



RECOMMENDATIONS PAPER

How can youth be meaningfully involved in the Greening Education Partnership?

Youth Working Group - NGO-UNESCO Liaison Committee



May 2026

YOUTH WORKING GROUP

The **Youth Working Group (YWG) of the NGO-UNESCO Liaison Committee (LC)** was launched in July 2023, and it supports the development and implementation of the NGO-UNESCO Liaison Committee's programme, which in turn is based on the recommendations adopted by the International Conference of NGOs.

The Group is formed by Youth Representatives appointed by the NGOs in official partnership with UNESCO. In the 2024-2026 mandate of the LC, **the YWG encompasses around 80 youth members from across the 400+ NGOs in official partnership with UNESCO**, with Isabela Carrozza Joia (Youth Liaison & Communications Officer of the Liaison Committee) as chair.

The YWG objectives is to gather the voices of youth from civil society on topics of importance, and, when requested, to advise the Liaison Committee on thematic issues, decisions and activities relevant to youth. In practical terms, this means the YWG steers youth-led initiatives, authors policy inputs, and helps design NGO events, ensuring youth voices are included. For example, YWG members contributed ideas to the agenda and format of the 18th International Forum of NGOs on Greening Education Partnership, such as by suggesting youth panels and topics across the pillars. They also organized preparatory consultations to formulate a youth position on GEP.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This position paper addresses stakeholders of the Greening Education Partnership (GEP), including UNESCO, Member States, NGOs and youth, and considers how young people can be meaningfully involved in the environmental and climate education agenda. In doing this, it identifies a key issue preventing meaningful involvement. Despite being critical agents of change, youth are not yet fully integrated into decision-making and implementation within the GEP framework.

Guided by the conviction that **climate and environmental education is a fundamental right**, the paper highlights stark inequalities in access to quality green education (especially for marginalized and underserved youth) and the persistent gap between institutional commitments and real-world implementation. Drawing on UNESCO and UN frameworks, as well as outcomes of the **18th International Forum of NGOs in Official Partnership with UNESCO on “Greening Education Partnership: NGOs Engaged for Sustainable Impact”** held in February 2026, the Youth Working Group (YWG) argues that youth participation should be strengthened across all four GEP pillars (schools, curriculum, teachers, communities) to align policy ambition with action and to make climate and environmental education both inclusive and effective.

The intended audience is the GEP community, namely: governments, UNESCO bodies, civil society, educators, and young learners themselves.

AUTHORS

This paper is a **collective work** produced by the members of the YWG.

In particular, special thanks go to Gabriele Druetta (Agence Universitaire de la Francophonie), Isabela Carrozza Joia (SDG Academy, Sustainable Development Solutions Network), Gabrielle Edwards (International Federation of Home Economics), Niko Costantino (International Dance Council CID), Rafie Hani Krachni (International Pharmaceutical Student's Federation), Muriel Slim (International Federation of Medical Students' Associations), and Elisa Valentin (Make Mothers Matter) for their contributions to the drafting process.

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SUGGESTED CITATION

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INTRODUCTION

Climate change, biodiversity loss, and broader environmental crises are no longer abstract challenges, but lived realities affecting people worldwide. **Young people represent the first generation to experience these crises from early childhood**, and many are already taking action to contribute to a more livable and sustainable future.

In response to these disruptions, UNESCO launched the **Greening Education Partnership (GEP)** in 2022 during the UN Transforming Education Summit. This flagship initiative brings together a wide range of stakeholders, from governments to civil society organizations, in order to harness education in support of climate action.

Although the GEP recognizes young people as essential actors in its mission, their participation has not always been embedded in a sustained and structural way. Youth engagement remains too often consultative rather than genuinely participatory, while policy commitments are not always matched by adequate resources, training, and institutional support. Strengthening these dimensions will be crucial for the GEP to fully achieve its transformative potential.

This paper aims to propose concrete recommendations to close these gaps and ensure that young people's perspectives, capacities, and rights are fully embedded in the work of the GEP. More specifically, this publication seeks to answer the following question: How can youth be meaningfully involved in the Greening Education Partnership?

This paper builds on the idea that, just as education is recognized as a human right, access to quality climate and environmental education should also be understood as part of this right. Educating children and young people about environmental issues is not optional. It is essential for their future well-being and for their participation as active citizens.

Framing **climate and environmental education as a right** means advocating for universal, inclusive, and enforceable access to education on climate and sustainability. It requires States and partners to ensure not only that curricula address climate and environmental issues, but also that all young people can access and actively shape such education. This is particularly important given that access to quality climate and environmental education remains profoundly unequal, while the impacts of climate change and environmental disasters tend to deepen existing educational inequalities.

Vulnerable groups, including rural and low-income communities, Indigenous peoples, women and girls, migrants and refugees, and persons with disabilities and chronic and rare diseases, are disproportionately affected both by climate impacts and by barriers to education. Schools in underserved regions often lack basic resources, let alone updated green curricula or teachers trained in sustainability. These disparities mean that the promise of ensuring that “every learner” becomes climate-ready will not be fulfilled unless the GEP actively addresses issues of equity and inclusion. A rights-based approach to education therefore implies the adoption of specific measures to ensure that marginalized young people are not left behind. Moreover, **for the GEP to have a meaningful impact, youth should be fully included in its structures and processes.**

RECOMMENDATIONS

The first three recommendations represent the preconditions for meaningful youth participation in GEP activities.

The fourth and fifth are concrete actions to implement in order to effectively include young people in this flagship initiative.

Each recommendation is accompanied by two case studies illustrating inspiring practices in which young people play an active role, whether as leaders, co-creators, or key contributors, in advancing green education around the world. A full compendium of all the case studies collected through the YWG network can be found in the annex to this Recommendations Paper.

1. Climate and environmental education should be recognized as a right for all
2. Climate and environmental education should be explicitly included as a compulsory, cross-curricular area of learning
3. Teachers should be equipped with competencies in empathy and emotional literacy to address eco-anxiety
4. Youth should be supported to develop impactful initiatives and to be included in decision-making
5. **The GEP should institutionalize a Youth Working Group with structured roles for youth participation**

1. Climate and environmental education should be recognized as a right for all



Pillar 1 - Greening every school

The effects of climate change and environmental crises are not experienced equally. Minority and marginalized groups, who often contribute least to climate change and environmental disruption, are disproportionately affected by its impacts. At the same time, **access to climate and environmental education is also unequal.** In many parts of the world, green education is not a central component of schooling, or is only minimally included.

Some schools have recognized the need for a holistic approach to green education and have therefore begun to integrate climate and sustainability education across both formal and informal learning through a whole-school approach. **Whole-school approaches recognize that schools are cultural environments for living and learning¹.** These approaches aim to establish a culture of sustainability by recognizing that all aspects of a school environment impact learning, including the formal curriculum, school environment, governance, infrastructure, extracurricular activities, and connections to the broader community. Whole-school approaches are supported by international frameworks such as UNESCO Education for Sustainable Development 2030 and are considered important because **schools need to develop agents of change rather than transmit information and/or values in a passive way** in order to promote students' engagement in sustainable action.

A disconnect between sustainable knowledge in the formal curriculum and sustainable actions in the non-formal curriculum and wider community communicates mixed messages and can

lead young people to believe that showing concern for health and the environment without adopting sustainable practices is normal adult behaviour. By providing young people with opportunities to engage with sustainability, schools can support the development of agency and informed practices.

While a whole-school approach is a promising model, under current structural limitations it can unintentionally deepen existing inequalities. Implementing a whole-school approach requires significant time and resources, meaning that schools able to adopt it are often not public and free institutions accessible to all young people. This creates further disparities in who is equipped with the knowledge and skills to engage with climate issues, including access to related career pathways.

Recognizing climate and environmental education as a right, and embedding it centrally across formal and informal learning in all schools, could help ensure that all young people are equipped to act as agents of transformative change. While barriers to equitable participation in climate action remain, **establishing universal access to green education is a necessary starting point.**



Action

The GEP should include in its next official documents for educational authorities a recommendation to recognize and promote climate and environmental education as a universal right

YOUTH IN ACTION - schools

Harit Suraksha

Youth-Led Health and Awareness Initiative



India

Harit Suraksha is a national initiative led by medical students across India. **It transforms campuses and community spaces into interactive climate learning environments** through a QR-tagged sapling plantation drive. Each sapling links to ecological information accessible to anyone with a smartphone, making climate knowledge open, self-directed, and not dependent on a particular curriculum or institution. Its scalable, student-led model shows how **climate education can reach beyond school walls and serve as a right in practice**, not just in policy.



Integration of environmental education into the FMPS preschool pedagogical model

Fondation Marocaine du Préscolaire (FMPS)



Morocco

FMPS has integrated environmental education into its preschool pedagogical model across Morocco, introducing **sustainability through play-based learning** such as storytelling, songs, gardening, recycling, and sensory activities on themes like biodiversity, water, energy, waste, and climate, supported by tailored resources developed with the Mohammed VI Foundation for Environmental Protection. **The initiative embeds climate and environmental education into early learning curricula.** It also advances climate and environmental education as a right by ensuring early, inclusive, and structured access to sustainability learning from the preschool level.



2. Climate and environmental education should be explicitly included as a compulsory, cross-curricular area of learning



Pillar 2 - Greening every curriculum

A cross-curricular approach to green education enables learners to engage with the complexity of the climate and environmental crises across multiple domains. To be effective, this approach should include key thematic areas that are often absent or only minimally addressed in current curricula.

- **Food systems:** Food systems are a major contributor to climate change, accounting for approximately 21-37% of global GHGs². In many regions, food also represents the largest share of household carbon footprints. Despite this, education on food systems is limited or absent from most formal educational curriculum. The result is a generational decline in food literacy with many individuals unaware of the social and environmental impacts of their food choices³. Integrating food systems education into the curriculum provides a tangible and accessible entry point for understanding climate change and its connections to everyday life.
- **Indigenous perspectives:** Indigenous knowledge systems and ways of relating to the land, ecosystems, and communities have been widely recognized as critical to addressing the climate crisis⁴. Therefore, including Indigenous perspectives in education supports a more holistic understanding of sustainability, strengthens respect for diverse knowledge systems, and ensures that climate solutions are informed by those who have long practiced stewardship of the environment.

- **Climate justice:** As outlined under Pillar 1, the impacts of climate change are unevenly distributed⁵. Climate education should therefore be delivered through a climate justice lens, ensuring that learners understand existing inequalities and the structural factors that drive them. This includes recognizing the disproportionate impacts on marginalized communities and the importance of including underrepresented voices in developing solutions. Embedding climate justice within the curriculum supports the development of more equitable and inclusive climate action.

In terms of **implementation**, place-based learning and engaging learners in locally situated action offer effective strategies for embedding green education across subjects.

Integrating climate and environmental education as a compulsory, cross-curricular area that is grounded in diverse knowledge systems, real-world contexts, and a climate justice lens, ensures that learners are equipped not only with knowledge, but with the understanding and agency needed to contribute to equitable and transformative solutions.



Action

The GEP should develop guidance for educational institutions, national authorities and accreditation agencies on how to implement cross-curricular and place-based approaches to climate and environmental education

YOUTH IN ACTION - curriculum

Drøbak Marine Utility Garden

Association Montessori Internationale



Norway

Students from Drøbak Montessori School, from 7th to 9th grade, **built and now maintain a functioning marine garden** in the Oslofjord, growing sugar kelp and blue mussels to help restore a degraded ecosystem. The project takes place during school hours and combines ecology, engineering, biology, and civic engagement, without separating learning into subject silos. Students have raised funds, presented at international conferences, and redesigned their buoys after a winter storm destroyed them. **It is a place-based, action-oriented, and student-driven initiative that demonstrates the potential of compulsory cross-curricular climate learning.**



SDG Academy resources on sustainable development

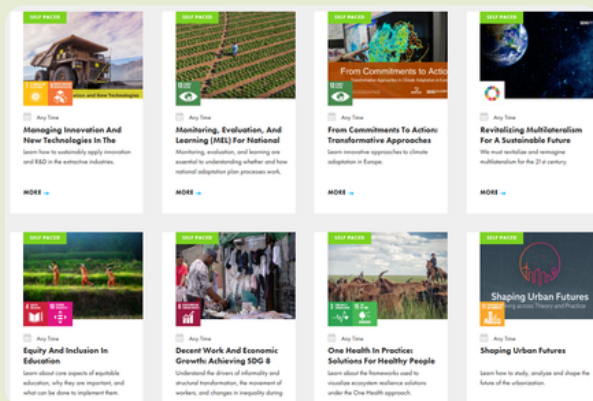
SDSN



Globally

The SDG Academy, the education initiative of the UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN), offers more than 50 free online courses that integrate climate change, sustainable development, public health, economics, governance, and social justice across disciplines.

Rather than positioning climate education as a standalone topic, its courses connect environmental challenges to wider systems including finance, inequality, urban development, and global cooperation. Reaching learners in 235 countries and territories, the initiative demonstrates how climate education can be embedded across curricula and made accessible through interdisciplinary, lifelong learning approaches that equip learners with the knowledge and skills needed for a just and sustainable transition.



3. Teachers should be equipped with competencies in empathy and emotional literacy to address eco-anxiety



Pillar 3 - Greening teacher training and education systems capacities

The impacts of climate change and environmental crises extend beyond physical consequences, significantly affecting mental health and well-being. In this context, eco-anxiety has emerged as a relevant and growing concern.

According to UNICEF, climate change can act as a psychological stressor comparable to an Adverse Childhood Experience, as it involves both direct exposure to environmental harm and indirect forms of distress⁶. These impacts may manifest in vicarious or direct trauma, post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, and complicated grief. Eco-anxiety, in particular, refers to a set of emotional responses not only to the environmental crisis itself but also to societal reactions to it, including political inaction and denial.

Empirical evidence highlights the scale and urgency of this issue. The largest global survey on eco-anxiety among children and young people, involving 10,000 participants aged 16 to 25 across 10 countries, found that nearly 60% of respondents reported being “very” or “extremely worried” about environmental problems⁷. Furthermore, between 50% and 67% reported feelings such as sadness, fear, anxiety, anger, powerlessness, helplessness, and guilt. Importantly, 45% indicated that **these emotions negatively affect their daily functioning**, including eating, concentrating, sleeping, attending school, and engaging in play.

In light of these findings, **the psychological dimension of climate change should be systematically integrated into greening education strategies**. In fact, **educational systems should not only raise awareness of environmental challenges but also equip learners with the tools to understand, process, and cope with the associated emotional responses**.

In particular, there is a need to promote emotional regulation skills and to foster a constructive sense of hope for the future. Adopting a “pedagogy of hope” can support the development of emotional resilience, while also strengthening mutual care and solidarity within learning communities.

Finally, **teacher training and education systems should adapt to address this emerging challenge**. This includes providing educators with appropriate pedagogical tools, psychological preparedness, and an empathetic approach, enabling them to effectively support students in navigating the emotional dimensions of the climate crisis.



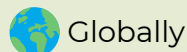
Action

Future guidance and official GEP documents should explicitly recognize eco-anxiety as a significant factor in climate and environmental education

YOUTH IN ACTION - teachers & education systems

Youth-Led Action on Climate Change (YLACC)

World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts



Co-created with 104 young people from 22 European countries under the World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts, YLACC is a non-formal climate education programme centred on **climate justice, emotional empowerment, and leadership**. The programme equips facilitators, not only participants, with **practical pedagogical tools to address the emotional dimensions of climate change, including fear, grief, and anger**. It stands out as an example of climate education that not only raises awareness, but also supports those responsible for delivering it.



Green Education at Collège La Trompette

Collège La Trompette



At Collège La Trompette, **a school greening initiative combines environmental education with a strong focus on emotional well-being and peaceful relationships within the educational community**. Through

planting and maintaining greenery in the school courtyard, students and

teachers learn about the importance of plants and ecosystems while also developing empathy, mutual respect, and healthy communication practices. By **linking care for the environment with care for others**, the project highlights the emotional dimension of climate and environmental education and the need to equip teachers with relational and emotional competencies to support students in the context of environmental crises.



4. Youth should be supported to develop impactful initiatives and to be included in decision-making



Pillar 4 - Greening communities

Since the emergence of the School Strike for Climate movement, global attention has increasingly focused on young people as key drivers of change. While this recognition is important, it has also led to an over-reliance on youth, placing disproportionate responsibility on them to address systemic challenges.

Although young people are essential actors in building a sustainable future, they continue to face significant barriers, including limited access to decision-making processes, structural inequalities, and unequal economic resources. In essence, youth engagement remains constrained by persistent power imbalances. As noted by the OECD⁸, young people have long been “underserved and unheard”. While progress has been made, substantial gaps remain.

Young people should therefore be recognized not only as stakeholders or beneficiaries, but as active leaders and equal partners in governance and decision-making processes. This recognition should be inclusive, regardless of socio-economic background, gender, ethnicity, education level, or age.

To enable meaningful and inclusive participation in greening education efforts, targeted support mechanisms are required. In particular, **accessible and youth-friendly funding opportunities** should be provided by local and national governments, international organizations, and the private sector.

In addition to financial resources, young people require **sustained non-financial support**. This includes access to safe and inclusive spaces for co-creation, mentorship opportunities, institutional backing, capacity-building programmes, peer learning, and informal and non-formal education opportunities. Such support must be **free of charge** and **accessible to all**, constituting a necessary precondition for effective youth engagement in sustainability efforts.

Furthermore, **young people**, both as members of broader communities and as a community in their own right, **should be recognized as legitimate actors with equal credibility**. An **intergenerational approach** is essential, acknowledging age as a dimension of diversity and fostering dialogue, mutual learning, and collaboration across generations.

Finally, enabling meaningful youth participation requires the establishment of both material and cultural conditions that support equality in participation and action. Without addressing these structural dimensions, efforts to engage young people risk remaining symbolic rather than transformative.



Action

All the actors involved should promote inclusive, context-sensitive, structured, and continuous mechanisms to address the inequalities in access that youth face when engaging in greening education initiatives

YOUTH IN ACTION - communities

Mon Environnement, Ma Verdure

Association les Amis de la Vie



Burkina Faso

Run by the Association les Amis de la Vie (AMIVI) in rural Burkina Faso, this programme trains young people aged 15-30 in soil-free agriculture, tree planting, and the creation of school gardens, then positions them as peer educators and co-managers of the initiative. **A youth committee works alongside AMIVI adults in planning and decision-making**, while a cascade training model enables young people to transfer knowledge to their schools and villages. In a context of resource scarcity, it demonstrates that meaningful youth leadership does not depend on ideal conditions, but on sustained structural commitment.



Voices for Change

Coordinating Committee for International Voluntary Service (CCIVS)



Globally

Coordinated by the Coordinating Committee for International Voluntary Service (CCIVS) across more than ten countries, Voices for Change invited young people to co-create an international advocacy song, “Echoes of Nature”, during a training workshop in Kenya, and to lead local climate actions in their own communities, ranging from tree planting to urban greening. **Youth were**



not consulted after decisions were made, but shaped the project from the planning stage, managed implementation, and contributed to the Most Significant Change research assessing impact. With over 1,095 participants engaged, the initiative demonstrates what inclusive, structured, and continuously supported youth leadership can achieve at scale.

5. The GEP should institutionalize a Youth Working Group with structured roles for youth participation



Transversal - GEP governance

According to the European Commission⁹, “young people are key drivers of positive change and essential partners in advancing sustainable and inclusive development”. Yet, **youth are often absent from the policy architecture that drives institutional transformation.**

Although they are the primary beneficiaries of higher education, young people are rarely given formal roles in decision-making, access to dedicated resources, or sustained institutional support¹⁰. This reflects a persistent framing of youth as future change-makers rather than as current actors already engaged in sustainability initiatives.

Including young people in governance increases the legitimacy of actions taken, provides recognition, and helps address power imbalances. At the same time, **it strengthens trust and enhances long-term collaboration.**

Participation should be institutionally mandated and adequately resourced. It is essential to move from symbolic inclusion to meaningful and concrete engagement. **Mechanisms should be transparent and voluntary.** Youth inclusion should be designed in an **inclusive** manner, taking into account socio-economic, linguistic, and geographical differences. In particular, these mechanisms should ensure the participation of minorities and underrepresented groups.

Following the launch of the Higher Education Working Group, **the establishment of a Youth Working Group with a formal mandate, adequate resources, and strong institutional support should be prioritised.** Such a structure would enhance the partnership’s work by integrating youth perspectives, not only as beneficiaries of education, but also as active contributors and implementers of initiatives through associations and community engagement.

Furthermore, this approach could be reinforced by **formalising youth representation and co-leadership roles across all working groups** within the partnership, thereby embedding young people as equal partners.

The Youth Working Group would have two primary functions:

- to **support and develop initiatives** designed for and with young people and youth organisations;
- to **provide an advisory role** to inform GEP initiatives.

This participatory approach should be reflected in official documents, guidelines and frameworks.



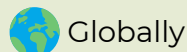
Action

The GEP should establish a Youth Working Group that is transversal to all its activities

YOUTH IN ACTION - governance

Appel de Toulouse pour l'école de demain

Agence Universitaire de la Francophonie



Co-created by around sixty students from sixty countries at the 3rd Congress of Francophone Students, the *Appel de Toulouse pour l'école de demain* is a youth-written policy text presented directly to ministers of education and higher education across the Francophone world. Students were empowered as “citizens of education”, drafting the text themselves and engaging with high-level decision-makers on key education priorities.



A central element of the initiative is its institutional support structure: the Agence universitaire de la Francophonie (AUF) provided **funding and political visibility**, while establishing the Association internationale des Clubs Leaders Étudiants Francophones (AICLEF) **to give students an autonomous platform for continued advocacy and action** beyond the event.

Seeds of Change

Rotaract Club Bari - Rotaract District 2120 Puglia & Basilicata



The Rotaract Club Bari, part of Rotaract District 2120, implemented a structured service project supporting an urban social garden in Bari, with **formal backing from the district and dedicated funding for materials and circular economy practices**. Though local in scale, the initiative demonstrates how youth organisations can hold formal roles within broader partnership structures, with concrete responsibilities and resources rather than symbolic participation. Its sustainability and community impact depended on this institutional support and long-term structural embedding.



CONCLUSIONS

This recommendations paper is a stepping stone towards building sustainable pathways for the Greening Education Partnership (GEP) and its stakeholders to meaningfully include youth in their policy agenda and decision-making processes.

The case studies featured in this paper, as well as the broader collection included in the annex, tell a consistent story: **young people are not waiting to be included in the greening of education.** They are already taking action with the means and tools available to them. In the case of the Youth Working Group (YWG), these initiatives are carried out within NGOs in official partnership with UNESCO. Across all represented regions, young people are already designing curricula, restoring ecosystems, training peers, drafting policy advocacy, and building the community structures required for a sustainable future.

The question raised by this recommendations paper is therefore not whether youth can contribute meaningfully to the Greening Education Partnership. The answer is already evident in the initiatives and projects showcased throughout this paper. The remaining question is **whether the institutional conditions exist to match the scale and ambition of what young people are already doing.**

The five recommendations presented here respond to that challenge. Taken together, they form a coherent framework that begins with recognizing climate and environmental education as a universal right, embeds it across curricula and teacher training, and extends towards the community and governance structures needed to make youth participation substantive rather than symbolic. The case studies demonstrate that these practices already exist in different contexts and at different scales. However, they need to become standard, supported by adequate financial resources and, above all, by institutional backing and structured mechanisms that young people too often lack.

Through this recommendations paper, the representatives of the 2024-2026 Youth Working Group of the NGO-UNESCO Liaison Committee seek to open a dialogue between the GEP, its stakeholders, NGOs, and young people themselves, in order to ensure that youth are not excluded from decision-making processes, but are instead recognized and meaningfully included in shaping innovative and ambitious projects for a greener and more sustainable future.

In this regard, **the most important recommendation remains the following: the GEP should institutionalize a Youth Working Group with structured roles for youth participation,** ensuring that young people are not treated as occasional consultees, but recognized as permanent and legitimate actors in the governance, implementation, and future development of the partnership.

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