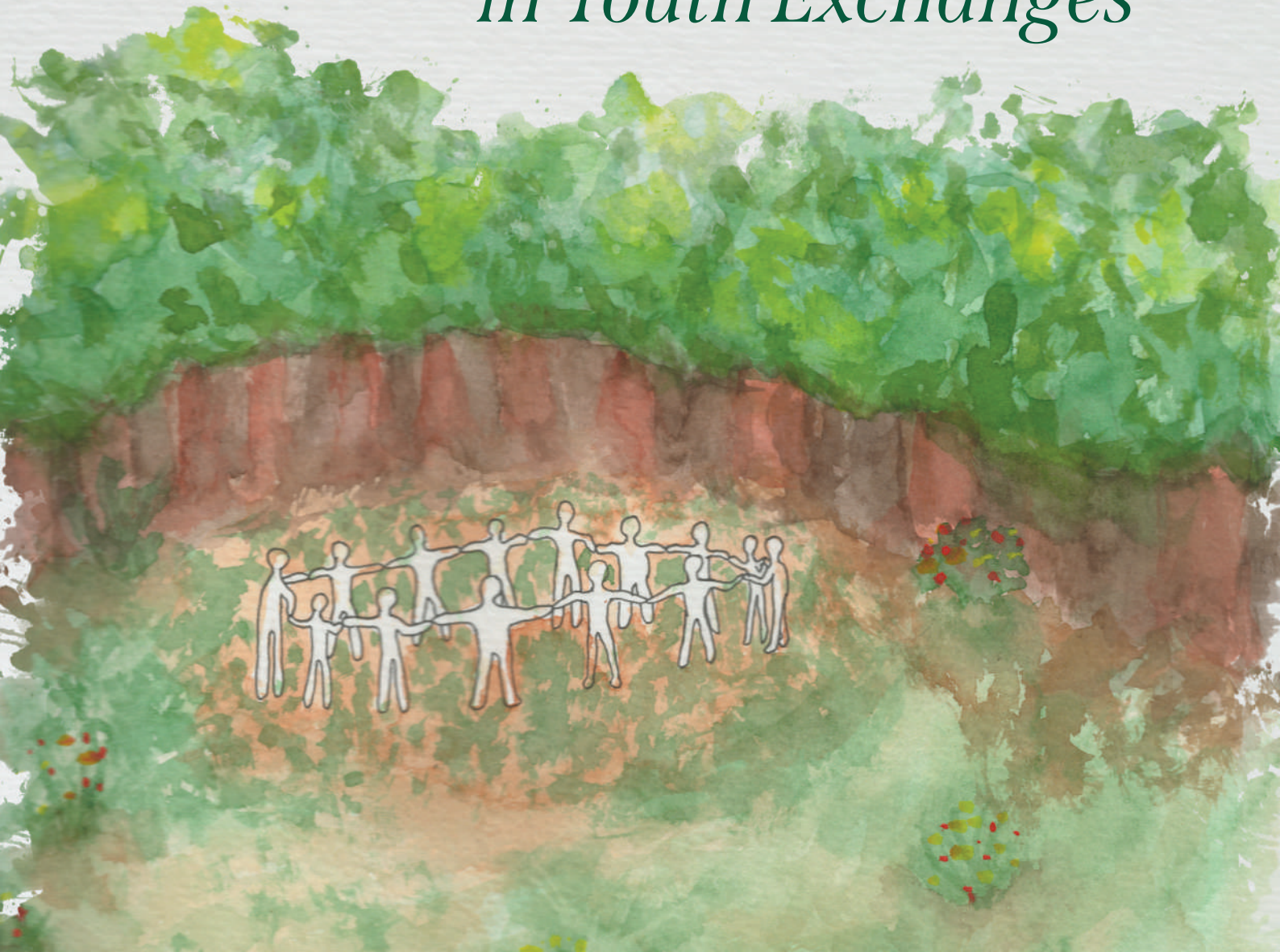


yes to sustainability 

# Sustainability

## *in Youth Exchanges*



# INTRODUCTION

## Who is this brochure for?

The aim of this Brochure is to help young people and youth workers to create their own sustainable Youth Exchanges. In times of climate crisis, Youth Exchanges can be a powerful tool to promote environmentally sustainable behaviour. Therefore it is valuable that we design and implement them with environmental consciousness.

In this brochure you will find what the different dimensions of sustainability are. Within each dimension there are selected suggestions of activities that you can implement in your project. On top of that, participants share stories of their sustainable Youth Exchanges so you can be inspired while creating your own.

**Enjoy the discovery!**

# ABOUT US

## Yes to sustainability

Yes to Sustainability (YTS) is an international network that has been running since 2017 and aims to bring young people together from different regions of Europe by organising Youth Exchanges in different ecovillages and sustainable initiatives. This project is supported by the European branch of the Global Ecovillage Network (GEN Europe).

In the last 5 years, we have organised more than 21 Youth Exchanges in different ecovillages and sustainable initiatives in Europe and 13 training courses for group leaders and organisers of Youth Exchanges. The aim has been to empower more young people to create and implement their own Youth Exchanges and to bring ecovillage lifestyles to their local communities.

Our **VISION** is a world in which young people are empowered to create resilient communities, contribute to regenerative cultures, and take care of the planet.



Our **MISSION** is based on four pillars that are supporting each other:

### Sustainability

To connect young people to ecovillages and sustainable initiatives where they can discover alternative low-impact lifestyles, and find inspiration to align their personal choices with their values and the needs of the planet.

### Empowerment

To empower young people to find their inner strength, take responsibility, take action and embody the change that they wish to see in the world

### Learning

To create opportunities for young people to grow personally and to explore sustainability in all its dimensions (social, ecological, economical, worldview...) through transformative and experiential learning.

### Community Building

To connect young people so that they can exchange practices and ideas, discover diverse worldviews and experiences, feel part of an international and inclusive community and share a sense of belonging.

## GEN EUROPE AND NextGEN EUROPE

GEN Europe is the European network of ecovillages and sustainable communities, with a vision of a conscious, resilient and sustainable Europe where ecovillage and community values and lifestyles are widely adopted.

NextGEN Europe is the youth branch of the GEN and it connects young people around the planet with ecovillage solutions, education, projects, and regenerative living practices.

GEN Europe

<https://gen-europe.org/>

NextGEN Europe

[https://nextgen-ecovillage.org/?page\\_id=382](https://nextgen-ecovillage.org/?page_id=382)

## WHAT IS A YOUTH EXCHANGE?

Youth Exchanges allow groups of young people from different countries to meet, live together and work on shared projects for short periods of time. On a Youth Exchange, you can expect to participate in activities such as workshops, exercises, debates, role-plays, outdoor activities and more.

Youth Exchanges in YTS usually take place in ecovillages or other sustainable initiatives.

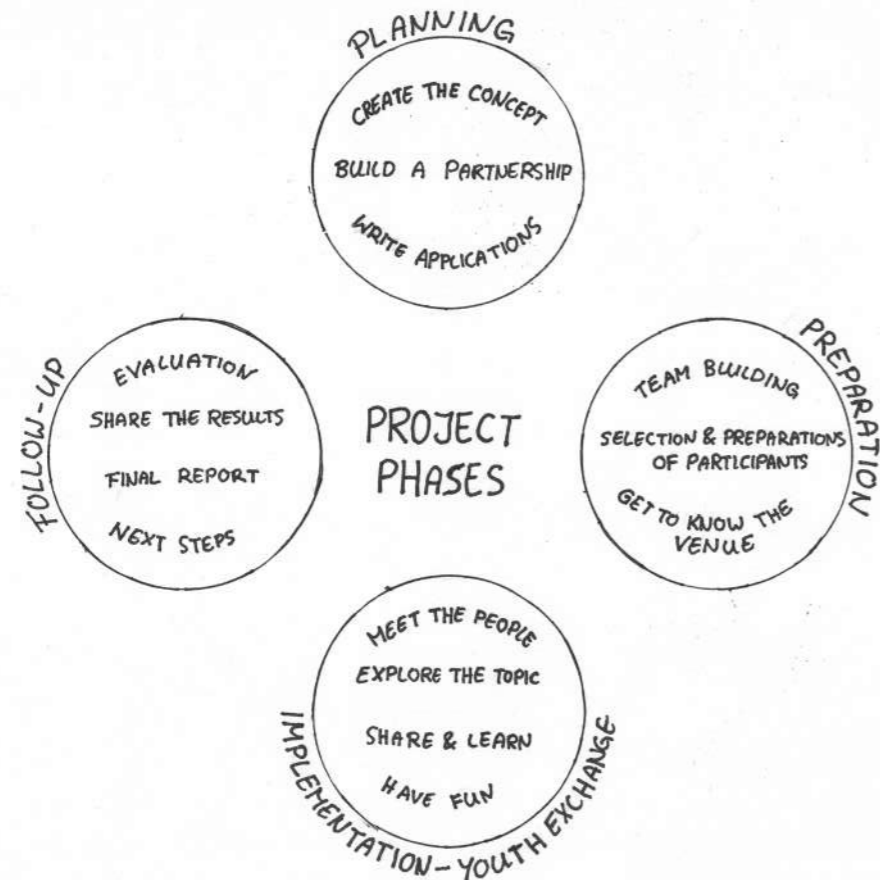
In order to make a Youth Exchange a high-quality experience from start to finish, it is necessary to be aware of the project phases and to follow them. We can apply the four dimensions of sustainability (social, economic, ecological and worldview) to the different phases of the project and make it sustainable from beginning to end.

### ERASMUS+

Erasmus+ is the EU's programme to support education, training, youth and sport in Europe. The 2021-2027 programme places a strong focus on social inclusion, the green and digital transitions, and promoting young people's participation in democratic life. Erasmus+ funds Youth Exchanges in the EU and in neighbouring countries (and much more!). Yes to Sustainability Youth Exchanges have typically been funded through the Erasmus+ programme.

## Project phases

The Youth Exchange consists of several phases. The four basic phases are: preparation, planning, implementation and follow-up. Each phase supports the next one, so it is important that each one is given enough focus. This is the key to a successful project.



## SUSTAINABILITY IN YOUTH EXCHANGES

### What is sustainability?

Sustainability means meeting our own needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet theirs. In this holistic model of sustainability ecology, economy, the social and worldview are seen as interdependent elements intertwined with each other.

IF IT'S NOT FUN, IT'S NOT SUSTAINABLE!



# DO IT SUSTAINABLY

How can we run Youth Exchanges sustainably? In the section below we gather learnings and suggested activities from our experience, based on the four dimensions of sustainability.

## Social

*“The next Buddha will not take the form of an individual. The next Buddha may take the form of a community; a community practising understanding and loving kindness, a community practising mindful living. This may be the most important thing we can do for the survival of the earth.”*

Thich Nhat Hanh

The social dimension aims to build meaningful new communities and networks which will help us transition toward resilient social systems and a more livable, sustainable future.

This part should be implemented in the Youth Exchange because individuals should get a better understanding of the true meaning of social equity and social justice. Such activities can also help individuals find their innate strengths and learn how to include them in a group and therefore learn how each individual is an important part of the community.



Mandala image by Gaia Education

Here are some ideas to make this dimension more socially sustainable:

- 📍 Team spirit - take good care of the energy in the team of group leaders/facilitators/organisers (clear roles & tasks, regular check-ins, express appreciation & critique, deep listening), because most likely it will influence the atmosphere in the group of participants - good flow in the team creates good flow in the group.
- 📍 Group culture - the first thing is to address personal needs, needs of the group and venue. It is important to also share the fears. This can help to raise mindfulness and empathy amongst each other. Create a visual poster that will remind you of what you agreed on at the beginning.
- 📍 Check in - check out - to have space for everybody to express daily in the group serves the team building and the creation of a safe space. It also gives space to announcements, addressing issues or needs.
- 📍 Cultural evenings - dedicate some time during the Youth Exchange to



make space for each cultural group to present their culture through art, music, dance, cooking national dishes ...

- 📍 Reflections in national groups - during the Youth Exchange national groups can meet together and share whatever feels present. With that, you create a space where participants can express themselves in their own language and connect better with their national group, with whom they might keep collaborating when they are back home.
- 📍 Secret buddy - at the beginning of Youth Exchange an organiser writes all the names down on pieces of paper and each participant picks a paper with a name, they become a secret buddy to the person they picked (if they pick themselves, they pick again). Through the week they have to secretly care for their buddy, for example giving more care to that person, preparing some secret, simple surprises.
- 📍 Hands on community - dedicate some time slots when participants can help in the local community. You can connect the participants with locals either to just talk, but even better to help them with what is needed. This way youth will also learn some practical skills and understand the local environment better.
- 📍 Local - participant connections - inviting locals to the events during the

Youth Exchanges (to cultural nights, last night celebration), to create a bond.

- 📍 Letter buddy - each person gets a letter buddy with whom they can reflect during the week and also write letters after the Youth Exchange.
- 📍 Don't forget to have fun - joy plays a big role in the Youth Exchanges, make your activities creative and give enough free time for youth to connect.
- 📍 Leadership - create opportunities for participants to share leadership, take initiatives, bring in their own ideas and take responsibility
- 📍 Keep connected - create spaces where youth can also connect afterward (e.g: a group on social media & sharing contacts if everyone agrees).
- 📍 Be inclusive of each one's uniqueness through creating safe spaces, active listening, non-judgemental attitude.



## Economic

Today economics rules supreme as the master discipline, with all the other subjects and values subordinated to it. Sadly, our current economic system is no longer sustainable, but with the alternatives we know, we can shift towards a new example of a global economy.

This dimension aims to first understand how we managed to get into the current system and second to learn about the working alternatives, which can help move out of the dysfunctional and unsustainable one.

This part should be implemented in the Youth Exchange because even with small changes in our lives and local communities we can build new habits that also affect the economic functioning of society.

- 📍 Buy food from the local community: with this, you support the local economy and spread the positive influence of the Youth Exchange. You can also check out if food saving from local supermarkets is possible. This means establishing cooperation with supermarkets, restaurants, etc. to collect the food that is leftover.
- 📍 Refuse, reduce, reuse, repurpose, recycle as many things as possible (choose wisely promotional material, buy second hand, borrow from



local people/family/friends (cups, plates, tents, or ask participants to bring it). This way you support the local economy and produce fewer emissions.

- 📍 Gifts sharing - at the end of the activity participants can exchange something they brought with them as a goodbye gift that will always remind them of that Youth Exchange (e.g. cups, clothes) When doing such a practice, ecological topics can be also addressed.
- 📍 Include a session on sustainable economy in the Youth Exchange introducing economic concepts based on diversity, inclusion and solidarity.
- 📍 Share good practice examples - Inspire the youth with examples of sustainable economy, if possible from the local community.
- 📍 How to spend money? - include participants in decisions about the money. Example: National groups get a small budget for dissemination activities after they get home. During a session, groups plan what to do



and how to use the money, with the support of the team.

- 📍 A different approach to the participant fee - contributions of participants can be based on donations, a sliding scale or even gift economy (so participants are free to choose how much they can and want to give, if any).
- 📍 Between the organisers - apply the concept of fair shares to divide the project budget and find a balanced agreement inside the team, with the partners and the venue.



## Ecological

Ecology is central to sustainability. Working with nature rather than against it is the main aim of this dimension.

This dimension can be integrated on many different levels: choice of venue, food and travel choices, minimal ecological impact activities, permaculture principles applied daily, etc.

This dimension should be implemented in the Youth Exchange because through the activities and daily flow, we can learn how our everyday

choices can have either a positive or negative impact on the environment.

- 📍 Venue - search for a venue that can provide a lot of learning opportunities where ecological features are integral to it: eco-houses, green electricity, solar heating, sustainable water management, compost toilets, ...
- 📍 Organic cosmetics - Encourage youth to bring only biodegradable natural cosmetics, which are not tested on animals.
- 📍 Study visits - Organise study visits in the region to other sustainable venues / ecovillages / ecological farms, because concrete examples stick in youths' minds.
- 📍 Workshops - Organise workshops on ecological practices like upcycling, zero-waste, wildcrafting, vegan cooking, creating natural cosmetics, repairing workshops, permaculture, organic farming, natural building, transport, food, materialism ...



📍 Food - when choosing food for participants always choose regional and seasonal ingredients, make sure your food is organic as well. Providing only vegetarian and vegan food is also a good example of sustainable practice.

📍 Travel - Encourage participants to choose green travel. Provide

information on routes and providers and help them find and buy affordable green travel options.

Also create a travel sheet, where participants can share from where they are coming from and can connect with each other to travel together.

MOST  
ECOLOGICAL

Hike > Bicycle > Train > Bus > Car > Plane

LEAST  
ECOLOGICAL



- 📍 Awareness raising – Raise questions such as how much CO2 is released through everyone travelling to the event. You can use online calculators to measure each participant's ecological footprint and discuss carbon compensation.

## Worldview

The worldview dimension is all about developing awareness and personal growth. It addresses underlying values and raises consciousness about the impact of our actions and choices and the interconnectedness of all life on Earth.

This dimension should be implemented in the Youth Exchange because participants can become more aware of how connected everything in the world is and how the four dimensions are interconnected.

Through the observation of how all elements are connected within an ecosystem, they can also learn how each change can have an impact.

- 📍 Holistic Worldview and Transformation of Consciousness – to make participants more aware of how connected everything in the world is and how the four dimensions are interconnected you can use a simple

method of discussing in pairs. Raise questions such as: what impact will we take and what impact we will leave? What are each participant's values?

- 📍 Centrepiece – Have a centrepiece with a candle and some natural elements in the middle of the meeting room to bring awareness to our interconnectedness and build a ritual sacred space.
- 📍 4 dimensions wall – cultivate mindfulness and become aware of our learnings. Throughout the whole event participants add activities, learnings, aha-moments of every day on 4 flipcharts (one for each dimension) to get an overview of the learnings they developed. This is also useful as a midterm reflection method.



- 📍 Personal Development and Inner Growth – explain to participants that learning happens throughout all your life
- 📍 Become aware of our own patterns and how we contribute to it – schedule reflection time in daily schedule (make participants reflect about the process of learning through

talking, writing, drawing, body expression).

- 📍 Reconnection with Nature – Create opportunities for young people to spend time in Nature, help them experience it with all their senses. Help them shift awareness, perceiving ourselves as a part of nature, not separate from it. This can be done with a solo moment, where participants have to reflect on a question while they spend time outside (1h or 2h) alone in silence. Afterward, they reflect with the whole group about the experience.
- 📍 Embodiment exercises: walk and talk – participants talk about certain topics in pairs while walking in nature; it supports them to be active and to include body intelligence.



## SUSTAINABLE STORIES

### Togetherness from nature (deep listening, understanding and ultimate offline off the grid)

#### 📍 Narana, Czech Republic

This Youth Exchange took place in the Czech Republic. Before leaving for the Youth Exchange, the participants had to be careful when packing their luggage. In the first place, they were asked to bring only organic body products to respect the nature surrounding them. At the same time, they had to pack their camping gear as they were going to sleep in tents and had to be cautious not to take too many things since reaching the venue, a family house immersed in the forest, required an hour-long hike. This Youth Exchange was a great example of connecting off-grid sustainability, digital detox and deep listening and understanding.



On the day of arrival, all the participants and facilitators dropped their phones in a locked box. Doing so allowed them to focus on the activities and themselves without external influences in the following days.

One of the main ingredients of this Youth Exchange was the learning-by-doing approach: in the morning, the participants worked in the garden while, in the evening, they attended permaculture lectures where they could analyse what they discovered on the field.

Another crucial principle of the Youth Exchange was the zero-waste philosophy. During the week, the facilitators organised different workshops to teach the participants how to create soap, detergents and beeswax wrap by themselves. Furthermore, for this Youth Exchange, the venue



provided small solar showers with a 20 litres capacity that the participants even took home at the end. All the meals were plant-based and prepared by a local lady who collected the ingredients in the area.

On the last day, each national team discussed a project they would develop in their home country. Afterwards, the participants shared photos of their projects on Facebook with each other.

## Participant Experience

*“This Youth Exchange showed me that being disconnected from the digital world feels so good and that nature is our real home. Also, our facilitator showed us how easy it is to live such a lifestyle without struggling, which inspired me a lot and truly shaped a new way of thinking.”*

Jelena Radovanović, Serbia



## Climate change through theatre

### 🌱 Online

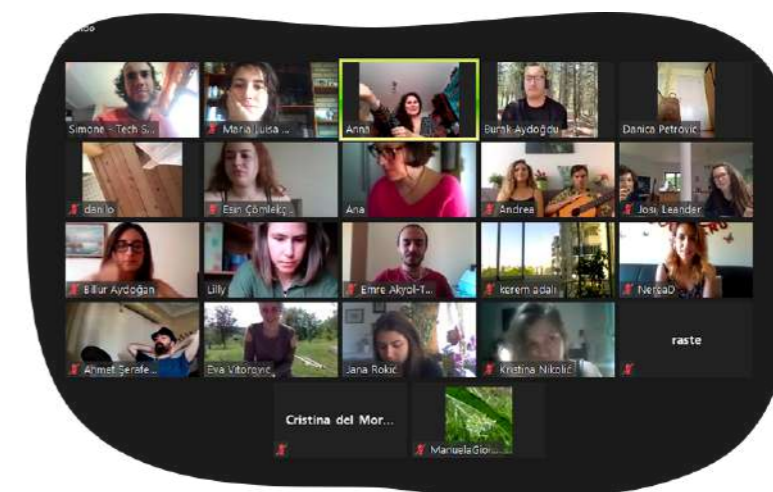
During Covid times, a unique Youth Exchange set a great example of creating sustainable Youth Exchanges online. This Youth Exchange aimed to use creativity to design solutions for tackling climate change.

Holding the Youth Exchange online drastically reduced the CO2 emissions of this project since participants did not have to fly or drive to join the activities but could easily connect with the rest of the group from their houses. Despite that, the feedback about human bonding was good, which means that creating sustainable projects with participants engaging in a healthy way is possible even without gathering in the same place. During the Youth Exchange, the participants decided that theatre was the best tool to express themselves creatively while raising awareness about the climate crisis. The mosaic of possible artistic expressions blending all together on the screen was broad, varying from poetry to dance, from facial expression to humour.

To keep everyone focused throughout the days, and to ensure healthy use of technology, the activities were divided into slots. In this way, the participants didn't have to spend too many consecutive hours behind the

screen, and their attention lasted longer. Because of the online setting, the facilitators considered group-building the main challenge of this Youth Exchange. To recreate the informal interactions that characterise any in-person projects in a virtual space, they used tools like Zoom, Jamboard and Discord.

The result of the Youth Exchange was a set of impactful performances that invited people to take action against climate change and gave a message of hope for a better future



## Participant Experience

*“The Youth Exchange about climate change through theatre was an experience that went beyond the screen of our computers. I’ve never thought of connecting these two topics together and it was amazing.*

*How powerful art can be to change the world!”*

Andrea Rodriguez Exposito, Spain



## We are the key

🌱 Zavod Veles, Slovenia

This Youth Exchange took place on a sustainable farm in Slovenia, and it was part of an initiative consciously designed to restore the social and natural environment. During this project, the participants had first-hand experience of good practices for a sustainable lifestyle.



The Youth Exchange aimed to make young people realise that they have the power to change things and embrace sustainability in everyday life.

The participants actively cooperated with the farm residents in different activities such as permaculture farming, maintenance of the water cycle on the farm, food processing and preparation of natural cosmetics.

Throughout the Youth Exchange, the youth leaders organised research time through interactive and participatory methods and self-organised presentations. In particular, the participants explored the answer to the question: How can we change our lives towards sustainability and feel satisfied in the relationship with ourselves and our community?

This project won the award for “Best project with a learning impact in 2018 in Slovenia within the Erasmus+ programme” by the National Agency MOVIT.

## Participant Experience



*“By the end of this Youth Exchange, I have found that my view on the world and of myself has changed immensely. The experiences I have gained through this project have given me inspiration and motivation to continue working towards my dreams and explore the world further.*

*In this Youth Exchange, I got a glimpse of what it means to live in a community and take care of nature as a part of it and for this, I am very grateful.”*

Eva Vitorović, Serbia



## Youth empowerment From a participant to a youth exchange organiser

*“In 2017 a friend invited me to the first Youth Exchange by YTS in Denmark. I never heard about Youth Exchanges before. That was a life changing experience for me. I became friends with Clara and Ena from Spain. Clara, one of the co-founders of YTS, encouraged Ena and me to organise a Youth Exchange in the German Ecovillage Zegg. Ena and I were dreaming of the project along our vision of what we want to bring into the world. We wanted to learn more about facilitation, how to hold space for a group and to pass on our knowledge in emotional work. Clara was mentoring us through the whole organisational process. Since then I have been self-organising different Youth Exchanges and facilitating YTS training. I am very grateful for this non-formal learning path and for growing into my power in the frame of YTS. So nice to feel how this amazing network became one of my heartfelt families.”*

Stefanie Görisch, Germany



## YOUTH INVOLVEMENT

### Empower youth to become leaders, don't create followers

Youth work is all about taking action towards young people where they are voluntarily involved. It supports their personal and social development through non-formal and informal learning.

Youth involvement can happen on many levels. It's important that the aim of the youth work is to leave space for the youth to take over leadership step by step. So, first they need to be introduced to the work, methods, structure and to gain experiences, knowledge, and skills.

In the next steps, they are not just following instructions and implementing tasks anymore but they start to share their own perception with feedback, suggestions which need to be taken into consideration and can be integrated in the work.

The highest step is to leave the coordination to them and be only the support. This means to let them make mistakes but not the crucial ones, to give them the freedom to express themselves but not to leave them too long in chaos. To be there as a youth worker but only backstage providing extra information, when asked by youth.

At that step, the youth worker is not a leader anymore, but a mentor. And youths are not only participants but they step into the role of the leaders



Have you been inspired by this brochure and want to connect with YTS and write youth exchanges?

Contact us!

<https://yestosustainability.org/>

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/yestosustainability>

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