative, urging organization members to adopt eco-friendly behaviours and provide evidence-based updates on sustainability initiatives.

Within this dynamic framework, European policymakers face a fundamental question: How can European youth projects and related practices be rendered more sustainable? The crucial need for robust support from policymakers and stakeholders is evident to cultivate an environment conducive to the green transition. Therefore, the heart of youth policymaking should revolve around promoting greener practices, spaces, tools, activities, and services. Simultaneously, there is a pressing call to instil a sense of active citizenship and critical thinking among young people, emphasizing environmental sustainability and climate action.

To guide those shaping policies that impact young individuals, we present five distinct areas of recommendations.

A. Improve the quality of information on green standards and practices:

Empowering the youth with streamlined access to information regarding involvement in environmental sustainability and eco-friendly approaches serves as a catalyst for autonomous action.¹⁹ It equips them with the necessary tools to make informed decisions about their lifestyles and consciously determine the ecological impact they desire. Moreover, youth information services assume a significant role in bolstering the comprehension of crucial principles, issues, and concepts related to the climate emergency and environmental sustainability.

To concretize this objective, we advocate for policymakers to allocate resources towards elevating the standards of youth information services. This investment stands as a strategic approach to align with the European Union's green objectives.

B. Legislative advancements towards the adoption of green standards:

We urge EU legislators to extend the existing scope of the Green Claims Directive²⁰. This extension should encompass not only companies but also education institutions (both formal and non-formal) and non-profit organizations.

This first recommendation aligns with the context of the European Green Deal, where the Commission, in its 2019 communication, outlined a series of legislative and non-legislative initiatives. These efforts aimed to diminish the prevalence of false green claims by mandating companies to substantiate environmental assertions using a standardized methodology, thereby

¹⁹ See Eurodesk, ERYCA. 2020. [Greening Youth Information Services](#).

²⁰ https://environment.ec.europa.eu/publications/proposal-directive-green-claims_en

evaluating their impact on the environment. Specifically, on 22 March 2023, the European Commission introduced a proposal for a Green Claims Directive, which seeks to combat greenwashing by establishing stringent requirements for companies making environmental claims to consumers. It introduces penalties to deter greenwashing practices. On 19 September 2023, EU institutions finalized a comprehensive law imposing a sweeping ban to counter the misleading of citizens through false sustainability claims.

As a complementary measure, our second recommendation proposes an expanded utilization of environmental management certification. Specifically, we emphasize compliance with the EU Eco-Management and Audit Scheme (EMAS)²¹, a framework built on the core principles of performance, credibility, and transparency. EMAS guides organizations in identifying optimal tools to enhance their ecological performance. Organizations, including youth groups, willingly commit to assessing and minimizing their environmental impact. Notably, providing publicly available information on any organization's environmental performance is a fundamental aspect of EMAS (European Commission, 2020a).

C. Promote the development of environmentally sustainable strategies:

Policymakers possess the tools and means to legislate the establishment and implementation of a green strategy within youth organizations and, more broadly, across non-formal education initiatives. For the youth sector, it is essential not only to endorse activities that raise ecological awareness but also to establish a framework that facilitates environmentally conscious choices for participants in educational activities.²² A critical element for achieving sustainability in an organization involves having a strategic plan to ensure unified efforts within the organization are directed toward a common goal.

Adapted to the specific project and scope of action of a youth organization, a “Green strategy” should encompass three key elements:

1. Measurement of the organization's carbon footprint and the formulation of concrete actions to reduce it, along with compensation mechanisms when necessary.
2. Integration of green practices and eco-friendly policies into everyday activities and office management.
3. Collaboration with pertinent public authorities, schools, civil society organizations, and other key stakeholders in the realm of environmental sustainability.

Youth organizations and non-formal education institutions can draw inspiration from the Joint Research Centre *GreenComp*, a comprehensive reference framework for sustainability competences designed to support lifelong learning programs. *GreenComp* aims to cultivate a sustainability mindset by aiding users in developing the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary for thoughtful, responsible action. It serves as a tool for designing learning opportunities that foster sustainability competences and for assessing, monitoring, and evaluating progress in supporting education and training for sustainability.

²¹ https://green-business.ec.europa.eu/eco-management-and-audit-scheme-emas_en

²² See Keen, E. (Ed.). 2018. T-Kit 13 Sustainability and youth work. Council of Europe. Available at: <https://pjp-eu.coe.int/en/web/youth-partnership/t-kit-13-sustainability-and-youth-work>

Ultimately, youth organizations can openly share their green strategies with potential applicants and beneficiaries, showcasing the various dimensions covered by their projects and collaborations with partner organizations.²³

D. Incentives to green the organisations practices:

To integrate environmentally responsible practices and encourage authentic strides towards sustainability, we propose the inclusion of green incentives in the evaluation criteria. This entails offering grants or awards to youth organizations that can substantiate their commitment to sustainable practices. For instance, during funding applications, youth organizations might be prompted to elucidate their incorporation of green measures in their projects, earning additional points as a result.

Funding bodies play a pivotal role in this process, and it is recommended that they actively inform and motivate applicants to incorporate green standards within their projects. This proactive approach ensures that sustainability considerations become an integral part of the project development and funding application process.

E. Promotion of environmental education skills, awareness raising actions, and capacity building targeting youth

In the current landscape, providing climate education is vital for empowering youth organizations, fostering their active participation in decision-making, and inspiring the adoption of sustainable lifestyles to combat climate challenges. Within school settings, discussions on climate change and its impacts are noticeably lacking, prompting young individuals engaged in youth organizations and non-formal education initiatives to seek climate education through external sources like online platforms and networking groups.²⁴

Several challenges contribute to the climate literacy gap among youth in these organizations, including a lack of support from communities and governments, inadequate funding and time for field visits, student disinterest, insufficient teacher training, limited access to quality content, and the inflexibility of classroom training systems resistant to curriculum revision.

To address this gap, we recommend policymakers to incentivise strategies aimed to prioritize climate education tailored for youth organizations and non-formal education initiatives. This approach aims to empower these groups with the knowledge and skills necessary for active engagement in decision-making processes and the promotion of sustainable practices to combat climate issues.

²³ See Tuménaité, N. 2021. Greening the youth sector: a sustainability checklist. Youth Partnership. Council of Europe. Available at: <https://pjp-eu.coe.int/en/web/youth-partnership/-/greening-the-youth-sector-sustainability-checklist>

²⁴ See Aggarwal, D., Esquivel, N., Hocquet, R., Martin, K., Mungo, C., Nazareth, A., Nikam, J., Odenyo, J., Ravindran, B., Kurinji, L. S., Shawoo, Z., & Yamada, K. (2022). Charting a youth vision for a just and sustainable future. Stockholm Environment Institute. <https://www.sei.org/publications/charting-a-youth-vision/>

Conclusions

Greenwashing, despite appearing as a solution to the rising demand for eco-consciousness, can have adverse consequences in the long term. For European youth, increasingly at the forefront of environmental advocacy, it is essential to ensure that their platforms and organizations genuinely reflect their efforts. The mentioned policy tools are crafted to safeguard the integrity of these initiatives, paving the way for a more environmentally friendly future throughout Europe.

To protect our planet and support authentic sustainability endeavours, it is crucial to take comprehensive steps. Transparency must become the cornerstone of youth organizations' practices. By openly and truthfully communicating sustainability goals and impacts, they can prevent greenwashing, rebuild trust, and encourage ethical actions among their youth members and partner organisations.

Similarly, education on sustainable practices equips present and future generations with the knowledge and motivation needed to drive actual change. It empowers them to make informed decisions, challenge deceptive practices, and promote responsible behaviours within their organizations and social movements.

Moreover, green practices should not be adopted merely for specific strategies; policies should be formulated to encourage a system based on genuine and fair green techniques for future generations. Developing robust policies and regulations is crucial. These measures will establish clear frameworks, incentivize genuine sustainability efforts, and foster collaboration within youth organizations and beyond. While the mentioned legal framework is a promising start, it needs further refinement to consider the specific needs of European youth and the actual risks of greenwashing for them.

The ultimate goal for European policymakers should be collaborative action and evaluation with their youth. Building the capacity and amplifying the voices of today's youth are crucial for realizing a healthy future on the planet. They have the potential to move from intentions and promises to decisive and authentic action.