

Youth Partnership

Partnership between the European Commission
and the Council of Europe in the field of Youth



Sustainability practices in youth-led youth work: challenges, opportunities and experiences

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Álvaro González Pérez¹



1. Álvaro González Pérez is an activist and trainer who started on his path in the youth field as a volunteer in AEGEE/European Students' Forum. He was its Vice-President and External Relations Officer in 2019-2020, and lead its advocacy on climate change and inclusion and participation of youth on the topic. During his term, along with various other youth representatives, he co-founded Generation Climate Europe. Today, Álvaro works mainly as a trainer and consultant for organisations working on youth, education and climate and environmental topics.

Disclaimer: The opinions expressed in this work, commissioned by the European Union–Council of Europe Youth partnership, are the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy of either of the partner institutions, their member states or the organisations co-operating with them.

Introduction

This paper builds upon the experiences of youth organisations in practicing sustainability in youth work, namely 1) the increasing relevance of the climate crisis within Association des États Généraux des Étudiants de l'Europe - AEGEE (European Students Forum), (2) the work of Generation Climate Europe (GCE), and (3) challenges and opportunities for youth organisations/young people to engage on the topic. The examples were presented at the meeting of the European Platform of Learning Mobility (EPLM) on 25 October 2021, which explored sustainability within the youth learning mobility context.

Sustainability in AEGEE

AEGEE is one of the biggest youth organisations in Europe. Founded in 1985, it works as a non-governmental, politically independent and non-profit student organisation. It strives for a democratic, diverse and borderless Europe that is socially, politically and economically integrated and that values the participation of youth in its construction and development.

Whereas the topic of sustainability has been present in AEGEE for over a decade, it was never so in a prominent manner and it was only reflected in low-impact structures such as interest groups, which served as a pool for debates and small initiatives. As a non-climate specific youth organisation, AEGEE did not have climate change as a priority topic among its members. However, this has changed drastically over the past three years.

A way to illustrate this is by taking a look at AEGEE's strategic plan, which is voted on every three years. The strategic priorities of the organisation are divided into organisational and thematic areas, the latter being at the core of AEGEE's advocacy. The thematic areas of AEGEE's strategic plan of in 2017-2020 were:

- equal rights
- civic education
- youth development
- European citizenship.

For 2020-2023, they are:

- social equity
- Climate emergency
- mental health
- political activism.

Undoubtedly, the sharp increase in youth climate activism derived from the Fridays for Future movement, initiated by Greta Thunberg, has had a decisive impact in the change of priorities. After being partially absent, the topic of climate emergency has become not only part of AEGEE's strategic plan, but also the thematic area most voted for by the membership. This affected multiple areas of the work of AEGEE:

1. **new partnerships** with environmentally friendly organisations (e.g Ecosia or Hostelling International);
2. **creation of new internal structures** such as the Climate Emergency Working Group (working on the objectives of the strategic plan on the topic) or the Sustainability Committee (an internal body working on advising and supporting AEGEE's local and European bodies on sustainability practices);
3. **working culture** changes by, e.g. having fully vegetarian events or promoting participation of youth in the immediate area of the event to avoid flying;
4. **external work** being highly impacted by the topic, e.g. the [Sustainability Manifesto](#) the [Policy Paper on Sustainable and Affordable Travel Options for Young Europeans](#) and co-founding and joining Generation Climate Europe.

The work of Generation Climate Europe (GCE)

GCE was founded in 2019 in the context of the increasing prominence of international youth climate movement. The main challenge of the movement was that, whereas there is a clear involvement of young people and the climate crisis is one of the few topics that can be labelled as a top priority for youth all around the globe, there was no structured involvement or bridge for young people to bring their demands on the topic to policy makers.

The establishment of GCE was driven by the desire to ensure that the voices of young people all around Europe are included in climate and environmental policy making and to advocate for strong action. In order to do this, GCE was founded as the largest coalition of youth-led organisations at the European level.

These organisations include European youth networks working almost exclusively on climate and environmental topics:

- Youth and Environment Europe – YEE
- International Young Nature Friends – IYNF

but also others including youth from all walks of society:

- AEGEE/European Students' Forum
- Young European Federalists – JEF
- European Students' Union – ESU
- Organising Bureau of European School Student Unions – OBESSU

- International Federation of Catholic Parochial Youth Movements – FIMCAP
- Erasmus Student Network – ESN
- ETUC-Youth

Several of these organisations experienced a higher involvement on climate and environmental topics, with some of them producing internal documents to ensure sustainability practices within their organisations (much like the [Sustainability Check-List](#) of the EU-Council of Europe Youth Partnership), including the topic of environmental sustainability among their strategic priorities or engaging in EU- or Council of Europe-funded projects on climate and environmental topics. The latter is undeniably influenced by the fact that, over the past couple of years, calls for projects under Erasmus+ and European Youth Foundation's schemes have increasingly shifted towards including climate and environmental topics. However, the inclusion of these topics on the institutional agenda and within funding programmes was also motivated by organisational involvement on climate issues.

The work areas of GCE are defined by five main priorities voted on by the member organisations, namely: (1) clean mobility, (2) circular economy, (3) sustainable development, (4) biodiversity and (5) climate justice. The projects and campaigns of GCE focus mainly around those topics, although they may include others if the membership deems so and there is a meaningful advocacy opportunity at the EU level on the topic (e.g. climate education). The flagship project of GCE is the Youth Climate Dialogues, which brings together policy makers from EU institutions taking part in the legislative procedure and young people from both the member organisations of GCE and beyond. This includes:

- **European Parliament Youth Dialogues** with MEPs from various political groups;
- **Council Presidency Youth Dialogues** at the outset and end of each EU Council Presidency;
- **Youth Climate and Sustainability Roundtables** with European Commissioners working on issues connected to the European Green Deal.

Challenges and opportunities to integrate sustainability in learning mobilities for youth

Opportunities for advocating for sustainability within youth learning mobility:

- Online and blended learning mobilities give opportunities for increased accessibility and sustainability in terms of travel.
- Young people are one of most affected constituencies by the climate crisis in the long run, therefore they are more motivated to engage on this topic.

- Climate is gaining in importance on the policy agenda, which gives an opportunity to use the momentum for increased advocacy on the topic.
- The increasing availability of evidence-based research and sources of information allows youth organisations to use evidence to support their demands.

Challenges:

- Realities of youth in Europe differ highly: nationality (e.g. visa costs), geographical location, socio-economic status, educational attainment, etc.
- Online and blended mobilities do not provide the same learning experience and carry a digital footprint.
- Realities of youth organisations differ highly from one another, which results in different sustainability cultures and thresholds.
- Understanding and acceptance on what sustainability is varies within each organisation.

Additionally, the [Policy Paper on Sustainable and Affordable Travel Options for Young Europeans](#) by AEGEE identified various challenging areas to integrate sustainable practices, specifically in the area of clean mobility.

- **Connections:** according to the Flash Eurobarometer 463, eight in ten Europeans never use trains for international trips.
- **Lack of competition in the railway sector.**
- **Funding:** There is a patchwork of national (high speed) rail networks that might not be well connected with neighbouring states.
- **Price and ticket schemes:** significant differences exist in middle-distance/long trips between road/flight transport options and there is a lack of night trains.
- **Emissions in the flight sector:** in some cases, flights are the only viable option for youth.