



# SUSTAINABLE FUTURE OF ORGANISATIONS

GUIDEBOOK



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ACADEMY OF  
GROWTH e.V.

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<b>1. WHY THIS GUIDEBOOK?</b>	<b>5</b>
1.1. The Purpose of This Guidebook	6
1.2. What Makes This Guidebook Different?	6
1.3. How to Use This Guidebook?	6
1.4. The Roots of the "Sustainable Future of Organisations" Project	7
1.5. Small-Scale Partnerships (KA210)	7
1.6. Common Challenges Youth Organisations Face Today	8
1.7. Reflection on the Chapter	9
<b>2. MEET THE ORGANISATIONS</b>	<b>10</b>
2.1 Čisteći Medvjedići (Croatia)	11
2.2 Re-Green (Greece) – A Partnership Shaped by Change	12
2.3 Academy of Growth e.V. (Germany)	12
<b>3. RETHINKING ORGANISATIONAL SUSTAINABILITY</b>	<b>14</b>
3.1. Why Define Sustainability?	15
3.2. The Degenerative Organisation	16
3.3. The Sustainable Organisation	18
3.4. The Regenerative Organisation	20
3.5. The Spectrum of Organisational Operation	22
3.6. Why Regeneration Matters	24
<b>4. THE STUDY VISIT METHOD</b>	<b>25</b>
4.1 Why we Chose the Study Visit Approach	26
4.2 Our Method of a Study Visit	27
4.3 What Made this Process Useful and Unique?	30
4.4 Reflection on the Chapter	31
<b>5. HOLISTIC CONTEXT</b>	<b>37</b>
5.1. What is a Holistic Context?	38
5.2. How to use Holistic Context?	38
5.3. Holistic Context Step by Step	39
5.4. Reflection on the Chapter	41

<b>6. CASE STUDY: ČISTEĆI MEDVJEDIĆI (CROATIA)</b>	<b>42</b>
6.1. Introducing the Organisation	43
6.2. Holistic Context of Čisteći Medvjedići	44
6.3. The Visit: What Happened in the Three Days	46
6.4. After the Visit: From Insights to Actions	49
6.5. From Intention to Action: Reflections After Nine Months	50
6.6. Reflection on the Chapter	51
<b>7. CASE STUDY: ACADEMY OF GROWTH E.V. (GERMANY)</b>	<b>52</b>
7.1. Introducing the Organisation	53
7.2. Holistic Context of Academy of Growth e.V.	54
7.3. Study Visit in Germany: Living the Questions Together	57
7.4. After the Visit: From Insights to Actions	59
7.5. From Intention to Action: Reflections After Four Months	61
7.6. Reflection on the Chapter	63
<b>8. EVALUATION OF ALL STUDY VISITS</b>	<b>64</b>
8.1. Power of Study Visits	65
8.2. Common Insights from All Visits	65
8.3. Conclusion: Lessons and Tools that Worked	66
8.4. Reflection on the Chapter	67
8.5. Turning Insights into Solutions	67
<b>9. SOLUTIONS</b>	<b>69</b>
9.1. Financial Stability	70
9.2. Work-Life Balance: A Cornerstone of Regenerative Organisations	71
9.3. Partnerships as Foundations for Regeneration	74
9.4. Decision-Making	77
9.5. Inclusive Project Design: Opening the Door for Young People with Fewer Opportunities	80
<b>10. REGENERATIVE FUTURE OF ORGANISATIONS</b>	<b>83</b>
<b>11. LIST OF RESOURCES</b>	<b>85</b>
<b>12. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</b>	<b>87</b>

# 1

## WHY THIS GUIDEBOOK?

### IN THIS CHAPTER:

- 1.1. THE PURPOSE OF THIS GUIDEBOOK
- 1.2. WHAT MAKES THIS GUIDEBOOK DIFFERENT?
- 1.3. HOW TO USE THIS GUIDEBOOK?
- 1.4. THE ROOTS OF THE “SUSTAINABLE FUTURE OF ORGANISATIONS” PROJECT
- 1.5. SMALL-SCALE PARTNERSHIPS (KA210)
- 1.6. COMMON CHALLENGES YOUTH ORGANISATIONS FACE TODAY
- 1.7. REFLECTION ON THE CHAPTER

## 1.1. The Purpose of This Guidebook

This guidebook was created within the Erasmus+ KA210 small-scale partnership project "Sustainable Future of Organisations" to gather knowledge, experiences, good practices, and lessons that can support NGO leaders and youth workers in building more sustainable and regenerative futures for their organisations. It places strong emphasis on the practical insights we have gained while leading our organisations, as well as on the good practices and knowledge shared among partners during the project.

The guidebook is designed for leaders of non-governmental organisations and those working with young people, with a particular focus on environmental NGOs. However, it is not limited to this field alone. Given the growing need for sustainability across all sectors, the guidebook will be useful to anyone managing a non-profit organisation.

This guidebook is grounded in real-life experiences and proven practices, offering a holistic view of sustainability that encompasses social, economic, and environmental dimensions. It is meant to be a practical companion for all those striving to lead organisations that not only ensure their own continuity but also actively contribute to building a regenerative and resilient future.

## 1.2. What Makes This Guidebook Different?

This guidebook is different because it is built on lived experience rather than theory. It reflects real challenges and successes from organisations that work directly with young people and communities, showing not only what works but also what did not go as planned. Instead of offering abstract frameworks, it combines deep reflection with practical tools adaptable to diverse contexts.

The content comes directly from study visits, conversations and honest reflections among partners. It acknowledges the complexity and imperfection of organisational life, allowing space for trial and error. Rather than prescribing a single right way of doing things, it invites readers to adapt the ideas, methods, and tools to their own realities.

The goal is not to provide a manual with strict instructions, but to create a companion that supports leaders and teams on their own journey toward greater sustainability and regeneration.

## 1.3. How to Use This Guidebook?

This guidebook is designed to be flexible and user-friendly. You can choose to read it from beginning to end or focus only on the chapters most relevant to your current needs. Each chapter ends with reflective questions or suggested actions that can help you connect the ideas to your own organisational reality. Some chapters are based on stories and case studies, while others offer concrete tools and frameworks that you can immediately apply.

To make the most of it, we encourage you to treat this guidebook not as a finished product but as a living resource. Feel free to adapt the methods and tools to your own context, and revisit the sections whenever you face new challenges or prepare for future growth.

## 1.4. The Roots of the “Sustainable Future of Organisations” Project

The project “Sustainable Future of Organisations” began when the leaders of three environmental organisations - Čisteći medvjedići (the Little Cleaning Bears) from Croatia, the Academy of Growth from Germany, and Re-Green from Greece - met during an Erasmus+ project in Germany. In that setting, they realised that they not only shared similar values and long-term goals but also faced many of the same challenges in their daily work. Motivated by the idea of joining forces, they decided to build a partnership that would help them find answers together and strengthen their impact.

What first emerged as a simple exchange among like-minded organisations quickly developed into a concrete collaboration plan. Through several meetings, the partners refined their vision, discussed potential contributions and explored how their different experiences could complement each other. They agreed that by combining their strengths, from grassroots activism and youth engagement to permaculture practices and holistic approaches to sustainability, they could create a meaningful learning space for themselves and others working in the youth and environmental sectors.

## 1.5. Small-Scale Partnerships (KA210)

We included a short chapter on Small-Scale Partnerships (KA210) to give context to how this guidebook came to life. Understanding the project's framework helps readers see why this collaboration was possible and how similar organisations can benefit from the same opportunity. It also serves as inspiration for others who wish to start their own Erasmus+ journey on a manageable scale and grow from there.

Small-Scale Partnerships are designed to make the Erasmus+ Programme more accessible to smaller and less experienced organisations, including newcomers. They aim to reduce entry barriers and encourage participation of organisations, youth groups, and initiatives that may not have the resources for larger-scale projects.

These partnerships typically last between six and 24 months, and focus on creating meaningful impact through simplified administrative requirements and smaller grants. They often act as a first step into international cooperation, providing organisations with the opportunity to build capacity, exchange knowledge, and develop networks at the European level.

### **The main objectives of Small-Scale Partnerships are to:**

- Attract and widen access for newcomers, less experienced organisations and small-scale actors to the programme;
- Support the inclusion of target groups with fewer opportunities;
- Support active European citizenship and bring the European dimension to the local level;
- Increasing the quality of the work and practices of the organisations and institutions involved;

- Building the capacity of organisations;
- Addressing everyday needs and priorities in the fields of education, training, youth and sport;
- Enabling transformation and change.

In line with the Erasmus+ horizontal priorities, projects under this action should also integrate principles of inclusion and diversity, environmental sustainability, digitalisation, and active participation. For example, projects are encouraged to design eco-friendly activities, promote green practices, ensure accessibility for participants from diverse backgrounds, and incorporate digital collaboration.

By participating in a Small-Scale Partnership, organisations can not only strengthen their internal capacities but also make a positive impact on their communities, helping to create a more sustainable, inclusive, and innovative future for young people.

## 1.6. Common Challenges Youth Organisations Face Today

Over the course of our Small-Scale Partnership, we collected insights from study visits, partner reflections, and direct experiences within our own organisations. Through this process, we began to notice recurring challenges shared by many youth NGOs across Europe: patterns that shape how they operate, grow, and sustain their impact. The following section summarises these everyday struggles, drawn from real conversations and observations throughout our collaboration, and sets the stage for the practical approaches explored later in this guidebook.

### Always in survival mode

Many youth organisations find themselves constantly focused on the next event, report or funding deadline. This leaves little time to step back, reflect or plan long-term. Teams often operate with urgency rather than intention, which can erode their ability to innovate and create meaningful projects.

### Financial sustainability

One of the most significant challenges is ensuring long-term financial sustainability. Many youth organisations rely heavily on short-term project grants, which creates insecurity and forces them to adapt their activities to available funding rather than to real community needs. Without a clear long-term financial vision, organisations often struggle to grow, invest in staff, or secure stability for their initiatives.

### Lack of structural clarity

Roles and responsibilities are often unclear, with decision-making processes inconsistent or overly centralised. In many cases, "everything is everyone's job", or a few people carry most of the workload, creating confusion and stress.

## **Burnout and overwhelmment**

Emotional exhaustion is widespread, especially among founders and core team members. Passionate youth workers often feel drained rather than energised, and few organisations integrate a rhythm of rest, celebration and renewal into their culture.

## **Disconnection between vision and practice**

Many NGOs begin with an inspiring mission but gradually feel disconnected from it. Daily operations become mechanical rather than meaningful, leading to a sense of drift and loss of purpose.

## **Low visibility and recognition**

Despite their positive impact, many youth organisations remain undervalued by society and under-recognised by decision-makers. This makes it difficult to influence policy, secure stable partnerships or gain the support they need.

## **Limited youth involvement and engagement**

Maintaining meaningful youth engagement can be challenging. The same small group of young people tends to remain active while others stay out of reach. Efforts to include young people with fewer opportunities sometimes remain limited, preventing genuine participation and long-lasting impact.

These are among the most common challenges faced by organisations working with young people, and several will be explored in greater detail throughout this guide, supported by concrete examples from practice. Through the Sustainable Future of Organisations project, partners such as Čisteći medvjedići, Academy of Growth and Re-Green exchange practical solutions and share examples of resilience, demonstrating how you can strengthen your youth organisation and make it more sustainable.

## **1.7. Reflection on the Chapter**

*Use these questions to connect the ideas from this chapter with your own organisation's reality.*

### **Reflection Questions:**

1. What motivated you to start or join your organisation?
2. How connected do you still feel to your original vision today?
3. Have you ever applied for a Small-Scale Partnership (KA210)? If not, do you see it as an opportunity for your organisation?
4. Which of the challenges described in this chapter best reflects your organisation's reality?
5. Do you consider your organisation sustainable in social, economic and environmental terms?
6. What practices could you introduce to ensure your organisation creates a lasting and meaningful impact on young people and the community?
7. What resources or partnerships do you need to achieve long-term sustainability?



# **MEET THE ORGANISATIONS**

## **IN THIS CHAPTER:**

**2.1. ČISTEĆI MEDVJEDIĆI (CROATIA)**

**2.2. RE-GREEN (GREECE): A PARTNERSHIP SHAPED BY CHANGE**

**2.3. ACADEMY OF GROWTH E.V. (GERMANY)**

## 2.1. Čisteći Medvjedići (Croatia)

Čisteći medvjedići (the Little Cleaning Bears) is a non-governmental, apolitical, and non-profit civic initiative focused on environmental protection through cleanup actions, education, and activism. Over the past five years, they have organised more than 450 cleanup events, with participation from over 1,500 individuals of all ages. During these events, more than 130 tons of waste were collected from the environment. Their objectives include protecting nature and the environment, raising awareness of environmental challenges, promoting proper waste disposal, and fostering sustainable, regenerative development through cleanup actions, activism, and education. They also emphasise the importance of promoting volunteerism, encouraging active community involvement, and supporting multiculturalism both locally and globally.

### Mission & vision

The mission of Čisteći medvjedići is to protect nature and the environment, promote sustainable and regenerative development through environmental education and cleanup actions, and motivate people to volunteer and contribute as active participants in society.

The vision of Čisteći medvjedići is a world where protecting nature and the environment is a guiding principle for every individual and community, and where sustainable and regenerative development becomes an essential way of life. We strive to build a society in which everyone, especially young people, actively contributes to preserving the environment, volunteering, and creating a healthier, cleaner and more sustainable world. Through education, cleanup actions, and collaboration across sectors, we aim to be drivers of ecological awareness and agents of positive social change.

### Key activities & focus areas

Čisteći medvjedići organise regular cleanup actions across Croatia, engaging schools, municipalities, local communities, and even companies in protecting nature and raising ecological awareness. Their programmes are local, national, and international, and they combine environmental activism with youth education, offering cleanup actions, workshops, school initiatives, and creative Erasmus+ projects that promote sustainability and active citizenship. A notable example is the campaign “Baci čik u koš” (Throw Your Cigarette Butt in the Bin), aimed at proper disposal of cigarette butts, through which more than 300,000 butts were collected and received strong media attention.

In addition to their local work, the organisation coordinates international youth exchanges and training courses within Erasmus+, focusing on activism, ecology, regenerative practices, and organisational sustainability. Their actions are designed not only to remove waste but to inspire long-term behavioural change, empower young people, and strengthen community resilience.

### What “sustainable future” means to Čisteći medvjedići

For Čisteći medvjedići, a sustainable future means creating a resilient organisation that blends ecological action, youth empowerment, and long-term planning. It means moving beyond one-off cleanups, investing in volunteer development, securing diversified funding, and embedding sustainability into organisational culture through education, partnerships, and regenerative practices, aiming to inspire systemic change at the community level.

## 2.2. Re-Green (Greece): A Partnership Shaped by Change

When this project was born, it was co-created by three organisations: Čisteći medvjedići in Croatia, Academy of Growth e.V. in Germany, and Re-Green in Greece. The initial idea and application were developed together by Juraj (Čisteći medvjedići), Thomas (Academy of Growth), and Kayil (then leading volunteer coordinator and ground manager at Re-Green).

Re-Green was a community project in Greece, well-known for its work in permaculture, natural building, holistic practices, and youth engagement. From the beginning, it brought valuable experience in land-based learning and regenerative living to the partnership.

However, even before the official start of this project, life took an unexpected turn. One of the co-founders of Re-Green tragically passed away, leaving the future of the place uncertain. Soon after, the remaining co-owner shared her decision to sell the land, adding another layer of instability about what would happen next. This period of uncertainty also affected Kayil, who had been coordinating the Re-Green project. Faced with these changes, he eventually decided to step away from the organisation, which further shifted the balance of the partnership.

Despite these challenges, the decision was made to keep Re-Green within the partnership. Out of respect and solidarity, and with the hope of continuity, we even included the potential new buyer of the property in early discussions. We intended to give this more challenging version of collaboration a chance. Over time, however, it became clear that the conditions for meaningful cooperation were no longer in place. The partnership, in its original form, could not continue. The decision was made to finalise the project between Čisteći medvjedići and the Academy of Growth, while still honouring the shared journey with Re-Green.

This is why, throughout the guidebook, Re-Green is mentioned only through our own reflections and observations, rather than through a dedicated case study. We do this out of respect for their ideas, experiences, and intellectual property, and to acknowledge the reality that partnerships, just like organisations themselves, are living systems. They evolve, sometimes in ways that no one could foresee.

The main lesson for us, and perhaps for others, is this: building projects together means embracing uncertainty. Partnerships are not static agreements on paper; they are living relationships shaped by personal lives, land, and unforeseen events. To work regeneratively means to adapt with care, to respect each other's journeys, and to recognise when the form of collaboration needs to change.

## 2.3. Academy of Growth e.V. (Germany)

Academy of Growth e.V. is a non-profit, youth-led organisation based in rural western Germany, founded with the vision of integrating personal development, ecological sustainability, and community living. What began as a solidarity initiative has grown into a permanent learning space, a farm that hosts international youth exchanges, training courses, and local community projects. The Academy is deeply rooted in regenerative values, permaculture, and experiential education, aiming not only to be a place of learning but also a living example of alternative ways of organising, working, and being together.

Since its founding in 2022, the Academy of Growth has hosted and co-designed Erasmus+ projects focused on permaculture, regenerative leadership, youth well-being, and organisational sustainability. Participants sleep in tents under the stars, help cook in outdoor kitchens, take part in hands-on ecological practices, and reflect together in nature-based settings, making learning not just informative but transformative.

### **Mission & vision**

The mission of the Academy of Growth is to create a space where people reconnect with themselves, each other, and nature through shared living, creative collaboration, and hands-on learning.

The vision is a world where personal growth, ecological regeneration, and community resilience are not separate goals, but interwoven realities. The Academy strives to model a lifestyle and organisational culture that is healthy, joyful, values-driven, and deeply aligned with natural cycles. It is a place where simplicity meets purpose and where young people are invited to step into their own leadership while contributing to something larger than themselves.

### **Key activities & focus areas**

Academy of Growth hosts youth exchanges, training courses, and local events that explore themes such as permaculture design, mental well-being, regenerative leadership, and organisational transformation. Each programme combines experiential education with community living, encouraging shared responsibility, embodied practice, and slow reflection.

In addition to their international work, the Academy engages in long-term infrastructure development on its land, including the creation of a food forest, an earth-based greenhouse, and eco-friendly facilities. Their events are not only environmentally conscious; they are designed to *regenerate* the land, the people, and the systems involved.

### **What “sustainable future” means to the Academy of Growth**

For the Academy of Growth, a sustainable future means living and organising in ways that are *truly life-giving* for the land, the people involved, and the communities connected to the work. It means building organisations that care for their teams’ emotional and physical well-being, operate at an appropriate scale, and choose simplicity over burnout.



# **RETHINKING ORGANISATIONAL SUSTAINABILITY**

## **IN THIS CHAPTER:**

- 3.1. WHY DEFINE SUSTAINABILITY?**
- 3.2. THE DEGENERATIVE ORGANISATION**
- 3.3. THE SUSTAINABLE ORGANISATION**
- 3.4. THE REGENERATIVE ORGANISATION**
- 3.5. THE SPECTRUM OF ORGANISATIONAL OPERATION**
- 3.6. WHY REGENERATION MATTERS**

## 3.1. Why Define Sustainability?

*Before we aim for a sustainable future, we need to ask: what does “sustainable” really mean?*

Sustainability has become one of the most widely used and often misused terms in the world of civil society. For many organisations, it means staying alive: securing the following grant, delivering the next project, and paying core staff. For others, it's about reducing harm: printing less, travelling by train, planting a tree. These are all important. But do they go far enough?

In our work with youth organisations and environmental NGOs, we noticed that sustainability is often treated as the goal but rarely defined. And more importantly: seldom questioned. *What kind of sustainability are we actually talking about? Sustainable for whom? At what cost? And for how long?*

These questions became central in our partnership. Through dialogue, study visits, and deep reflection, we began to see patterns. In ourselves. In our structures. In the organisations around us. We realised that there is no single state of sustainability, but rather a spectrum of how organisations operate.

### A living spectrum

We identified three recurring patterns:

- Degenerative practices: where energy, people, and resources are slowly (or quickly) depleted over time.
- Sustainable practices: where systems are stable and functioning, but not necessarily evolving.
- Regenerative practices: where organisations give more than they take, create surplus, and strengthen the systems and people around them.

This spectrum isn't a ranking. It's not about being good or bad. It's a tool for reflection. Most organisations operate across all three levels, sometimes simultaneously. You might have a regenerative way of working with your local community, but a financially unsustainable team model. You might be environmentally thoughtful, but rely heavily on unpaid labour. This chapter invites you to look honestly at these patterns, not to criticise yourself, but to gain clarity. To understand where you are now, and to start imagining what could shift.

### Why this matters

For youth-focused, small, community-based organisations, sustainability is not just about survival. It's about creating structures that allow people to thrive. That means asking different questions:

- *What is the appropriate scale for our work and our team?*
- *What is the actual number each person needs to live and thrive, not just scrape by?*
- *Are we creating something that grows in value over time, or something that constantly drains us?*

These are not easy questions. But they matter because many beautiful initiatives fail not from lack of passion, but from unsustainable design. We've seen it happen again and again: good people, good values, exhausted systems.

And while finances are often at the heart of sustainability challenges, they are never the whole story. Real sustainability, and especially regeneration, includes many other forms of value: time, trust, energy, community, learning, care, and belonging. If we focus only on money, we risk missing what makes our organisations truly alive. An organisation that cannot offer high salaries might still offer deep personal growth. A volunteer might not be paid, but might receive meaningful learning, mentorship, and connection. When the exchange is mutual, transparent, and nourishing, that is sustainability. When the exchange creates shared abundance, lasting impact, and continued growth, that is regeneration.

### What this chapter offers

In the pages that follow, we explore the spectrum in depth. You will find:

- Concrete definitions of degeneration, sustainability, and regeneration;
- Real-life examples from NGOs: the pressures, compromises, and breakthroughs;
- Reflection questions to help you locate your organisation on this spectrum;
- A diagnostic table to assess patterns across different areas: finances, leadership, environment, team culture, and more.

We hope that this chapter creates clarity, language, and shared ground so that together, we can stop asking only "How do we survive?" and start asking: "How do we grow something that lasts? Something that feeds us and others for years to come?"

## 3.2. The Degenerative Organisation

*What happens when we run on short-term wins, overcommitment, and invisible costs?*

Degeneration isn't always dramatic. It often begins quietly, with a bit more stress here and a bit less time to reflect there. But over time, the pressure builds. People get tired. Systems break down. The work starts to lose its meaning. Degenerative patterns drain energy, creativity, and resources without replenishment.

We've seen many youth organisations fall into this mode, even with good intentions. They take on too much. They chase every funding opportunity. They rely on unpaid labour. And they convince themselves that "it's only temporary." But if nothing changes, this "temporary hustle" becomes a permanent state, and the organisation slowly burns out from the inside.

### Characteristics of Degeneration in NGOs

#### Short-term survival mode

Projects are planned to meet urgent deadlines, not long-term vision. There's little time to pause, evaluate, or innovate. The focus is always on the next event, the following report, the next crisis.

### **One wins, others lose**

One or two leaders carry most of the load, sometimes paid, often not. Others contribute for free or burn out trying to keep up. Power and responsibility are rarely shared in a healthy way.

### **Underpaying or not paying people at all**

A project may “work” on paper, but if only one person can afford to stay involved while others volunteer indefinitely, the model is already cracked. The structure depends on hidden sacrifice.

### **Constant firefighting**

Without clear systems or breathing space, organisations operate reactively. There is no time to invest in better tools, strategies, or internal culture; everything goes to keeping up.

### **High turnover and loss of knowledge**

People leave due to exhaustion or lack of compensation, and with them goes valuable experience, relationships, and organisational memory.

### **Disconnection from original purpose**

In survival mode, mission and meaning fade. The work becomes mechanical. The “why” gets lost in the daily rush to deliver.

## **Short-Term Thinking: The Trap**

Degenerative systems are usually built on short-term thinking. There's a kind of logic to it: “Let's just make it through this project, and then we'll rest.” But that rest rarely comes. When you're always in survival mode, long-term health is sacrificed for immediate deliverables. Imagine a garden where you harvest every crop without feeding the soil. It might work for a season. But eventually, the system collapses.

## **Real-Life Examples of Degeneration**

### **“The volunteer trap”**

A small NGO runs multiple Erasmus+ projects per year. One person writes the applications, hosts participants, and handles logistics, often unpaid. Volunteers help at first, but soon leave. The founder burns out, and the organisation collapses.

### **“Funding over vision”**

An organisation applies to every available grant, regardless of alignment. They win funding, but are stretched thin delivering projects they don't fully believe in. Morale and relevance decline.

## “Invisible burnout”

A team delivers a successful event. Everyone smiles for the group photo. But afterwards, no one has the energy to reflect or follow up. The impact ends where the project ends.

### Reflection questions:

1. In which areas of your organisation do you feel constantly in “firefighting” mode?
2. Who currently benefits most from your project work, and who might be sacrificing too much?
3. Are any of your activities unsustainable by design?
4. What costs are currently invisible - emotionally, financially, or structurally?

## 3.3. The Sustainable Organisation

*What does it look like when things are “okay” but not evolving?*

Sustainability is often seen as the goal. And yes, it's a big step forward from degeneration. In a sustainable organisation, systems function. Projects are delivered. People are paid (at least to some extent). There is structure, clarity, and a rhythm. The organisation is stable but not necessarily growing or transforming.

But sustainability is not the destination. It is a middle point, not an end goal. A sustainable organisation maintains what it has. It doesn't collapse, but it doesn't regenerate either. It keeps things going without deeply renewing them.

### Characteristics of Sustainability in NGOs

#### Balanced input and output

The organisation functions at a manageable pace. Money in equals money out. Staff are compensated, though often modestly. Projects run. Reporting is on time.

#### Systems are in place

There are clear roles, timelines, and plans. Communication flows. Delegation exists. The structure works, but mostly to maintain the current status quo.

#### Repeatable results

The organisation has found a formula that works. It's reliable. Annual camps, trainings, or projects happen with consistent quality but little innovation.

#### Limited renewal or reflection

There is little time or energy for experimentation, visioning, or asking new questions. The focus is on keeping things running, not evolving.

## Fairer, but not abundant

Core staff avoid burnout, but operate close to capacity. Volunteers still play a key role. Compensation covers basic needs, but there's little surplus for personal or organisational growth.

## The Plateau of Short-Term Thinking

While degeneration is driven by desperation, sustainability can become a comfort zone. The organisation is no longer in crisis but still relies on short-term decisions. Questions like "What's affordable this year?" take precedence over "What will make us stronger in five?"

This results in:

- Staying small to avoid financial risk
- Choosing only proven methods
- Avoiding strategic investment in people, tools, or innovation

## Real-Life Examples of Sustainability

### "The annual rhythm"

An NGO runs a successful annual training program. It's smooth, well attended, and well reviewed. But every year is a copy of the last. There's no room for experimentation or a new direction.

### "The part-time director"

A co-founder is officially working part-time but is giving far more hours than they are paid for. The organisation is stable but only because of hidden personal overcommitment.

### "Just enough funding"

A team consistently covers core costs. Salaries, rent, and materials are in place. But there is no space to invest in long-term growth, team development, or experimentation.

### Reflection questions:

1. What patterns in your organisation are stable, but not evolving?
2. Is your current scale aligned with your team's real-life needs and energy?
3. What would you try if you had more time, money, or capacity?
4. Are you unknowingly limiting your vision by aiming only for "sustainable"?

## 3.4. The Regenerative Organisation

*What if your organisation could not only survive but actually heal, grow, and inspire?*

Regeneration goes beyond “not doing harm.” It is about actively contributing to life: creating systems, cultures, and projects that nourish the people involved, restore the land, and generate ripple effects beyond your immediate scope. A regenerative organisation leaves things better than it found them.

This might sound idealistic. But in our experience, it is not only possible, it is necessary. Especially in the youth and environmental sectors, we need organisations that model the very world we are trying to build. That is why we believe regeneration is the next frontier.

### Characteristics of Regenerative Organisations

#### Win-win-win dynamics

No one is expected to sacrifice so that others can benefit. The aim is mutual benefit: the organisation thrives, people grow, and impact deepens. Everyone involved gains something meaningful, not just the end beneficiaries.

#### Investment in people and ecosystems

Resources are not only used to deliver the next event but to build long-term capacity. That might include fair compensation, time for rest, mentorship opportunities, co-creation, land stewardship, or ecosystem regeneration. The focus shifts to nourishing the roots, not just harvesting outcomes.

#### Cultural rhythms of reflection and renewal

Rather than continuous output, there are intentional cycles of time for reflection, celebration, and reset. Rest is respected. Feedback is welcome. Challenges are integrated. These rhythms create resilience over time.

#### Rooted in permaculture ethics

Many regenerative organisations draw inspiration from permaculture, a design approach rooted in nature’s patterns. At its core, there are three ethics that can also guide how organisations operate:

#### People care

Support the well-being of everyone involved. Create structures that help people feel safe, valued, and able to grow.

#### Earth care

Respect and regenerate the natural environment. Consider the ecological impact of your projects and leave ecosystems healthier than you found them.

## Fair share

Ensure resources are shared fairly. Avoid overextraction and redistribute when there is surplus. Make sure no one is excluded from sustainability.

These ethics are not abstract ideals. They offer a practical compass for designing budgets, building teams, choosing partners, and defining impact.

## Regeneration as long-term thinking in action

Short-term thinking asks, "What can we afford this year?" Regenerative thinking asks, "What can we plant now that will nourish us and others for years to come?"

This shift is at the heart of regenerative work. It means building systems that support life in the long run, whether that is a trusting team culture, resilient funding models, or deep relationships with local communities.

Instead of offering the minimum to your team and collaborators, you begin to ask: How can we create offers so meaningful that people choose to return, year after year, as co-creators of this shared journey?

This kind of abundance is not created overnight. But once it begins, it tends to grow exponentially, like interest compounding, or like seeds becoming forests.

## Real-Life Examples of Regeneration

### "The shared growth invitation"

A youth organisation designs its exchange programs to include pathways for former participants to become future facilitators. Each year builds new leaders, and the impact becomes self-reinforcing.

### "The financially transparent team"

Before submitting a grant proposal, a team discusses their real financial needs. Everyone is asked what they need to thrive. Budgets are adjusted to reflect this reality, instead of asking people to give more than they can.

### "The community garden"

An organisation creates a community food forest that becomes more than a symbolic gesture. It is a space for hands-on education, ecological restoration, and community gathering, a living system that continues to grow in value each year.

### Reflection questions:

1. Where in your organisation are you already planting seeds for long-term impact?
2. What systems or rhythms support the growth and well-being of your team?
3. How do you care for the deeper foundations of your work, not just the deliverables?
4. If your organisation no longer existed, what would remain as a result of its work?

## 3.5. The Spectrum of Organisational Operation

Every organisation operates along a spectrum, often in more than one place at the same time.

Throughout this chapter, we have explored three different ways organisations can function: degeneratively, sustainably, and regeneratively. These are not fixed boxes. Most organisations sit in different places on the spectrum at the same time: you might be close to regenerative in one area and still strongly degenerative in another.

You might have a regenerative approach to community building, while still relying on unsustainable financial structures. Or your environmental practices might be advanced, while your team culture struggles with burnout. This is normal in living systems.

This section is not about judging where you are, but about becoming more aware of your current reality, so that you can make conscious decisions about where you want to go next.

During our training course with NGO leaders, we received very clear feedback:

“It’s helpful to have a scale, not just three words. We want to see if we are at the very beginning of sustainability or already close to regeneration.”

The following tool is our response to that insight.

### Tool: Regeneration Spectrum Scale (1-9)

For each area of practice, you will see three anchor descriptions: one degenerative, one sustainable, and one regenerative.

You then score your organisation on a 1-9 scale:

- **1-3** = mainly degenerative
  - 1 = strongly degenerative
  - 3 = already moving towards sustainability
- **4-6** = mainly sustainable
  - 4 = just above degenerative
  - 6 = already close to regenerative
- **7-9** = mainly regenerative
  - 7 = early regenerative
  - 9 = strongly regenerative, a reference point for others

This allows you to make a more nuanced evaluation. For example, your funding might not be fully regenerative, but clearly beyond “basic sustainability” → you might choose a 6. Or your team’s well-being might still be primarily degenerative, but with some improvements → you might choose a 3.

You can use this tool in two ways:

1. Individually: each person fills it in; then you compare and discuss differences.
2. Collectively: you fill it in together as a team and negotiate a shared score.

## Tool: Regeneration Spectrum Scale: Self-Assessment

For each area, read the three anchors and then mark a score between 1 and 9.

AREA OF PRACTICE	DEGENERATIVE ANCHOR (≈ 1-3)	SUSTAINABLE ANCHOR (≈ 4-6)	REGENERATIVE ANCHOR (≈ 7-9)	YOUR SCORE (1-9)
<b>Funding &amp; Finances</b>	Underpaid staff, unclear budgets, and hidden volunteer work	Balanced budgets, basic transparency, and some reserves	Transparent, equitable pay; clear budgets; reserves and shared surplus	
<b>Team Well-being</b>	Burnout, overwork, and emotional exhaustion are normal	Workload is mostly manageable; some time for rest and reflection	Rest, growth, and care are integrated; a culture of feedback and celebration	
<b>Leadership &amp; Roles</b>	One person holds power; roles are unclear or constantly shifting	Roles are defined; leadership remains centralised	Leadership is distributed; clear roles with autonomy and shared responsibility	
<b>Vision &amp; Purpose</b>	Disconnected from original mission; "we just run projects"	Vision is stable but rarely revisited	Vision is co-created, evolving, and actively used in decisions	
<b>Project Design</b>	Reactive, mostly "for funding only"	Delivers good quality, standard formats	Designed for transformation, deep impact, and local relevance	
<b>Environmental Practice</b>	No awareness or harmful practices	Recycling, eco-conscious materials, and some green choices	Actively regenerating ecosystems, biodiversity, and nature connection	
<b>Volunteer Engagement</b>	Exploitative or dependent on unpaid overload	Volunteers support stable systems; roles are somewhat clear	Volunteers grow through meaningful roles, mutual learning, and shared ownership	
<b>Decision-Making</b>	Centralised, unclear, non-inclusive	Some inclusion; key decisions remain top-down	Shared power, transparent processes, participatory decisions	
<b>Time &amp; Rhythm</b>	Constant rush, crisis mode, no rest	Routine exists; some time for planning	Seasons of rest, deep work, celebration, and reflection are embedded	
<b>Evaluation &amp; Learning</b>	No time to reflect; same mistakes repeat	Reporting is done; some lessons are captured	Continuous learning culture; feedback and failure are used for growth	
<b>Communication</b>	Chaotic, informal, easily misunderstood	Structured but mainly transactional	Transparent, human-centred, feedback-friendly communication	

<b>Physical Infrastructure</b>	Unsafe, neglected, or draining spaces	Basic infrastructure is maintained	Spaces are beautiful, accessible, and support well-being and ecology
<b>Technology &amp; Tools</b>	Outdated, absent, or causing friction	Functional tools; minimal digital strategy	Tools empower creativity, collaboration, and digital sustainability
<b>Partnerships &amp; Networks</b>	Competitive, extractive, or siloed	Professional, project-based collaborations	Deeply reciprocal relationships; networks that grow and learn together
<b>Organisational Culture</b>	Stressful, isolating, fear-based	Polite, professional, but emotionally limited	Culture of trust, care, joy, inclusion, and shared growth

### 3.6. Why Regeneration Matters

*Sustainability maintains. Regeneration transforms.*

Many organisations working with young people and the environment aim to be sustainable. That's already a meaningful shift in a world built on extraction, overwork, and burnout. But if we stop at sustainability, we risk preserving systems that are just "good enough" without ever asking what's possible beyond that.

Regeneration invites us to imagine more. It challenges us to build structures that nourish everyone involved, while also contributing to the well-being of the planet and future generations. It offers a long-term, values-aligned path that supports health, purpose, and resilience.

A regenerative organisation becomes a living system. One that not only delivers impact but also strengthens the people, relationships, and ecosystems around it. In this way, your work becomes more than a series of outputs. It becomes a force that multiplies good.

This doesn't mean every organisation needs to be perfect. Regeneration is not a standard to meet; it is a direction to move toward. It is a way of thinking, designing, and relating that asks: *How can our work give more than it takes? How can we grow something that lasts and feeds others in the process?*

Whether you are running a youth centre, a climate initiative, a community garden, or a grassroots network, the question is the same: *What kind of future are we growing, and what type of organisation do we need to become to grow it well?*

This is not about scaling bigger. It is about scaling deeper.

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# **THE STUDY VISIT METHOD**

## **IN THIS CHAPTER:**

**4.1. WHY WE CHOSE THE STUDY VISIT APPROACH**

**4.2. OUR METHOD OF A STUDY VISIT**

**4.3. WHAT MADE THIS PROCESS USEFUL AND UNIQUE?**

**4.4. REFLECTION ON THE CHAPTER**

## 4.1. Why We Chose the Study Visit Approach

It began in the sun: three chairs in the grass after the last dishes were washed and the final hugs exchanged at our very first Academy of Growth youth exchange, Garden of Growth (2023).

The farm felt both quiet and full: garden beds buzzing with insects, the smell of soil and basil still in the air, notes and sketches scattered across a table outside. We weren't having a meeting. We were simply three people unwinding after an intense week that had gone far beyond our expectations: Juraj (Čisteći medvjedići) as the kitchen and logistics mastermind, and Kayil (Re-Green) and Thomas (Academy of Growth e.V.) as facilitators and co-organisers.

That unplanned conversation became a turning point. Academy of Growth was still at the very beginning of its NGO journey, focused mainly on bringing international exchange projects to life. Juraj, whose organisation in Croatia was best known for local environmental cleanups, had just spent a week coordinating every practical detail to keep things flowing smoothly. But as he sat in the sun reflecting on what we had created together, something shifted. For the first time, he began to see beyond logistics; to understand how an idea becomes a project, how a project becomes an experience, and how those experiences can shape an organisation's identity and long-term strategy. The wish to bring his own projects to life began to grow quietly as a new direction.

Next to him, Kayil represented a different but complementary reality. As Re-Green's land caretaker and project manager, he was new to the Erasmus+ world, but far from new to experiential education. His background spanned local permaculture design courses, holistic retreats, and even a "Carpe Diem" initiative where young Americans travelled through Europe to learn from sustainable communities. Re-Green's work combined ecological design, community living, and embodied learning: all rooted deeply in the Greek landscape.

And there we were: three people, three distinct pathways - one NGO just beginning its international journey, one established community learning hub, and one grassroots environmental movement; each with its own focus and challenges, but sharing a common long-term vision: to contribute to a more sustainable, regenerative world.

As we talked, the conversation drifted between stories and reflections. We spoke about what keeps our organisations alive: the invisible labour behind each project, the weight of seasons and funding cycles, the challenge of balancing dreams with limited capacity. And underneath it all, we realised how much we could learn from each other's realities. Not from polished presentations, but from the living, breathing systems we each work in: the daily routines, the rhythms of people and place.

That afternoon, two ideas started to take shape. First, if we genuinely wanted to learn from one another, we needed to create time and space for it; not in another online meeting, but by actually going to each other's places, walking the land, seeing the context, and feeling the atmosphere that shapes every decision.

And second, the Erasmus+ Small-Scale Partnership programme could give this idea a home: a structure to make such cross-visits real. Visiting each organisation, their site, their team, their challenges, felt like the most authentic way to understand how values translate into practice.

At first, we imagined these visits as "best-practice exchanges," where we would learn what was working well in each organisation. But the more we talked, the more that idea felt too shallow compared to what we had just experienced during the Garden of Growth. What had taught

us most that week were not the smooth moments; it was the things that went wrong and how we adapted, the moments we improvised, the evening reflections where we admitted what was hard. The richness was in the process, not the perfection.

That was the real spark: a shared understanding that learning happens when we drop the performance. We didn't need another showcase of success. We required an honest look at reality: the victories and the vulnerabilities, and a circle of peers who could witness and support that process.

That is why we chose the study visit approach. Not to perform, but to witness. Not to collect ready-made solutions, but to experience the living systems behind each organisation: to sense their strengths, see their patterns, and understand how their values are embodied in everyday practice. We wanted a learning that was personal, place-based, and relational; a learning that breathes.

In the end, what began as a conversation between three sun-tired friends grew into something much bigger: a shared commitment to create space for real organisational learning; to visit, listen, and grow together.

What followed naturally evolved into what we now call our method of study visit, a practice born not from theory but from friendship, curiosity, and the willingness to engage to be present for each other's work.

## 4.2. Our Method of a Study Visit

Before explaining our method for a study visit, it is worth saying what it isn't. It isn't a traditional study visit where participants come to observe best practices, listen to success stories, and collect ideas that might later be applied. Nor is it a presentation of successful projects or a tour that showcases what already works well.

Our study visit method is a living, authentic process that reflects the real work of organisations. Instead of focusing on achievements, it invites participants to share reality as it truly is with all its challenges, doubts, successes, and uncertainties that are part of everyday organisational life. Rather than creating a "performance" for participants, the idea was to go deeper into the essence of each organisation and act as active observers who, through their perspective, help its growth. Instead of observing from the outside, the process invites compassion and shared learning from inside.

This method developed naturally during three study visits conducted within the project. At first, the intention was simple: to exchange experiences and learn from one another. But already during the first visit, it became clear that the deepest learning happens not when we listen to presentations, but when we explore real challenges together, when we feel safe enough to admit what does not work well, and when others can offer fresh perspectives and support. Beneath every visible success, we discovered invisible struggles, and those struggles became the most fertile ground for collective learning.

In our study visit method, participants are not guests who come only to observe and learn. They are equal partners in a reflective process. Together, we create an ecosystem of trust where learning flows in all directions. The host organisation has a rare opportunity to pause and see its

work through the eyes of others. At the same time, participants gain insight into what is usually hidden, the real life of organisations, with all its complexity, beauty, and imperfection.

## Structure of our method of a study visit

The host organisation opens its doors not to show perfection, but to share its reality. By doing so, it invites others to join in a process of reflection and understanding of its journey, what works, what does not, and what is in transformation.

### The host organisation asks itself questions such as:

- *What is our current situation?*
- *What are our main challenges?*
- *What is the vision for the future of our organisation?*
- *How can this vision become sustainable or regenerative?*
- *What are our next steps to achieve it?*

These questions form the foundation of our study visit, which unfolds through three key phases.

## 1. Understanding your organisational reality

Each visit begins with an understanding of the host organisation's holistic context. Instead of a formal presentation, the team presents the whole system they manage: who they are, the values that guide their decisions, the resources they rely on, what drives them, their mission and vision, their financial situation, and other relevant aspects of their work. This process helps everyone see the bigger picture and understand the system in which the organisation operates, not only what it does, but also why and how it does it.

## 2. Facing challenges and reconnecting with vision, mission and values

The second phase focuses on exploring real challenges and reconnecting with the organisation's deeper purpose. Through open dialogue and reflection, the host and participants look at what works well and what needs to change. By addressing challenges together, they uncover what truly drives the organisation and whether its vision, mission, and values still reflect its current direction. Challenges become learning opportunities for realigning actions with purpose, leading the organisation from unsustainable practices toward sustainable and regenerative ways of working.

## 3. Harvesting knowledge: turning insights into concrete steps

The final phase is dedicated to harvesting, a collective process of gathering insights, lessons, and possible next steps. The harvest belongs to everyone: the host leaves with greater clarity and renewed energy, while participants leave with ideas and perspectives they can apply in their own contexts. What makes this moment special is that the results are co-created rather than predefined. The visit does not end with closure, but with opening, planting seeds of learning that will grow within several organisations.

## The role of the host and participants

Our method of a study visit is built on understanding and mutual support. The host organisation takes a brave step by openly sharing its internal processes. This means recognising that uncertainty, mistakes, and searching for direction are natural parts of growth. Such an act of authenticity does not weaken the organisation; on the contrary, it opens space for learning and trust. The host becomes a shared field of exploration and development, a living example of learning and transparent culture.

Participants, on the other hand, do not come as evaluators or consultants but as friends, partners, and co-creators in the process. Their role is to listen, observe, and offer reflections grounded in experience, curiosity, and empathy. This relationship creates a regenerative dynamic: what the host receives through new insights, participants receive through new perspectives. Growth is mutual.

Learning happens through honest witnessing. When one organisation dares to share its challenges, others recognise themselves in them. The visit becomes a mirror. From recognition comes empathy, and from empathy, collective knowledge. Ideas do not emerge from instructions, but from resonance.

## Why this method matters

We live in a society that often celebrates success and results over values, community, well-being, and knowledge, and perfection over authenticity. Many organisations feel pressure to show only what is “representative”. In doing so, we miss opportunities for genuine learning, the kind that happens when we share our struggles, processes, and inner journeys with others.

Our study visit method offers a different approach. It says: “learning is not a performance, but a practice of truth”.

By exploring real challenges together, organisations strengthen not only their systems but also their relationships, culture, and capacity for growth. This method embodies the values it promotes: transparency, care, curiosity, and community. It shows that sustainability, and especially regeneration, is not built solely on efficiency and results, but on connection, reflection, and a willingness to grow.

## From challenges to shared growth

What began as a simple need, the wish to better understand partner organisations, evolved into a methodology for organisational learning. Through each visit, we discovered that regeneration happens the moment we replace judgment with curiosity, isolation with dialogue, and fixed solutions with shared exploration.

When organisations open their inner processes to one another, they move from competition to collaboration. The impact goes beyond the visit itself; it changes how we see ourselves, each other, and the world we operate in.

### 4.3. What Made this Process Useful and Unique?

The study visit approach proved not only inspiring but also deeply human. What began as an exchange of practices soon turned into something much richer: an ongoing process of witnessing, understanding, and supporting the living realities behind each organisation.

By being physically present, we didn't just see how our partners worked - we *felt* it. We walked the fields, shared meals, and joined morning routines. We watched how people move through their space, how they balance work and rest, and how their values are woven into the most minor details of daily life. These experiences built a kind of understanding that simply doesn't emerge through reports or online calls.

When you sit together over coffee, see someone's garden after the rain, or help chop vegetables for lunch, you start to understand what truly shapes their work: the rhythms, the constraints, the personal stories. It becomes clear that organisations are not abstract entities; they are living ecosystems made of people, time, and relationships.

#### The dimension of partnership

Perhaps the most profound learning came from experiencing each other's realities beyond the professional layer. In our case, this deepened through unexpected life events. During one of the study visits, a serious health situation in the family of the Academy of Growth's leading team affected planned activities, including adapting the study visit and reshaping parts of another youth exchange.

At first, this felt like a disruption. But what happened instead was a moment of genuine partnership. Our colleagues from Čisteći medvjedići were not just informed, they witnessed it. They saw the situation, the emotional load, the juggling of personal and organisational responsibilities. It created a new depth of understanding that would have been impossible through a 90-minute online meeting.

That experience built a layer of empathy and trust that now lives at the core of our collaboration. The partners know why sometimes replies take longer, why certain decisions are made differently, and how to offer support rather than pressure. It's a living example of what we later named the principle of "Planning with Realism, Not Optimism → plan 30% for life will happen": acknowledging that humans lead organisations, and life, with all its unpredictability, is always part of the work.

This kind of insight extends far beyond crises. Staying together in each other's environments, whether it's a remote eco-community, a city office, or a small family farm, makes visible the complete picture of what it means to run an NGO. You see the daily chores, the animals, the volunteer help, and the children running around. You understand how personal lifestyle, environment, and values shape organisational behaviour. In one of our broader partnerships, witnessing how parenthood shaped the rhythm of work offered another eye-opening lesson: that regeneration is not just about ecosystems but also about *human systems* and balance.

#### Beyond screens: the value of presence

In the final evaluation after our last study visit in Germany (April 2025), participants compared the in-person visits with the one partly held online. The results were almost unanimous: there is simply no comparison.

Online meetings have their practical advantages: they save time, money, and emissions; they make it easier to share files; and they can even be the only possible option at times. But what

they save in logistics, they lose in connection. You can't read body language, you can't feel the group's energy, and you can't build trust over a screen. There are no spontaneous chats during a walk, no shared meals, no side conversations that spark new ideas. Online, people turn off their cameras; in person, they look into each other's eyes. One participant described it perfectly:

**“Online, it's efficient. But in person, it's alive.”**

In-person visits allow for something irreplaceable: the magic of informal moments. The laughter over breakfast, the tired smiles after a long day, the collective silence as we watch the sunset. These moments don't just make the experience pleasant; they make it memorable. They build the emotional and relational foundation that turns a network of organisations into a community of practice.

When we are together, learning becomes embodied. We can walk the land we are talking about, see the systems, touch the materials, taste the food that sustains the people who do the work. The experience moves from cognitive to sensory, from theory to reality.

### Why it was unique

What made this process especially valuable was the courage and preparation of the hosting organisations. Each host took time beforehand to reflect deeply, prepare their holistic context, and share it openly and transparently. Unlike traditional study visits, where the focus is on what participants can take home, here the learning was mutual and regenerative. The hosts received perspectives that helped them grow; the visitors left with insights they could bring into their own contexts.

By bringing fresh eyes, free from the weight of daily routines, participants could offer supportive reflections and new angles that often go unnoticed internally. And because everyone shared the same intention, to learn *with, not about*, each other, the process became a two-way exchange of care, honesty, and growth.

Through this approach, the partnership transformed into kinship. The study visits didn't just strengthen our projects; they strengthened *us*. They reminded us that regeneration starts in relationships; when people dare to be real, to listen deeply, and to keep showing up, even when plans change.

That is what made this process both valuable and unique: it was not a project about visiting organisations but a journey of *seeing* each other entirely, truthfully, and in person.

## 4.4. Reflection on the Chapter

*Use these questions and the task to connect the ideas from this chapter with your own organisation's reality.*

### Reflection Questions:

1. When was the last time you paused to reflect on how your organisation truly works?
2. What would others see if they visited your organisation for a few days?
3. Which parts of your reality would you find easy to share, and which would feel vulnerable?

4. What are the main challenges you are currently facing in your work?
5. How can you make reflection and honest sharing a regular part of your organisational culture?

## Reflection task

This task helps your organisation move from identifying challenges to exploring new perspectives and creating concrete steps for change. It can be done within your team or together with a partner organisation.

### Phase 1: Preparation (10 min)

Each team member chooses one challenge they want to explore. The goal is to describe the challenge clearly, without yet searching for solutions.

### Phase 2: Reflection in small groups (about 45 min per challenge)

Work in pairs or small groups and follow this structure:

- **Sharing:** The person explains their challenge and what they have already tried.
- **Clarifying questions:** Others ask short, focused questions to better understand the situation.
- **Reflections and ideas:** The group shares insights, experiences and possible solutions from different perspectives.
- **Closing:** The person summarises what was most useful and selects one idea they want to take forward.

### Phase 3: Harvest and collective learning (30 min)

The team gathers again. Each person shares one key insight and one meaningful idea they want to explore further. This creates collective clarity and strengthens shared understanding.

### Phase 4: Action Steps (30 min)

Each person defines a simple and realistic plan for moving forward:

1. **Focus challenge:** State the challenge you want to address.
2. **Desired outcome:** Describe what you want to achieve or change.
3. **Actions:** List specific steps, when you will do them, and who can support you.
4. **Needed resources:** Identify what you need to stay committed and make the plan happen.

The goal of this process is to help your organisation move from awareness to action, transforming challenges into meaningful, practical steps forward.

## Reflection task: From Challenges to Solutions

This task helps your organisation move from identifying challenges to exploring new perspectives and creating concrete steps for change. It can be done within your team or together

with a partner organisation. All steps in this process can be supported directly by the templates included in this guidebook.

### **Phase 1: Preparation (10 min)**

Each team member chooses one challenge they want to explore. The goal is to describe the challenge clearly, without yet searching for solutions. Use the first part of the template to list and briefly explain your challenge.

### **Phase 2: Reflection in small groups (about 45 min per challenge)**

Work in pairs or small groups and follow this structure:

- **Sharing:** The person explains their challenge and what they have already tried, using their completed template as a guide.
- **Clarifying questions:** Others ask short, focused questions to better understand the situation.
- **Reflections and ideas:** The group shares insights, experiences and possible solutions from different perspectives. These can be written directly into the "Ideas and insights" section of the template.
- **Closing:** The person summarises what was most useful and selects one idea they want to take forward.

### **Phase 3: Harvest and collective learning (30 min)**

The team gathers again. Each person shares one key insight and one meaningful idea they want to explore further. This creates collective clarity and strengthens shared understanding. The "Key takeaways" section of the template can support this step.

### **Phase 4: Action steps (30 min)**

Using the Action plan worksheet, each person defines a simple and realistic plan for moving forward:

- **Focus challenge:** State the challenge you want to address.
- **Desired outcome:** Describe what you want to achieve or change.
- **Actions:** List specific steps, when you will do them, and who can support you.
- **Needed resources:** Identify what you need to stay committed and make the plan happen.

The goal of this process is to help your organisation move from awareness to action, transforming challenges into meaningful, practical steps forward.

## From challenges to solutions

### For participants sharing a challenge

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

*(To reflect together on real organisational challenges and co-create possible solutions through listening and exchange of knowledge.)*

#### 1. My challenges

*(List up to three challenges your organisation or team, or you, is currently facing in work.)*

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

#### 2. Description of my main challenge

*(Briefly describe the main challenge (choose one of the above) you want to explore during this session. Include key context and what has already been tried.)*

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#### 3. Ideas and insights from the group

*(Key suggestions, perspectives, or reflections shared by others. Write 3-4 main ideas and insights.)*

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#### 4. Key takeaways

*(Main insights or thoughts you want to remember. Write three main takeaways.)*

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#### 5. Notes or insights for myself

*(Based on today's reflections, note what you might want to develop further in the next session - your first ideas for concrete steps or changes.)*

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**For participants listening and offering ideas**

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

*(Listen actively, understand the context of the challenge, and offer constructive ideas and reflections.)*

**1. Name of the person sharing**

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**2. Key points of their challenge**

*(What did you understand about their context or main difficulty? Write 2-3 key points of their challenge.)*

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**3. Clarifying questions (if any)**

*(What would you like to ask to understand their challenge better? Write two questions.)*

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**4. Ideas, reflections, and suggestions**

*(What possible solutions or perspectives could be helpful? Write 2-3 ideas, reflections or suggestions.)*

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**5. Notes or insights for myself**

*(Any ideas you'd like to take away for your own work.)*

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**Action plan worksheet**

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

*(Define a clear and realistic plan for addressing the challenge identified in previous sessions.)***1. My focus challenge***(What is the challenge I want to focus on?)*


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**2. My goal / desired outcome***(What do I want to achieve or change through this action plan?)*


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**3. My actions***(List the concrete steps you will take to move forward. Be specific and realistic.)*

Step:	Action:	When will I do it?	Who can support me?
1.			
2.			
3.			
4.			
5.			

**4. Needed resources***(What might help me stay committed? Write down three resources you will need to make this plan happen.)*


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# **HOLISTIC CONTEXT**

## **IN THIS CHAPTER:**

- 5.1. WHAT IS A HOLISTIC CONTEXT?**
- 5.2. HOW TO USE HOLISTIC CONTEXT?**
- 5.3. HOLISTIC CONTEXT STEP BY STEP**

## 5.1. What is a Holistic Context?

To truly understand an organisation, we must look beyond its activities and explore the system that sustains them. During each study visit, this deeper understanding began by mapping the organisation's holistic context: the people, values, resources, and purpose that shape every decision. We realised that this step was not just a useful introduction, but a transformative practice in itself. That is why the next chapter offers a more detailed exploration of the holistic context: as both a tool and a mindset that helps organisations align daily actions with their long-term vision, creating coherence between purpose, people, and practice.

A holistic context is a framework that helps organisations make decisions in alignment with their mission, values and long-term vision. Instead of reacting only to immediate needs, it allows leaders to step back and look at the bigger picture, considering not just financial resources but also the people, relationships, culture and knowledge that sustain the organisation.

If we want to move beyond "survival mode" and build a regenerative future, we need a tool that helps us see the whole system. A holistic context does precisely that. It invites us to pause and ask: Who are we as an organisation? What resources and relationships do we nurture? What kind of life are we creating not only for ourselves, but also for our community and the environment around us?

In Chapter 2, we explored the spectrum between degenerative, sustainable, and regenerative practices. A holistic context helps us recognise where we are on this spectrum and which decisions move us to the next level.

For example, an organisation may have a stable budget (sustainable), but still rely on hidden volunteer labour (degenerative). Or it may run successful yearly projects with consistent quality (sustainable), but rarely create space for innovation or long-term visioning (degenerative tendencies). A holistic context makes these realities visible and helps us take steps towards more profound renewal and healthier functioning.

## 5.2. How to Use Holistic Context?

Every organisation exists within a larger context that shapes its decisions, priorities, and long-term direction. No choice is made in isolation; people, resources, values, and the vision that guides the work always influence it. A holistic context helps organisations look beyond immediate tasks and deadlines. It invites them to consider the bigger picture: who is involved, what resources are available, which values matter most, and what kind of future they are working towards.

For youth organisations, this approach is especially valuable. It ensures that decisions are not only practical but also aligned with mission and values. Instead of reacting to short-term pressures, organisations can act with clarity and intention.

Most importantly, a holistic context is not a static document to be written once and stored away. It is a living framework. Every decision, from whether to apply for a new project to how daily routines are organised, can be tested against it, making sure each step contributes to the long-term vision and regeneration.

## What does this mean for everyday work?

A holistic context reminds us not to make decisions only out of urgency, but also from vision. If we are constantly in “firefighting mode,” our choices are short-term and often push us into degenerative patterns. By using a holistic context, we bring the bigger picture into daily decisions:

- *Is this a choice that drains us or nourishes us?*
- *Does this decision bring us closer to our vision of long-term stability and regeneration?*
- *Who benefits from this choice, and who might be paying the hidden cost?*

## 5.3. Holistic Context Step by Step

### 1. Define the whole under management

Identify the decision makers in your organisation. Clarify who has the authority to make final decisions and who holds veto power. Include not only formal leaders but also volunteers, advisors or partners whose perspectives are essential.

### 2. Define your resource base

Can you define all the resources/assets you own or work with? This may include resources you do not own but are available to you. We found that the Eight Forms of Currency (Capital) is a great way to structure this.

#### EIGHT FORMS OF CURRENCY

CAPITAL	CURRENCY	COMPLEXING TO...
Social Capital	Connections	influence, relationships
Material Capital	Materials, “natural” resources	tools, buildings, infrastructure
Financial Capital	Money	financial instruments & securities
Living Capital	Carbon, Nitrogen, Water	soil, living organisms, land, ecosystem services
Intellectual Capital	Ideas, Knowledge	words, images, “intellectual property”
Experiential Capital	Action	embodied experience, wisdom
Spiritual Capital	Prayer, Intention; Faith, Karma	spiritual attainment
Cultural Capital	Song, Story, Ritual	community

### 3. Define the sources of money

Note all the sources of funding or financial support. These may include grants, public calls, donations, partnerships, membership fees or income from services. Understanding your income streams helps assess sustainability and opportunities for diversification.

### 4. Define your statement of purpose

Write a short and clear statement that explains why your organisation exists. In two or three sentences, describe your mission and the change you aim to create. This should be inspiring and easy to communicate.

### 5. Quality of life statements

Describe the quality of life you want to achieve through your organisation. Focus on economic well-being, human relationships, personal growth and your contribution to others. We ask ourselves, *"How do I want my life to be?"* The aim is to connect with your core values. Many people tend to get stuck on labelling specific "things", but the key is to dig deeper. What truly lies behind each statement? Write in the present tense, such as "We value...", "We create...", "We are...".

### 6. Forms of production

List what your organisation will commit to producing to realise your quality of life statements. This might include projects, workshops, volunteer opportunities, awareness campaigns or partnerships. Focus on what, not how.

### 7. The future resource base

Describe how your organisation's resource base should look in the future to sustain your goals indefinitely. Include networks, communities, partnerships, systems and resources that will support long-term growth and stability.

### 8. The future landscape

Envision how the environment and community around your organisation should look in 10, 50 or even 200 years. Consider physical, cultural and social aspects that will support your vision.

### 9. How you must behave

Define the behaviours and values your organisation must embody. Identify the qualities that will ensure long-term trust, credibility and support from your community and partners. Ask yourself how you want to be known and remembered.

## 5.4. Reflection on the Chapter

*Use these questions to connect the ideas from this chapter with your own organisation's reality.*

1. Create a holistic context for your organisation.
2. Where are you still in "survival mode," and where do you already see regeneration patterns?
3. Do you measure results only in terms of budgets, or also in terms of well-being and community impact?
4. How would your resources look in 10 or 20 years if you worked regenerative?
5. What small decisions today can move your organisation from sustainable to regenerative?

# CASE STUDY: ČISTEĆI MEDVJEDIĆI (CROATIA)

## IN THIS CHAPTER:

6.1. INTRODUCING THE ORGANISATION

6.2. HOLISTIC CONTEXT OF ČISTEĆI MEDVJEDIĆI

6.3. THE VISIT: WHAT HAPPENED IN THE THREE DAYS

6.4. AFTER THE VISIT: FROM INSIGHTS TO ACTIONS

6.5. FROM INTENTION TO ACTION: REFLECTIONS AFTER NINE MONTHS

6.6. REFLECTION ON THE CHAPTER

## 6.1. Introducing the Organisation

Čisteći medvjedići began as a citizens' initiative driven by a simple idea to do something good for the community and the environment, and to enjoy in good company. The first cleanup actions brought together small groups of volunteers, and each new action attracted more people, strengthened connections, and fostered a growing sense that change starts with small steps. Over the years, the initiative has grown into an organisation that now combines volunteer cleanups, education, and international projects, while retaining its simplicity, volunteer spirit, and sense of togetherness.

For Čisteći medvjedići, cleaning the environment has never been just a physical act. It is a way to create space for meetings, conversations, and a shared sense of responsibility. Through cooperation with schools, local communities, and the business sector, the organisation encourages people of all generations to get involved, learn, and take action in their communities. Through years of work, it has developed a clear identity rooted in the collective power of individuals, as well as in authenticity, volunteering, and continuous learning.

Through reflection on our own work and the holistic context, we recognised that sustainability is not only about reducing negative impact but also about fostering regeneration at social, ecological, and human levels. Through this case study, we share part of our journey and the mindset that continues to guide us. We hope that our story inspires others to recognise their own journey, to build communities based on collaboration and kindness, and to act with care and hope for a better future, which we call a regenerative future.

### 6.1.1. Working with Fewer Opportunities Youth Through Cleanups

We already know the authentic story of Čisteći medvjedići when Perica Štefan started cleaning action on his own. Soon his family joined, then friends, and later other active citizens. Behind this was a clear vision: to connect people through a good deed for the community, cleaning the environment. From the beginning, everyone was welcome at cleanups, regardless of age, profession, nationality, religion, race, or political views. The essence was always the same: to spend time together and do something good.

Cleanup actions create an atmosphere where everyone feels safe and included. This environment is particularly well-suited for working with young people with fewer opportunities. There are no formal requirements or special skills needed. Picking up litter may seem simple, but it offers something powerful: an immediate sense of contribution, belonging, and visible impact.

During the study visit, we reflected on how inclusive cleanups really are. For many young people who struggle with school, face social isolation, or live with financial barriers, joining a cleanup is much easier than entering a structured training course or long-term programme. The activity is practical, collective, and equalising: when cleaning, everyone wears gloves, carries a bag, and works side by side. At the same time, cleanups can open the door to deeper involvement. Some young people who first joined for a local cleanup later participated in Erasmus+ exchanges, became youth leaders, or took on organisational roles. What starts as a simple activity often becomes a pathway to empowerment and learning.

For us, the challenge is to keep this pathway open and intentional. We are learning to design cleanups not only as environmental actions but as inclusive entry points. This means paying

attention to atmosphere, offering support to those who are shy or hesitant, and celebrating even the smallest contributions. Working with fewer opportunities youth through cleanups has shown us that change often begins with small steps. A single action can spark confidence, create a sense of community, and open possibilities that go far beyond waste collection.

## 6.2. Holistic Context of Čisteći Medvjedići

In this chapter, we present parts of the holistic context of Čisteći medvjedići. Rather than sharing the entire document, we focus on selected elements that helped us better understand our organisation and guided us towards important conclusions. For example, the exercise "Define the whole undermanagement" helped us recognise not only our core decision makers but also the active volunteers and supporters we can rely on. Writing the holistic context also showed us where we currently stand and, just as importantly, the direction we want to take in the future.

### Defining the resource base

- Core team
- About 30 regular volunteers, of whom 15 are very active volunteers who regularly participate in our cleanup actions;
- Skilled friends;
- Friends from the media;
- Friends with experience in leading associations and Erasmus+ projects;
- Network of partners in the Erasmus+ world;
- Network of partner schools;
- Network of local partners;
- A large market for our products and services;
- Connected with the local committees of the City of Zagreb;
- Connected with the mayor of the Municipality of Nova Kapela;
- Connected with the libraries of the City of Zagreb;
- Everyone knows Perica (president of Čisteći medvjedići);
- Hangtime Agency - Perica's company for events.

Although we initially identified low visibility and recognition as a challenge for organisations, we realised that they are, in fact, among our greatest strengths. We have established a wide network of contacts within the Erasmus+ community and at the local level, as well as strong connections with the media, which allows us to spread our message and strengthen the impact of our activities.

### Defining the sources of money

When defining our income sources, we realised that we manage our finances more effectively than we initially thought. In just over two years, the organisation has grown to employ four staff members, a clear indicator of sound financial planning. A key part of our 2024 strategic

plan was diversifying funding to reduce dependence on Erasmus+ projects. Today, our income includes not only Erasmus+ but also local and national projects, collaborations with schools and libraries, and partnerships with companies.

However, this diversification has also led to a significant increase in workload, causing rapid organisational growth. Our ongoing challenge is to connect financial sustainability with social sustainability, ensuring a healthy balance between stability and well-being for our team. The unpredictability of project approvals makes planning difficult, yet it remains essential for our long-term vision.

## Quality of life, forms of production and future resource base

To provide a concrete example, we share the full sections of our holistic context. They describe how we see the well-being of others and ourselves, the forms of production we commit to, and the resource base we envision for the future. Together, they show how values such as fairness, creativity, collaboration and sustainability are translated into practical commitments, from developing new youth programmes and partnerships to investing in better systems and tools for long-term stability.

### Quality of life statements

- We are dedicated to creating a sustainable future by fostering ecological awareness and protecting nature as a fundamental principle of all our activities.
- We believe that volunteering and active citizenship are essential to strong communities, encouraging people to engage in community life actively.
- We believe that young people are the drivers of change, which is why we create programmes for youth aged 7 to 30, but also include all other ages in cleaning and educational programmes.
- We maintain a healthy balance between personal and professional life, ensuring space for family and friends.
- We value friendships and collaboration, creating a supportive community built on trust and teamwork.
- We encourage learning and curiosity, providing opportunities for growth, creativity and meaningful contributions.
- We ensure fair pay, transparency and accountability in all practices.
- We manage resources sustainably, making decisions that secure meaningful income and long-term stability.

### Forms of production

- Educational programmes for schools to build ecological awareness and youth participation;
- Creative Erasmus+ projects on ecology, sustainability and citizenship;
- Social media strategies to reach and engage young people;
- Active online communities through social platforms and messaging groups;
- Volunteering opportunities to protect the environment and empower communities;

- A healthy work environment and more team time together;
- Building networks with 20 schools and 20 local partners;
- Introducing digital tools for administration, finances and project management;
- Hiring an additional team member for administrative and operational tasks;
- Developing strategies for funding diversification and monitoring calls for proposals;
- Creating templates for Erasmus+ project development and management;
- Increasing the number of cleanup actions with community involvement;
- Establishing a database of young people in local communities.

### Future resource base

- Innovative school programmes and new Erasmus+ projects;
- A more sustainable and active local community;
- New volunteering opportunities and youth engagement strategies;
- Open, honest and joyful communication;
- Improved working conditions and greater team satisfaction;
- Expanded networks of local partners, schools and volunteers;
- Partnerships with companies and long-term project partners;
- A dedicated administrative team member;
- Optimised systems for financial, task and project management;
- A system for monitoring calls for proposals;
- Templates for Erasmus+ project planning;
- An improved website and stronger recognition within the local community.

## 6.3. The Visit: What Happened in the Three Days

### 6.3.1. Day One: Understanding the Context and Challenges

The first day of the study visit began with light introductions of all participants before we moved into deeper work. This was the first study visit and, besides the case study of Čisteći medvjedići, it was also important for us to connect as a team.

We presented the holistic context of Čisteći medvjedići, mapping out who the decision makers are, what resources we rely on, and how our finances flow. We explored values, material resources, and especially the role of storytelling as a powerful cultural currency, the way we share our story to bring in volunteers, attract partners, and inspire support. We shared the story of Perica Štefan and how everything began with just one person starting cleanups on their own, soon joined by friends and family. Over time, this personal initiative grew into a citizens' movement and later into the organisation Čisteći medvjedići. It was a reminder that behind every NGO lies an authentic story.

This naturally led to the question: *What is your story? What is your authenticity? What do you want to share with the world?*

After presenting the holistic context, although the plan was slightly different, we naturally moved on to share the main challenges in our work. This moment laid the foundation for the next study visits and became the primary focus of all of them. In the end, it proved to be one of the most valuable methods developed within this project. These are the main challenges we identified:

- Lack of time and difficulty balancing work and personal life;
- Uncertainty of funding, with most income depending on unpredictable project approvals;
- Difficulty engaging young people, both as Erasmus+ participants and as local volunteers;
- Juggling two jobs at the same time;
- Blurred roles and questions around leadership transitions;
- Feeling disconnected from fieldwork due to too much administrative work;
- Struggles with motivation for cleanups, especially on weekends;
- Uncertainty of funding, with most income depending on unpredictable project approvals;
- A general sense of fatigue and the need to rekindle inspiration.

From the first day, the external perspective of partners proved very valuable. Their constant questions of “Why?” encouraged us to look deeper into both the holistic context and the real challenges we face in our work.

Instead of treating these as isolated challenges, we began to reframe them as quality-of-life statements, each pointing toward the kind of future we want to create.

The first day closed not with heavy discussions but with play. We went out for a game of laser tag and shared dinner afterwards. This was more than fun; it was a reminder that we are not just colleagues, but friends and teammates. Strengthening our relationships as people is part of strengthening our organisation.

### 6.3.2. Day Two: Digging into Challenges

On the second day, we chose four key challenges to go deeper into:

- Time and work-life balance;
- Lack of younger volunteers;
- Communication gaps within the team;
- Reduced motivation for cleanups.

Time quickly proved to be both a personal and a structural challenge. Should we grow the organisation by employing someone new? Or is it more about becoming smarter with tools, clearer with priorities, and honest about what we can handle? Ideas emerged: keeping time journals, trying out automation, and training ourselves in time management. But perhaps the strongest insight was that we often don't spend enough time with each other. Because most of us work from home, we sometimes don't even know what is happening in one another's lives beyond the job. It became clear that if we connect as people, as friends, we will naturally work better together.

A very important question also surfaced: what is the exact amount of money our current team needs to be happy and to work regeneratively? How many projects does that mean in real terms? By putting down the numbers clearly, we can also have our human and time capacities clear. Without that, growth just happens and often in degenerative ways.

When we turned to the question of youth engagement, the conversation deepened. Why do young people join? Why do they leave? We saw the need for fresh strategies: a stronger social media presence, more targeted digital outreach, and the creation of roles like youth ambassadors who can speak the language of their peers. This was not just about "getting more volunteers." It became a bigger question: how do we make our mission resonate with a new generation so that they want to make it their own?

What stood out on this day was our willingness to face hard truths. We acknowledged the tension between paid work and volunteer labour, the stress between earning money and staying true to our mission, and the hidden costs that fall on us when we give more than we can afford. It was not easy to say these things out loud, but naming them gave us space to imagine healthier ways forward.

### 6.3.3. Day Three: From Insight to Ideas

The third day was about turning insights into ideas. Appropriately, it began with a cleanup action: a live demonstration for our partners of what these actions actually look like in practice. As we picked up waste together, we also reflected on how to keep these actions meaningful.

The number of cleanups became a central question. Once again, we asked ourselves what the exact number of cleanup actions we truly want to organise is. In recent years, we have organised around fifty per year. Is that truly sustainable for us? If we continue chasing numbers without taking time to pause, do we risk losing meaning and motivation, both for ourselves and for our volunteers? We realised that fewer actions could actually have a greater impact. Alongside this came the idea of "cleanups for the soul", those special actions where the team and volunteers enjoy themselves and reconnect with why we started in the first place.

Communication was another important topic. We recognised that working more closely together cannot remain optional; it is a necessity. Weekly check-ins, shared working days, and clearer systems for storing and sharing information are not only organisational tools but ways of building trust and honesty within the team.

The study visit did not end with a list of problems to fix. After two days of discussing challenges, we shifted to another essential perspective: what is already working well? What are our strengths? In youth work, reflection is a key to learning, but we often forget to stop and celebrate what we do well. Our partners reminded us of this by sharing their observations. They pointed out our authentic story, strong media visibility, solid database, diverse funding, vast network of contacts, good reputation, and the fact that we work with friends. These are not small things. They are the foundations we can build upon to face our challenges.

The study visit reminded us that real progress does not come from showing results, but from sharing realities. It was not a space for performance but for learning together. Through open dialogue and mutual reflection, we saw that regeneration happens when we align our actions with purpose, when we connect as people, and when we find balance between doing and being.

## 6.4. After the Visit: From Insights to Actions

The three-day visit to Croatia was more than a reflection on challenges; it became a space for turning insights into direction. Together with our partners, we identified several areas where small but focused steps could make a real difference. These actions were not about fixing everything at once, but about creating a path toward more clarity, balance, and regeneration.

### Balancing time and work

Time proved to be one of our most pressing challenges, affecting projects, relationships, and motivation. We needed to understand where our time truly goes, protect buffer space, and make room for genuine connection within the team, not just task completion.

#### Action steps:

- Track time for four weeks by task category and review emerging patterns.
- Compare time spent with income and impact per activity to identify mismatches.
- Add a 20% buffer in planning so that life's unpredictability doesn't break the system.
- Schedule one shared in-person workday per week to rebuild rhythm and trust.

### Clarifying financial needs

Without precise numbers, growth happens by accident and often in degenerative ways. We needed to define the exact income required for the current team to live and work well, and then align the number and type of projects with that reality.

#### Action steps:

- Calculate the real monthly and annual budget for the current team, including gross pay, operations, and reserves.
- Translate that figure into the number and mix of projects needed across the year.
- Review the figures quarterly and adjust the pace or scope before burnout sets in.

### Engaging young volunteers

The goal was not simply to attract more volunteers, but to communicate in a way that resonates with young people so they want to make the mission their own. We needed clearer channels, relatable voices, and meaningful roles for youth involvement.

#### Action steps:

- Adapt social media communication for youth aged 18-25.
- Introduce a new ČM youth ambassador or representative for the younger audience.
- Strengthen partnerships in three to four Erasmus+ projects.
- Create a ČM Youth WhatsApp group for communication and engagement.

## Reframing cleanup actions

Chasing high numbers can drain meaning. Fewer actions carried out with more intention can bring back joy, deepen learning, and strengthen community bonds. We once again asked ourselves what the exact number of cleanup actions we genuinely want to organise is, and whether the current pace is truly sustainable for us.

### Action steps:

- Set an annual target that fits capacity (for example, 25-30 total) with a clear mix of community, school, municipal, and corporate actions.
- Define criteria for “cleanups for the soul” and schedule at least one each season.
- Add light gamification elements to cleanups to keep them engaging and playful.

## Strengthening communication

Good communication is not optional; it is infrastructure. We needed simple, repeatable routines and shared tools to ensure that information flows smoothly and relationships stay strong.

### Action steps:

- Introduce a 45-minute weekly check-in.
- Work together in person once a week.
- Hold creative brainstorming sessions.
- Organise teambuilding activities once or twice a year.

## 6.5. From Intention to Action: Reflections After Nine Months

Nine months after the study visit, we can see how many of the intentions we set have begun to take shape, some in small, almost invisible ways, others in bigger shifts that changed how we work.

Only a few weeks after the visit to Croatia, we received approval for one large project, and shortly after, two more were confirmed. Suddenly, we realised that all these projects needed to be implemented. This highlighted the unpredictability of applications: to ensure financial stability, we calculated that four approved projects were required, meaning we would need to apply for at least six. What we did not ask ourselves was what would happen if all six were approved. While many celebrated, we realised our capacities were insufficient. The question was no longer *if* we should hire a new person, but when it became a necessity.

This experience taught us that planning requires more than preparing for the worst-case scenario. We also need to prepare for the best-case scenario and remain flexible enough to adapt quickly when reality shifts. It pushed us to manage time more consciously and to track how we were spending our hours. This exercise revealed hidden time drains and helped us to say “no” when tasks did not fit our real capacities. We did not manage to automate everything, but small

steps, such as using templates for reports and weekly planning tools, which we call “Centralised project management”, have already saved energy. Working together in person one day each week brought back rhythm and connection, reminding us that collaboration is not only about tasks but about relationships.

With these changes, financial stability is no longer in question. For the first time, we defined the exact amount of money our team needs to work sustainably. Growth is no longer something that “just happens”; it is now a conscious choice. Still, project approvals remain unpredictable, but we are more experienced and aware, learning to live with both clarity and uncertainty.

We also made an essential change in our cleanup actions. Instead of aiming for 50 per year, we reduced the number to around 35-40. With fewer actions, we had more energy to make them meaningful. The idea of “cleanups for the soul” became real moments when both we and our volunteers could enjoy the experience rather than rush through it.

Our weekly check-ins, which we call the “Monday Check-In”, became a ritual. Beyond aligning on tasks, these meetings created space to understand better and listen to one another and to strengthen our relationships. We also started building clearer systems for storing and sharing information. It is not perfect yet, but the sense of alignment and trust is stronger than before.

Looking back, not every action step has been completed, and not every idea turned out the way we imagined. The approval of several large projects right after the study visit pushed us back into survival mode at times. Yet, the seeds planted during the visit continue to grow. Nine months later, we can feel that we are not only surviving, but slowly moving towards a more sustainable and regenerative way of working.

## 6.6. Reflection on the Chapter

*Use these questions to connect the ideas from this chapter with your own organisation's reality.*

### Reflection Questions:

1. What part of this story resonated most with your own organisation's journey?
2. How do you balance growth, funding, and team well-being in your work?
3. Which of your current practices could evolve from “sustainable” to “regenerative”?
4. What helps your team stay motivated and connected to its mission?
5. How do you include young people, especially those with fewer opportunities, in your activities?
6. What small steps could you take to strengthen your community and partnerships?

# **CASE STUDY: ACADEMY OF GROWTH E.V. (GERMANY)**

## **IN THIS CHAPTER:**

**7.1. INTRODUCING THE ORGANISATION**

**7.2. HOLISTIC CONTEXT OF ACADEMY OF GROWTH E.V.**

**7.3. STUDY VISIT IN GERMANY: LIVING THE QUESTIONS TOGETHER**

**7.4. AFTER THE VISIT: FROM INSIGHTS TO ACTIONS**

**7.5. FROM INTENTION TO ACTION: REFLECTIONS AFTER FOUR MONTHS**

**7.6. REFLECTION ON THE CHAPTER**

## 7.1. Introducing the Organisation

Academy of Growth e.V. is a young organisation rooted in rural Germany, where four people share their lives on a piece of land that doubles as a home, a project space, and a learning environment. Since its founding in 2022, the Academy has grown into a hub for permaculture-based education, youth exchanges, and regenerative living practices.

Our vision is simple: to create a meaningful life close to nature, where education, community, and sustainability come together. From hosting international projects to building compost piles and food forests, we combine the big picture with the everyday: muddy hands, spread-sheets, and shared meals.

In this case study, we share parts of our holistic context - a tool that helped us clarify the kind of life and impact we want to create. It also helped us recognise the unique strengths of our project: a DIY spirit, a close-knit team, a commitment to honest conversations, and a long-term vision for the land we steward.

We hope this insight into our journey inspires others to reflect on their own context, especially those working at the intersection of education, ecology, and community building.

### 7.1.1. Working with Fewer Opportunities Youth Through Permaculture

At Academy of Growth e.V., we believe that everyone deserves access to meaningful experiences in nature, community, and learning, especially those who've had fewer chances to do so. Our projects are designed with this principle in mind, creating inclusive spaces where young people with diverse backgrounds feel welcome, supported, and empowered.

Many of the youth who join our programs come from urban environments, face social or economic challenges, or are navigating personal transitions. Some have never pitched a tent, picked a tomato, or cooked in a group. Others may carry invisible burdens, such as stress, uncertainty about their future, or a lack of support structures. For us, these are not limitations, but invitations: to create environments where new stories can begin.

Permaculture offers a powerful framework for this work. Its ethics *care for the Earth*, *care for people*, and *fair share* speak directly to the kind of world we want to co-create with youth. The garden becomes a classroom, but also a metaphor: for growing resilience, restoring connection, and finding purpose.

During our study visit, partners highlighted how strongly this vision is reflected in the Academy's daily life. The simplicity of living in nature, the DIY spirit of building things together, and the culture of honest feedback and celebration create an atmosphere where young people feel they can be themselves. It's not just about learning skills; it's about being part of something real.

Our holistic context reinforces this approach. We've made a conscious choice to live slowly and meaningfully, to build systems that support well-being and learning, and to create spaces that are physically and emotionally safe. We schedule buffer time into our programs, hold reflection circles, and ensure there's always a balance between challenge and rest. We celebrate progress, not perfection.

In practice, this means:

- Hosting youth exchanges where the group builds something tangible together: a garden bed, a compost system, a shared meal;
- Supporting participants through structured yet flexible schedules, where there's room for expression, slowness, and play;
- Working with experienced facilitators who can hold space for emotional processes and intercultural learning;
- Designing learning experiences that centre the body, the land, and the heart, not just the intellect.

The feedback we receive confirms the impact: for many, it's a first experience of feeling truly included, useful, and inspired. For some, it plants a seed that continues to grow long after the project ends.

Working with fewer opportunities for youth isn't a separate strategy; it's part of our core mission. It's embedded in how we live, how we grow food, how we build relationships, and how we define success. By combining permaculture, community living, and European mobility programs, we aim to offer not just access, but transformation.

## 7.2. Holistic Context of Academy of Growth e.V.

In this chapter, we share key elements from the holistic context of Academy of Growth e.V., a young, yet deeply rooted initiative in Kevelaer, Germany. Rather than presenting the entire document, we focus on specific components that helped us gain clarity about who we are, what we aim for, and how we want to live and work together - today and in the future.

This process helped us reflect on the multiple dimensions of sustainability and regeneration, far beyond financial metrics. It encouraged us to acknowledge what already works well and the areas where we still need to grow.

### Whole undermanagement

Academy of Growth e.V. is both a place and a community: a physical, land-based project and a living team of people sharing work, vision, and daily life. The core decision makers are four individuals who live and work on the land:

- Madleen Engelmann
- Marcus Hagmans
- Svenja Hagmans
- Thomas Hagmans.

The property is shared between private and organisational use. While part of the house is under a residential contract, the rest of the land is rented via a business agreement through Thomas's registered company. This space hosts educational projects, regenerative land work, and cultural initiatives.

The relationship with the landlords is based on mutual respect and clear communication. Every physical project or installation follows a transparent proposal process, ensuring both ecological integrity and future reversibility. This structure allows for creativity and security while

laying the foundation for a long-term vision, including the hope of securing a 20-30 year agreement from 2025 onward.

## Resource base

The Academy of Growth e.V. is supported by a broad and diverse resource base that combines practical infrastructure, natural ecosystems, community relationships, and personal dedication.

**Built infrastructure:** mobile shower and toilet systems, a large greenhouse, nature classroom, raised beds, a well-equipped workshop, event kitchen, and spaces to host up to 30 participants.

**Living systems:** a developing food forest, mature fruit trees, chickens, wildflower meadows, and composting areas.

**Mobility & tools:** several cars, trailers, wheel loaders, and storage solutions to manage logistics and land work.

**People & skills:** deep expertise in permaculture, facilitation, construction, education, and administration; a strong local and international network for support and collaboration.

**Digital & communication tools:** internet access, documentation systems, Erasmus+ project know-how, and creative content creation (e.g. social media, videos, storytelling).

More than the sum of these parts, what holds everything together is a shared culture of collaboration, experimentation, and care, with a strong DIY ethic and a long-term commitment to place.

## Quality of life statements

Our quality of life is not defined by how much we achieve, but by how aligned our everyday experience is with what truly matters to us. We reflected on the following aspirations:

- To feel healthy in body and mind, supported by clean food, fresh air, movement, and rest.
- To live with self-respect, honouring our needs and staying true to our values.
- To experience love and presence with our family and community.
- To enjoy life through play, humour, beauty, and celebration.
- To keep things simple, let go of unnecessary complexity.
- To feel free and inspired, creatively shaping our days and contributions.
- To be financially stable, so that we can make long-term decisions with clarity and autonomy.
- To be rooted in nature, in rhythm with the seasons and cycles of the land.

These statements serve as a compass, helping us align our decisions with the kind of life we want to live, not just in theory, but every day.

## Forms of production

To live the life we envision, we need to produce more than just income. We focus on several interrelated forms of "production":

Food & infrastructure: through regenerative gardening, foraging, and maintenance of basic systems (sanitation, shelter, water, electricity).

Income & projects: through youth exchanges, training courses, solidarity initiatives, and small entrepreneurial activities.

Time & energy: by creating space in our schedules for reflection, rest, joy, and family - not only for work.

Relationships: through mutual care, shared work, emotional support, and celebrations.

Knowledge & learning: through peer exchange, facilitation, seasonal planning, and non-formal education.

Contribution: by sharing our space and knowledge with others, locally and internationally, and regenerating the land we steward.

These forms of production are interwoven and, when balanced, support both personal and collective well-being.

## **Future resource base**

The final section of our holistic context describes what success looks like: not as a distant dream, but as if it is already happening. We divided it into two parts: how people behave and relate (behaviour & conduct), and how the land and infrastructure feel and function (landscape & property).

### **Behavior & conduct**

- People treat each other with care, honesty, and respect.
- Everyone contributes meaningfully and takes ownership of shared spaces.
- Conflicts are addressed with curiosity and compassion.
- Joy, rest, and rhythm are built into our shared life.
- Guests feel welcomed into something authentic and warm.
- We regularly reflect, adapt, and celebrate our growth.

### **Landscape & property**

- The land is vibrant, biodiverse, and well-cared-for.
- Food production is abundant and supports both our needs and education.
- The old barn is restored as a beautiful space for events, storage, and creativity.
- Paths, tents, and learning spaces are well-kept and welcoming.
- Tools and systems are organised and easy to use.
- Everything feels alive, simple, and intentional: a home that inspires others.

This vision serves as our long-term compass. It reminds us that sustainability is not a static goal but an ongoing process: one that includes joy, experimentation, reflection, and the courage to grow.

## 7.3. Study Visit in Germany: Living the Questions Together

### Hosted by Academy of Growth e.V. (Germany)

In March 2025, Academy of Growth e.V. welcomed the project partners to their land-based learning centre in Kevelaer, Germany. Nestled between garden beds, geodesic domes and chickens roaming free, we spent three days diving deep into the question: *What does a sustainable and regenerative future of organisations look like - not in theory, but in our daily decisions?*

Rather than filling the schedule with presentations, the visit was intentionally spacious, allowing the rhythm of nature and honest conversations to shape the flow. We focused on how to organise work in a way that honours energy, purpose, relationships, and the cycles of time. The visit became not just a study of organisational development, but a reflection on how we want to live and lead.

### 7.3.1. Day One: Looking at the Bigger Picture: Project Lifecycles and Decision-Making

We opened the visit by mapping out a full project lifecycle, not just the familiar parts - planning, doing, and reporting - but also the often-forgotten steps: saying "yes" or "no" with intention, celebrating what has been achieved, and caring for what has been built. The complete arc we explored was:

**Decision → Plan → Doing → Closing → Review → Celebration → Use → Maintenance → Enjoyment**

Each step holds value, yet in many NGO routines, the focus stays narrowly on implementation. We realised how much energy is lost when we skip or rush phases like proper closing or ongoing maintenance. These neglected steps can pile up, creating hidden stress. One insight was that celebration and appreciation are not extras; they are necessary to complete the cycle and make space for new beginnings.

A recurring theme was the importance of the initial decision: How do we choose what projects to pursue? At the Academy of Growth, Thomas shared a practical insight: passion can count as +10 points when evaluating an idea. Not everything has to make money. But when it comes to capacity and alignment, they use their Holistic Context to guide their choices, checking whether a new opportunity aligns with their deeper values, long-term vision, and quality of life.

We also discussed the challenge of saying "no", especially in grassroots settings where enthusiasm can outpace resources. A helpful tool was mentioned that allows scoring project opportunities based on criteria such as urgency, impact, passion, and financial return. Recreating such tools could support better clarity in early project stages.

We also reflected on personal dynamics. Thomas shared how initiating big projects without shared agreement at home had created tension in the past. Aligning early with Maddy (Madleen), especially on the "why now?" and "is this ours to do?", has become an essential part of their decision-making culture. We explored how shared leadership at home and in the organisation is often the invisible backbone of sustainability.

### 7.3.2. Day Two: Scaling at the Right Pace: Seasons, Priorities and Mental Load

On the second day, we focused on the challenges of scale, timelines, and mental load. Together, we listed all open projects on the land: from the geodome to the compost toilet to the pond idea. What became clear was a shared pattern: many projects are completed to 90-95%, but the final 5% lingers. These last steps, often small, slowly accumulate and take up disproportionate mental space.

We discussed how to shift from a never-ending “to-do list” to a “can-do list.” Instead of feeling behind, this mindset affirms the freedom to choose. The “can-do list” still includes non-negotiables; tasks essential for vision and functionality, but it offers a more regenerative framing. We realised that empowerment comes from choice, clarity, and rhythm.

A key insight was that life will always happen. Unexpected events, illness, and relational shifts are not obstacles but part of the terrain. The lesson? Plan with a buffer. Leave time and space for the unplanned. If our schedule is at 100%, there’s no room to adapt, which leads to burnout.

We explored seasonal living as an anchor. The Academy of Growth team now holds quarterly reflection and celebration rituals, aligned with the seasons. These meetings are a space to check in, re-vision, and pause before rushing into the next thing. It’s a practice of slowing down to move forward more wisely.

### 7.3.3. Day Three: Closing Loops and Looking Forward: Regenerative Business Thinking

The final day focused on closing, letting go, and planting seeds for the future.

We began with a simple truth: unfinished things weigh heavily. Whether it’s tools left lying around after a project or a final report that sits unwritten for weeks, these “open loops” create a mental charge. The solution isn’t to rush; it’s to schedule closures, just like we schedule beginnings. We practised naming what’s left, mapping the time needed, and actually giving it space in the calendar. This shift allowed a collective exhale.

From here, we moved on to larger questions about financial sustainability and income diversification. What kind of infrastructure do we need to host high-quality winter retreats? What projects align with our land and values? What is the appropriate scale for us now, not in five years?

We mapped potential future directions: permaculture workshops, school collaborations, digital offerings, community-supported food systems, consultation services, and hybrid hosting models. The key takeaway was: start simple, move slow, build systems that reduce stress.

One challenge discussed honestly was the emotional speed of growth. The Academy of Growth had expanded rapidly, and while the results were visible, so were the costs. For many organisations, the advice would be to start on the side: build capacity while maintaining a secure income elsewhere, and know your personal numbers. What do you need to live well? What does your organisation need to function sustainably?

This led us into personal reflections on work-life balance. We created “lists of joy” reminders of dancing, festivals, nature days and real rest. Thomas and Maddy reflected on how even in the

service of a vision, life needs to be lived, not just built. Gardening, preserving food, enjoying the space: these aren't side notes; they are the point.

## 7.4. After the Visit: From Insights to Actions

The three-day visit to Academy of Growth e.V. offered more than learning: it provided first-hand insight into what it takes to build an organisation that grows not just in size, but in soul. Below is a synthesis of what emerged: key lessons and concrete next steps for teams ready to shift from reaction to regeneration.

### Redesigning the project lifecycle

We mapped out a full-circle project lifecycle:

**Decision → Planning → Doing → Closing → Review → Celebration → Use → Maintenance → Enjoyment**

Too often, organisations rush from one task to the next, bypassing closure, celebration, and ongoing care. This leaves behind mental clutter and unharvested value.

#### Action steps:

- Visualise your full project cycle: make each phase visible and name the responsibilities.
- Schedule intentional time for closing, review, and celebration after each project ends.
- Build maintenance into your routines, so what you create continues to serve.
- Honour the final steps; they carry deep emotional and cultural significance.

### Shifting from “to-do” to “can-do”

We reframed traditional task lists into Can-Do Lists, categorising actions as: Non-negotiables, Options, and Joy-based tasks. This shift grounds work in choice and values, making space for agency and aliveness instead of pressure and guilt.

#### Action steps:

- Create a “Can-Do” list that reflects your current energy and long-term priorities.
- Review and revise it regularly – weekly or seasonally – to stay aligned.
- Include joy-based actions in your planning. Joy is not a distraction; it's fuel.
- Use the Can-Do list format in your team to replace “shoulds” with shared possibilities.

### Saying yes (and no) with integrity

Every “yes” carries a cost. We practised pausing before committing, asking if a proposal aligns with vision, timing, resources, and passion. We also acknowledged that +10 points of excitement can be reason enough, even if the project won't bring direct income.

**Action steps:**

- Develop a checklist or scorecard to evaluate new opportunities.
- Include passion, timing, resource availability, and values alignment.
- Reflect together before committing; shared understanding reduces regret.
- Track red flags and green flags from past decisions to build your decision wisdom.

**Finishing what we start**

We noticed a common bottleneck: the last 10% of projects often remain unfinished, not because it's too difficult, but because urgency has faded. These open loops silently drain our attention and create disconnection.

**Action steps:**

- Make a list of all projects that are 80-95% done.
- Designate "completion days" and make them enjoyable: music, food, teamwork.
- Give emotional closure the same weight as logistical tasks.
- Celebrate completions, small or big, to reinforce a culture of finishing.

**Living with the seasons**

A regenerative rhythm follows nature. We now hold seasonal reflection rituals every three months to review, celebrate, and realign.

This structure supports mental resilience and team synchronisation.

**Action steps:**

- Mark four seasonal check-ins in your calendar: Spring, Summer, Autumn, Winter.
- Reflect on what blossomed, what's fading, and what wants to emerge next.
- Include joy and nature in the process: meals, music, walks, or small ceremonies.
- Use these gatherings to pause, feel proud, and re-choose your direction.

**Planning with realism, not optimism**

We recognised that some past overwhelm came from scaling too fast. The lesson: dream big, but act at a scale appropriate to your current capacity.

This includes honestly checking time, finances, and people, and building with feedback from those closest to the vision.

**Action steps:**

- Before launching a project, map your real capacity: time, energy, skills.
- Involve your team, family and partners in decision-making.
- Plan with 20% buffer time to accommodate life's unpredictability.
- Grow slow and steady: deep roots first, then branches.

## Building financial foundations

Sustainability includes financial clarity. We explored diverse income streams: fee-based, institutional, public, and donations, as a way to match values with viable business models.

### Action steps:

- Know your numbers: personally and organisationally. What's enough to thrive?
- Start small: offer one service and learn from it before expanding.
- Document your past work to attract new partnerships.
- Make finance a team topic: not a taboo. It's a shared responsibility.

## Creating joy and rest by design

Regeneration requires joy. Instead of leaving celebration and rest to chance, we now design for it. We each created "joy lists", practical reminders of what energises us, and committed to integrating these into our schedules.

### Action steps:

- Ask: what makes you feel most alive? Create a list and share it with your team.
- Schedule joy and rest like you schedule work. It's just as vital.
- Celebrate small milestones. Rituals build team connection and momentum.

## Simple systems that work

Chaos comes from unclear systems, but over-systemisation can also paralyse. We now focus on a few, simple systems that support us and evolve as we grow.

### Action steps:

- Choose 2-3 tools you love and actually use. Ditch the rest.
- Schedule quarterly digital and physical cleanups.
- Assign a "home" for everything: tools, documents, responsibilities.
- Let your systems reflect your way of working, not the other way around.

This chapter is an invitation: to slow down, reflect, and reimagine how organisations can work with life rather than against it. What you build today is shaped by how you work tomorrow. Let's build wisely. Let's build well. Let's build for the long run.

## 7.5. From Intention to Action: Reflections After Four Months

Four months have passed since the study visit, and while the intensity of daily life and ongoing projects hasn't slowed down, something within us has shifted.

One of the most essential action points we implemented was carving out space for joy, not as a reward after work, but as an essential part of our lives. We said “yes” to Summerjam, a music festival we love but hadn't attended in years. We also revived our tradition of hosting a “Share Your Passion” weekend with friends, using the very same setup we've built over time for international groups. For two years, we had put these joyful gatherings on hold in the name of responsibility and efficiency. Looking back, we now see clearly that some of the worst long-term decisions we made were to sacrifice the joy of living to keep working.

We've also started saying “no” with more clarity and more confidence. We turned down new opportunities that didn't align with our Quality of Life statements. We're learning to protect our energy and prioritise finishing what we've started rather than endlessly expanding. The invisible weight of unfinished projects is finally decreasing, step by step. The greenhouse and the shower trailer, two major infrastructure pieces, are now complete. That's a huge relief, both practically and emotionally.

At the same time, we've taken a serious look at the long-term future. The question of what will happen with the Winterstall barn, a key part of the property, is becoming increasingly urgent. We've begun brainstorming and dreaming up solutions that could secure our long-term vision while respecting the landowners' intentions.

Another layer of this shift is personal: within our core team and especially between Maddy and Thomas, there is now even more conversation about our shared values, boundaries, and when to say “yes” or “no”.

One of the most practical tools we've integrated is “parking” tasks through scheduling, giving future chores a clear time slot so they no longer take up mental space. This mental decluttering has proven powerful. If we know we will write a report in eight weeks, we don't need to carry it in our heads today. We're slowly applying this logic to more and more areas of life and work.

Yet, challenges remain. Right now, as I write this, another group of 30 people is preparing to travel to our home in two days. It's peak project season, and while we're proud of what we're holding, the truth is: there's very little time left for deep reflection. The very practice we advocate: pausing, reviewing, and realigning, is the one we still struggle to integrate fully during high season. But we know it's essential. That insight alone is shaping how we want to plan 2026: with more space, more buffers, more breath.

We also see how much the systems we're building now will create more freedom in the future. It's not just about finishing old projects; it's about designing a more sustainable life. That includes setting clearer standards for tidiness and functionality. With the sheer amount of stuff we use to run these programs, things pile up fast. One item out of place becomes ten. We're looking into ways to reduce this friction: not to control everything, but to create ease.

We're tired. Emotionally and physically exhausted, to be honest. Hosting three international projects in one year, while maintaining and improving a complex space, is no small feat. In some areas, we still operate from a degenerative place. That's our truth. But it's also what makes the Holistic Context so valuable: it doesn't judge; it guides. It helps us see where the red flags are showing up, where the green ones are growing, and where we need to keep walking toward the life we truly want.

Change is slow. It's uncomfortable. But it's happening, in small decisions, deep conversations, finished greenhouses, and joyful music festivals. And that, we believe, is how transformation becomes real.

## 7.6. Reflection on the Chapter

*Use these questions to connect the ideas from this chapter with your own organisation's reality.*

### Reflection Questions:

1. Which part of the Academy of Growth's story mirrors your organisation's current stage or struggles?
2. What is your "enough number" (personal and organisational), and how does it guide your next funding and project choices, your community and partnerships?
3. Where do you skip phases in the project lifecycle (Closing, Review, Celebration, Use, Maintenance, Enjoyment), and what is the cost?
4. Which projects are 80-95% finished, and what would it take to close the last 5-20% this month?
5. In what concrete ways do you design for joy and rest - not as rewards, but as fuel for regeneration?

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# EVALUATION OF ALL STUDY VISITS

## IN THIS CHAPTER:

**8.1. POWER OF STUDY VISITS**

**8.2. COMMON INSIGHTS FROM ALL VISITS**

**8.3. CONCLUSION: LESSONS AND TOOLS THAT WORKED**

**8.4. REFLECTION ON THE CHAPTER**

**8.5. TURNING INSIGHTS INTO SOLUTIONS**

## 8.1. Power of Study Visits

In chapter 4, we described the study visit method, why we chose it, its structure and its unique features. Yet no description can fully capture how valuable this method proved to be for each organisation involved. As we noted earlier, one of the biggest challenges for many NGOs is operating in survival mode. The study visit created space to pause, reflect, and look at where we are and where we want to go. What may seem like a simple exercise turned out to be transformative, because too often organisations are consumed by urgent daily tasks and forget the less urgent but essential aspects: relationships, systems, and practices that lead to long-term results and regeneration.

For example, after our first study visit, hosted by Čistecí medvjedići, we felt overwhelmed by everything that had happened over those three days. But once we had some time to reflect, what stayed with us was clarity: clarity about our current position and the next steps we need to take. That gave us the confidence to move forward with more focus and purpose.

A key aspect of this method lies in its honesty and openness. As described in chapter 4.2, the regenerative study visit is not about showing perfection but about sharing reality as it truly is. The host organisation invites others into its daily work, with all its challenges, doubts, and questions, and together we explore what can be learned from them. This openness transforms the visit from a presentation into a shared learning process. When we show our weaknesses, we also show trust, and that trust becomes the foundation for growth.

Through this process, organisations do not just exchange experiences; they build relationships based on empathy and mutual understanding. The power of the study visit lies exactly there in the combination of honesty, reflection, and collective support. It turns challenges into opportunities and makes the partnership a space where both organisations and individuals can grow, regenerate, and rediscover purpose.

## 8.2. Common Insights from All Visits

Through all three study visits, we noticed several common insights that have shaped how we see our organisations and the work we do.

One of the strongest realisations was the importance of taking time for reflection. In our everyday work, we often rush from one deadline to another, without pausing to see the bigger picture. These visits gave us the rare chance to slow down, observe and think more strategically about where we are and where we want to go.

We also recognised how central relationships are to our sustainability. Again and again, we saw that trust, openness and supportive partnerships matter just as much as funding or formal structures. When the bonds within our teams and with our volunteers are strong, we feel more resilient and able to adapt to challenges. At the same time, we realised that passion alone is not enough. We need clearer systems and structures to support our growth. Many of us have experienced rapid expansion that increased our workload, and the visits reminded us of the vital importance of efficient communication, planning, and administration for long-term sustainability and moving towards regeneration.

Finances were also a recurring theme. While we have made progress in diversifying our funding sources, the unpredictability of project approvals continues to cause stress and uncertainty. We see that building financial sustainability must go hand in hand with caring for our teams' well-being.

Finally, the visits confirmed the importance of engaging young people meaningfully. Although we have succeeded in bringing many young volunteers into our work, we know how challenging it can be to keep them motivated. Approaches such as peer learning, creativity and giving space for their voices make a real difference.

### 8.3. Conclusion: Lessons and Tools that Worked

Throughout all three study visits, we used a standard set of methods and tools that proved effective regardless of the country, culture, or organisation size. Some of these tools will have already been explored in detail, or we will explore them in later chapters, but here is a short overview of what consistently worked.

Holistic context helped organisations reflect on their values, resource base, and long-term direction. It was especially useful for understanding where we currently stand and in which direction we are heading.

Reflection and support circle created a safe space for feedback and shared learning. They encouraged vulnerability and trust.

Challenge mapping supported teams in identifying and prioritising challenges, helping them shift toward sustainability and regeneration, moving from a sense of overwhelm to clarity.

Co-creating action steps replaced advising with a collaborative process in which ideas and next steps were shaped together in realistic, context-based ways.

Intention and presence reminded us that not rushing the process and staying grounded and present made space for deeper conversations and reflection.

Looking back across all three study visits, some common lessons stand out clearly. The first is that no organisation has it all figured out, and that is perfectly fine. Each of us carries unique strengths and faces our own struggles. The value of the process was never about fixing each other, but about creating a mirror. Sometimes, simply seeing our own situation reflected from another angle was enough to spark meaningful change.

Another powerful lesson was how much we learned about ourselves while visiting others. Observing a different way of working made us reflect on our own practices, sometimes with pride, sometimes with discomfort, but always with growth. The outside perspective proved to be a gift. When someone comes with care, curiosity and no hidden agenda, they help us notice what we had overlooked. This is the real value of structured peer support.

We also realised that slowness is not a luxury but a necessity. In our everyday reality, we are often caught in urgency, rushing from one task to another. The study visits gave us permission to pause, reflect, and think more deeply: not only about projects but also about our purpose, well-being, and long-term sustainability.

Finally, doing this together reminded us that we are not alone. There are many of us working in different contexts, but facing similar tensions and questions. Connection, reflection, and support make a big difference and are key ingredients for a sustainable, or even regenerative, future for organisations.

## 8.4. Reflection on the Chapter

*Use these questions to connect the ideas from this chapter with your own organisation's reality.*

### Reflection Questions:

1. What was the most meaningful insight you gained from all the study visits presented here?
2. How did witnessing other organisations change the way you see your own?
3. Which practices or ideas do you want to apply?
4. How did this process influence your understanding of sustainability and regeneration?
5. How can you keep this spirit of reflection and shared learning in your organisation?

## 8.5. Turning Insights into Solutions

Every study visit closed with a harvest: a circle where observations, lessons, and ideas were gathered while they were still fresh. But the real value only appeared when these insights were translated into everyday practice. Transfer is the moment where reflection becomes direction, where a note in a notebook becomes a change in a calendar, a budget, a partnership agreement, or a way of deciding. What mattered was never the size of the action: it was the consistency of small, well-placed shifts. Change began where awareness met rhythm.

We also learned that solutions rarely arrive fully formed. They emerge through an ongoing loop of *observation* → *action* → *feedback* → *adaptation*. Seen through a regenerative lens, each insight is a seed: it asks, "How can this improve the well-being of people, the resilience of our organisation, and the health of our wider community?"

This is why transfer cannot stay abstract. It must touch the five places where organisations either gain strength or leak energy. First, insights need to make money: we align ideas with real numbers so stability grows instead of stress (Chapter 9.1 Financial Stability). Second, insights need to meet time and energy: we protect human rhythms so impact is sustainable (Chapter 9.2 Work-Life Balance). Third, insights need to meet relationships: we turn goodwill into clear roles, timelines, and agreements that can flex when life happens (Chapter 9.3 Partnerships). Fourth, insights need to meet choice: we adopt a shared way of saying "yes", "no", or "redesign it," so opportunities strengthen our mission rather than scatter it (Chapter 9.4 Decision-Making). And finally, insights need to meet inclusion: we design projects that allow young people with fewer

opportunities to enter easily, participate meaningfully, and grow through tangible contributions (Chapter 9.5 Inclusive Project Design).

In other words, this chapter closes the learning loop of the study visits and opens the practice loop of organisational life. What follows in Chapter 9 is a practical toolkit to carry your harvest forward: how to resource it (9.1), pace it (9.2), collaborate around it (9.3), choose it wisely (9.4), and make it accessible to all young people (9.5).



# SOLUTIONS

## IN THIS CHAPTER:

9.1. FINANCIAL STABILITY

9.2. WORK-LIFE BALANCE: A CORNERSTONE OF REGENERATIVE ORGANISATIONS

9.3. PARTNERSHIPS AS FOUNDATIONS FOR REGENERATION

9.4. DECISION-MAKING

9.5. INCLUSIVE PROJECT DESIGN: OPENING THE DOOR FOR YOUNG PEOPLE WITH FEWER OPPORTUNITIES

## 9.1. Financial Stability

Financial stability is one of the foundations of a sustainable organisation. Without it, even the most passionate teams can quickly become exhausted or lose direction. For us, financial stability is not just about having enough money for today. It is about creating the conditions that allow us to plan, grow and take care of both our mission and our people.

Through this project and our past experience, we identified four key lessons that are essential for financial stability:

1. Knowing your number
2. Diversification of income
3. Long-term financial planning
4. Financial buffer or Plan B

### Knowing your number

One of the most overlooked aspects of financial stability is clarity. Knowing your number means understanding exactly how much money your organisation needs to function in a healthy, balanced way. It is not just about covering expenses, but about recognising the income level that allows your team to work with focus, well-being, and creativity rather than under pressure and fatigue.

This awareness helps organisations move from survival mode to conscious planning. When you know your number, you can make decisions with confidence, align projects with real capacity, and avoid the trap of overcommitment. It becomes easier to say “yes” to the right opportunities and no to those that lead to burnout.

### Diversification of income

One of the clearest lessons we learned is that relying on a single source of funding is risky. For example, Erasmus+ projects offer significant opportunities, but they also depend on competitive, unpredictable approval processes. Čisteći medvjedići, for instance, built resilience by combining local and national grants, Erasmus+ projects, partnerships with schools and municipal committees, as well as collaborations with companies. Each individual source may be small, but together they form a stronger safety net that reduces dependency and provides the organisation with greater stability.

### Long-term financial planning

Good planning is the backbone of financial sustainability. Since project results often take between two and six months to be announced, we learned to think and plan ahead. In practice, this means that our financial vision is always at least six months to a year into the future. Long-term planning allows us to anticipate possible gaps, prepare for them, and ensure that ongoing activities can continue even during uncertain times. It also helps us align financial decisions with our strategic goals rather than being reactive to short-term challenges.

Longer projects or multi-annual frameworks, such as an Erasmus+ accreditation, can provide an additional layer of stability. They allow organisations to rely on predictable funding over

several years, reduce the stress of constant applications, and give more space to focus on quality and innovation rather than survival. When available, these opportunities should be a core part of financial planning.

### Financial buffer or Plan B

Because projects are never guaranteed, we realised the importance of having a financial buffer. This means setting aside funds from approved projects to cover potential gaps if another project is not funded. In some cases, it also means identifying alternative funding streams or scaling activities to match available resources. The buffer does not need to be large, but it needs to be intentional. It provides a cushion that helps reduce stress, protects the core team, and ensures continuity of essential activities.

At the same time, financial stability is not only about income. It is also about how we manage the resources we have. Transparent accounting, realistic budgeting, and careful monitoring give us the clarity we need to make wise decisions. Just as important is the link between financial and social sustainability. We realised that more funds can sometimes create more workload and stress. True stability means finding the balance between financial growth and our team's well-being.

#### Reflection Questions:

*Use these questions to connect the ideas from this chapter with your own organisation's reality.*

1. How clear are you about your organisation's real financial needs?
2. Where does most of your income come from, and how secure are those sources?
3. Do your current projects reflect your mission or mostly follow available funding?
4. How balanced is the link between your team's well-being and your financial planning?
5. What could you simplify, diversify, or stop doing to strengthen stability?
6. Who could you partner with to create more resilient and long-term funding?
7. What would financial regeneration, not just sustainability, look like for you?

## 9.2. Work-Life Balance: A Cornerstone of Regenerative Organisations

Work-life balance is not a perk; it is a structural pillar for any organisation that wants to last, evolve, and inspire. Passion cannot carry a team if energy, time, and attention are continually overstretched. When balance is built into how we work, people think more clearly, trust grows, and the projects we start are completed. From our study visits and shared practice, we learned that balance protects creative energy and decision quality; that joy, rest, and relationships are legitimate outputs of work; that recurring crises usually point to system design rather than individual failure; that open loops quietly drain capacity until they are closed; that clear criteria

make “yes” and “no” decisions more honest; and that simple structures and steady rhythms make energy renewable.

### **Why balance is non-negotiable**

Regeneration begins with people. If those who hold the organisation are exhausted or permanently behind, the system is unwell, regardless of how noble the mission may be. Balance means protecting creative energy, making room for relationships and strategic thinking, and integrating life events, such as illness, grief, and celebration, rather than ignoring them. When this equilibrium is neglected, the costs ripple across the whole: staff turnover, frayed communication, unfinished projects, blurred boundaries, financial stress, and lost trust.

### **From recurring problems to system shifts**

Many of our sector’s struggles repeat themselves: burnout, unclear roles, deadline sprints, and difficulty saying “no”. The shift came when we stopped treating each symptom in isolation and adjusted the conditions that kept producing them. Burnout was not only too many hours; it was the absence of planned downtime, shared workload agreements, and scheduled joy. Some teams began to include “joy time” in their calendar: festivals, creative weekends, social rituals to reset the year’s rhythm. Unfinished projects had accumulated for years; instead of launching new ideas, teams decided to finish what was started, made a visible list of open loops, assigned ownership, and checked progress regularly. Saying “yes” to everything had looked like growth; now opportunities are filtered through the holistic context, and those that do not support long-term quality of life and vision are declined, even when they look good on paper. Financial stress often arose from trying to do too much with limited capacity; the response was to reduce volume, prioritise better-funded programmes, and pilot small diversification steps such as consulting, space rental, or workshops. Pace and overload improved when time for reflection was scheduled, buffer weeks were placed between projects, and collaborations were chosen more carefully. The lesson was simple: our problems were not random; they were designed into our systems, and they can be redesigned.

### **Structural shifts that create space**

Across the visits, several structural practices consistently created room for well-being and reliable output. Seasonal reviews aligned work with natural rhythms: winter for vision and rest, spring for planning, summer for implementation, autumn for harvest and reflection. Whole cycle project thinking restored neglected phases by making closing, review, enjoyment, use, and maintenance part of the plan, not afterthoughts. Decision frameworks grounded in the holistic context and team dialogue prevented fear- or habit-based commitments. Externalising the mental load through shared calendars and simple task trackers reduced cognitive strain. Planning at no more than 80% capacity created a buffer against the unexpected. Clarifying roles and ownership shifted responsibility from a centre to a shared field, keeping energy renewable.

### **Cultural practices that sustain energy**

Structure works best when culture supports it. Teams that named personal and shared “joy lists” and placed those activities into weekly rhythms reported more ease and motivation. Simple celebration rituals: meals, storytelling, creative retrospectives, closed chapters and marked

seasons. Unplugged time established clear digital boundaries through phone-free days or weekends. Regular emotional check-ins brought people's real state into the room before tasks, building trust and empathy. None of these practices was about productivity for its own sake; they were about remaining human together.

## Designing a regenerative rhythm

We distilled six pillars that hold a regenerative rhythm. Vision is revisited regularly, so direction stays alive rather than assumed. Structure is kept clear and realistic to reduce guesswork and stress. Reflection returns each season to help the team learn, release, and adjust course. Celebration honours milestones, large and small, so work completes emotionally as well as practically. Boundaries set limits for meetings, tools, and working time so attention can be recovered. Joy makes deliberate room for music, creativity, connection, and beauty each week, because these are not rewards after work but essential ingredients of good work.

## Conclusion

If we want organisations that endure and lives that feel worth living, we must stop treating exhaustion as normal. Work-life balance is not the opposite of impact; it is the condition for it. Let us build not only organisations that function but places where people can live, love, and grow together.

### Reflection Questions:

*Use these questions and the task to connect the ideas from this chapter with your own organisation's reality.*

1. Which repeating strain in your team hints at a design issue rather than an individual one?
2. Which two structural changes this quarter - such as seasonal reviews or buffer weeks - would most reduce overload?
3. Which open loops could you close in the next month to free the most attention?
4. What criteria will help you decline opportunities that do not serve your long-term quality of life and vision?
5. How will you schedule joy, celebration, and unplugged time so they become part of the system rather than afterthoughts?

### Reflection task: Green and red flags

This reflection task helps your team explore what supports balance and what disrupts it. It can be done individually or together as a team.

#### Step 1: Green Flags (10 min)

Each person writes a short list of activities, habits, or practices that help them feel balanced, energised and well. These should reflect personal values and meaningful routines, such as walking, cooking, reading, spending time outdoors, connecting with loved ones or having quiet time.

After writing, the team shares a few items. This exchange often brings new ideas, so everyone can add anything they found inspiring.

**Step 2: Red Flags (10 min)**

Each person writes a list of signs that signal imbalance, such as constant fatigue, irritability, skipping meals, lack of free time or difficulty sleeping.

The team again shares several examples and takes a moment to recognise patterns that resonate with their own experience.

**Step 3: Weekly Check-In (5 min)**

Teams or individuals review their lists at the end of each week. This small routine helps teams notice changes early, protect their well-being, and plan the upcoming week more intentionally.

The goal of this tool is to strengthen awareness, support healthier rhythms and create the conditions for long-term, balanced work.

## 9.3. Partnerships as Foundations for Regeneration

The foundation of this project was an Erasmus+ KA210 Small-Scale Partnership. On paper, this framework focuses on cooperation among a small number of organisations, capacity building, and the exchange of practices. In reality, partnership became far more than a contractual arrangement: it became our method for learning, our mirror for reflection, and our testing ground for resilience.

### The intention behind our partnership

When this project began, three organisations came together: Čisteći medvjedići from Croatia, Re-Green from Greece, and Academy of Growth e.V. from Germany. The idea was co-developed by Juraj (Čisteći medvjedići), Thomas (Academy of Growth), and Kayil (then leading volunteer coordinator at Re-Green).

Our intention was simple, but ambitious:

- To build each other's capacity through the exchange of knowledge and practices;
- To create a space for peer reflection and honest feedback;
- To deepen our mutual understanding of how different organisations work;
- To take practical steps towards long-term sustainability;
- To hold trust, curiosity, and shared values as the glue of the partnership.

The guiding question was: *What does a sustainable organisation look like - and how can we help each other get there?*

### Partnerships as mirrors

One of the most powerful lessons from this project was that partners act as mirrors. They reflect not only our strengths, but also our blind spots. They help us realise which of our "normal" ways of working are actually specific choices, and sometimes limiting ones.

This dynamic only works when relationships are rooted in honesty and mutual respect. At times, it felt vulnerable to share challenges: unfinished projects, financial stress, or lack of

boundaries, but those moments were the most valuable. They created trust and opened the door for growth.

## Learning from different contexts

The diversity of our partnership enriched our learning. Each organisation brought its own context:

- Čisteći medvjedići: urban environmental activism, volunteer mobilisation, and youth education through cleanup actions.
- Re-Green: land-based sustainability, permaculture, and holistic practices.
- Academy of Growth: building systems for long-term resilience on a land-based site in rural Germany.

Stepping into each other's realities made clear how context shapes priorities. Where one organisation struggled with visibility, another faced the burden of too much growth too fast. Where one was fighting for financial diversification, another was learning to slow down and embed celebration. Each of us borrowed and adapted insights from the others, while staying rooted in our own realities.

## When life happens: lessons from re-green

No chapter on partnerships would be complete without naming the challenges. During the preparation of this project, one of the co-founders of Re-Green tragically passed away. Later, the remaining co-owner announced her decision to sell the land. This left the organisation's future uncertain. Out of respect and solidarity, we decided to keep Re-Green as a partner and even included the potential new owner in early discussions. Our intention was to give this more challenging version of collaboration a chance.

But over time, it became clear that you cannot give a project to someone who has not dreamed it, planned it, and embedded it into their life. The new realities at Re-Green simply did not align with the scale and timing of our shared project. Eventually, the project was finalised by Čisteći medvjedići and the Academy of Growth.

This experience underlined an important truth: partnerships are living systems. They evolve with people's lives, land, and circumstances. Respect means not only supporting each other in difficult times, but also recognising when collaboration in its original form is no longer possible.

## Three core lessons for partnerships

From this journey, three lessons stand out as essential for anyone entering small-scale partnerships:

### 1. Clear expectations from the start

Clarity is everything. Money, roles, and activities must be agreed upon early and documented, not just discussed in a call that can later be forgotten. Budget distribution, responsibilities, and timelines should be signed and visible to all. This is especially crucial when one organisation serves as the coordinating body and holds the legal responsibility before the National Agency. While hierarchies are built into the Erasmus+ framework, clarity and transparency can prevent tensions and mistrust.

The same applies to project activities. What may seem obvious to one partner can be imagined very differently by another. Investing time to ensure everyone is truly on the same page is worth the effort, because misunderstandings may only surface a year later, when the work is already in motion.

## 2. Realistic capacity and aligned vision

It is almost impossible to hand over a project to someone who was not part of its original dreaming and planning. Our experience with Re-Green made this painfully clear. Even a project of great value will not fit if it does not match the partner's current reality.

Before committing, each organisation needs to ask:

- Do we have the capacity (time, energy, infrastructure) to hold this?
- Are our circumstances stable enough to sustain it?
- Does this project fit within our long-term vision and context?

A quick check-in with each partner's Holistic Context can help reveal whether visions align or whether hidden gaps might cause problems later.

## 3. Clear roles, deadlines, and task distribution

Clarity doesn't stop at the beginning. During implementation, clear roles and timelines are essential. Everyone should know what needs to be done, by whom, and by when - and, equally important, why it matters. Ambiguity creates frustration. When roles are shared openly and tasks are distributed fairly, partnerships grow stronger and trust deepens. Without this, the burden often falls back onto the coordinator, recreating hierarchy rather than fostering collaboration.

## Partnerships as tools for regeneration

Looking back, we see that partnerships are not just about delivering a funded project. They are ecosystems. When built with trust, clarity, and shared rhythm, they can become transformational alliances that outlast individual projects. Partnerships invite us to move from "funding cooperation", collaborating only for the sake of grants, to genuine co-creation. They challenge us to slow down, reflect, and align. And when they work well, they multiply resilience, opening possibilities none of us could have realised on our own.

## Practical tips for building meaningful partnerships

*Use these inputs to connect the ideas from this chapter with your own organisation's partnership reality.*

- Start with values, not tasks: Before logistics, make sure visions and principles align.
- Write it down: Budgets, roles, and agreements should be documented and signed.
- Check capacity honestly: Each partner must assess if they truly have the time, energy, and infrastructure for the project.
- Visit each other in person: Nothing replaces the insights you get from seeing how another organisation really works.
- Clarify roles and timelines early: Define who does what, by when, and why it matters.
- Leave room for emergence: Not everything can be planned; flexibility is essential.

- Reflect regularly: Hold mid-project check-ins, not just final evaluations.
- Be transparent about limits: Saying “no” when you cannot deliver is better than over-promising.
- Acknowledge hierarchy: Coordinators carry more responsibility; name this openly and balance it with fairness.
- Celebrate together: Partnerships are not only about work; build joy and appreciation into the collaboration.

## 9.4. Decision-Making

Decision-making is not a moment; it's a way of seeing. New invitations arrive with excitement attached: funding calls, collaborations, a clever pilot idea. Before we move, we read them through the lenses we've been polishing throughout this guidebook. That is how choices become regenerative in practice: aligned with our direction, rooted in our holistic context, honest about money, paced for human energy, and held in real partnership.

### Stage 1: Direction of travel: from “Can we do it?” to “What does it grow?”

The first reading is directional: does this opportunity push us along the spectrum from degeneration through sustainability toward regeneration? Degenerative choices look productive at first and then quietly drain us: more stress, hidden volunteer hours, a calendar that fills up while purpose thins. Sustainable choices keep things running, but often plateau. Regenerative choices create surplus: skills deepen, soil (literal or cultural) improves, trust compounds, and systems get easier the next time. Ask what this decision will leave behind in six months that makes the next six months simpler. If the likely outcome is depletion masked as momentum, pause. If the likely outcome is capacity - people more resourced, processes clearer, relationships stronger - we are facing a regenerative “yes.” This spectrum is not a morality test; it is a tool for honest seeing. Most teams sit in all three places at once. The point is to notice where this decision lands and to redesign it until the pattern tends toward surplus.

We also stay wary of the “funded = good” reflex. Funding can prop up degenerative patterns just as easily as it can enable renewal. If the design relies on invisible sacrifice (even “just this time”), we are borrowing from the future. The regenerative filter asks: “What becomes easier, richer, quieter (in a good way) after we do this? What new capability or community fabric will still be there if the budget disappears?” If we can name that surplus concretely, we are moving in the right direction.

## **Stage 2: Holistic context: decisions that fit who we are (and who we're becoming)**

The holistic context keeps urgency in its place. It asks us to hold the whole: who decides and who is affected (the “whole undermanagement”), which resources we touch across the eight forms of capital, what quality of life we have committed to protect, and the future resource base we are actively cultivating. A proposal is then read against this living frame: does it nourish our purpose or pull us away? Who benefits, and where might we be hiding the cost? Does it strengthen the future landscape: social, cultural, ecological, that we want to inhabit ten, fifty, two hundred years from now? When we test a choice this way, we reject impressive offers that make the organisation poorer in less visible currencies (time, trust, joy, attention) and we redesign good offers so they actually fit our context.

Treat the context as a practice, not a file. Before a commitment, identify: who holds veto, who carries the work, which capitals are impacted, and what behaviours we must embody to remain credible in our community. Decisions made in “firefighting mode” usually look rational on paper and still push us into degenerative loops. Decisions made in context feel calmer in the body: they are coherent, not just feasible. As teams deepen this habit, we notice better choices appearing almost automatically: fewer, better-timed projects; clearer forms of production; more honest boundaries around what we can sustainably hold.

## **Stage 3: Financial reality: stability is designed, not hoped for**

Financial honesty turns enthusiasm into something that lasts. Knowing your number - the real cost of operating well - makes decisions simpler: either the opportunity meets it (or we shape it until it does), or we say a clean “no for now.” Diversification reduces fragility: no single grant, donor, or client should decide our year. Long-term planning (six to twelve months ahead, minimum) lets us see gaps early enough to bridge them, not panic through them. And a buffer - modest but intentional - is a cultural signal: we plan with realism, not optimism. The aim is not a swollen budget; it is a calm organisation, able to keep its promises without squeezing people.

Equally, more money is not automatically more stability. Increased income can create new workload, coordination costs, and reporting demands. Read budgets as capacity stories: does this choice fund the time it takes to do it well, including preparation, coordination, closure, and recovery? Are we counting the “admin that makes magic possible,” or pretending it takes no hours? Transparent numbers build trust inside and outside; they also reduce the quiet moral pressure for team members to fill gaps with their evenings. The financially honest answer might be to scale the offer down, phase it, or pair it with a capacity-building component. When finances and social sustainability move together, the team breathes.

## **Stage 4: Work-life balance: energy as a condition for impact**

There is no regenerative future without work-life balance. We learned to read calendars like landscapes: winter for vision and rest, spring for planning, summer for implementation, autumn for harvest and reflection. We learned to design full project cycles that include closure, review, celebration, and integration - not just delivery and reporting. And we learned to keep at least a

20% margin for “life will happen,” because it always does: illness, weather, family. When a beautiful idea lands in a season that is already full, the regenerative move is not to squeeze harder but to reshape scope or timing until human energy is protected. Impact requires people who still want to be here next year.

Culture carries structure. Balance becomes real when we normalise joy lists, celebration rituals, unplugged weekends, and honest emotional check-ins. These are not bonuses; they are infrastructures of care. They prevent the pattern in which projects reach 90-95% and the last 5% linger, the heavy open loops. So we schedule finishes the way we schedule starts; we externalise the mental load into shared tools; we move from “to-do” to “can-do,” naming non-negotiables and letting the rest breathe. If an opportunity threatens this rhythm, it does not fit us yet, or it needs a redesign.

### **Stage 5: Partnership quality: clarity is care**

Partnerships are living systems, not signatures. We now decide *with* the relationship in mind: is there alignment of vision and realistic capacity on both sides? Are money, roles, timelines, and accountability written early enough to prevent “I thought you would...” a year later? Can we talk about load-bearing truthfully - the time, the travel, the reporting - and still want to work together? When life changes, can the project adapt without breaking trust? We learned these the hard way. The lesson wasn't “avoid risk”; it was “design clarity.” Writing things down early isn't bureaucracy; it is how goodwill survives implementation.

We also learned that you cannot hand a project to someone who didn't dream it. If a partner's context has shifted, forcing the original plan may erode both the relationship and the result. Better to pause, re-scope, or re-route with respect. Good partnerships multiply resilience; they move us from “funding cooperation” to genuine co-creation that outlives a single grant cycle. Practically, that looks like values alignment first, capacity checks second, logistics third, and regular in-person moments when possible, because kinship grows from shared meals and real-time together. That's when collaboration becomes regenerative: the work strengthens the relationship, and the relationship strengthens the work.

### **Stage 6: The rhythm of deciding: pause, redesign, or a clean “no for now”**

When the lenses disagree: a financially strong offer landing in a saturated season, or a values-aligned idea with unclear roles, we don't force a brittle “yes”. We redesign until fit appears: move dates, reduce scope, add buffer, put roles in writing, and attach closure time to the budget. If redesign can't turn the lights green, we say “no for now” with gratitude and clarity. That is not failure; it is stewardship of energy, reputation, and future possibilities. Over time, this rhythm becomes culture: seasonal reviews, finish-what-we-started cycles, small celebrations that mark endings. Decisions stop feeling like heroic leaps and start feeling like the next coherent step.

In essence: A good decision moves us toward regeneration, fits our holistic context, is financially honest, respects human energy, and is held in clear partnership. When those conditions

align, saying yes grows capacity - not workload - and leaves our future better resourced than our present.

### Reflection Questions:

*Use these questions to connect the ideas from this chapter with your own organisation's reality.*

1. In six months, what concrete surplus will this choice leave behind - skills, soil/culture, trust, or simpler systems?
2. How does this fit our holistic context: who decides/who is affected, which capitals shift, and where are the hidden costs (time, trust, joy, attention)?
3. Does the budget truly fund the whole arc - prep, coordination, delivery, closure, recovery - and if not, how must we reshape or phase it?
4. Where does this land in our seasonal calendar, what 20% buffer remains for "life will happen," and what must we drop to keep ourselves healthy?
5. What must be written down with partners now (money, roles, timelines, accountability, adaptation triggers) so goodwill survives implementation - and if we can't secure that, is this a clean "no for now"?

## 9.5. Inclusive Project Design: Opening the Door for Young People with Fewer Opportunities

If we talk about a "regenerative organisation" but mainly work with young people who are already confident, mobile, and well-supported, something is missing. Many young people live with money worries, unstable housing, caring responsibilities, health issues, or negative experiences with schools and institutions. If we want them to be part of our projects, we have to design with their reality in mind from the beginning – not add them on at the end.

In this project, we worked with two very different practices: permaculture on the land at the Academy of Growth and clean-up actions with Čisteći medvjedići in Croatia. Behind both was the same question: how do we make it easy to join, safe to stay, and possible to grow for young people with fewer opportunities? The guidelines below are based on that learning.

### 1. Make the first step small and clear

For many young people, the most significant barrier is simply starting. Travelling abroad for a week, sleeping in tents or joining a long training can feel too much at first. What helped was offering simple, local ways to try things out: a neighbourhood clean-up, a day in the garden, or helping to cook for a group.

The key is that people understand quickly what will happen, where they have to go, and how long it will take. "Come help us clean this park on Saturday from 10 to 12." "Join us on Sunday to plant potatoes and eat together." When the first step is small and concrete, it is easier for someone to say "yes" once and decide afterwards if they want more.

## 2. Create a safe and friendly atmosphere

Methods alone do not make a project inclusive. The feeling in the group does. Young people with fewer opportunities often expect to be judged, talked down to, or ignored. If that happens, they will not come back, no matter how nice the programme looks on paper.

We saw that safety grew when people were welcomed by name, shown around, and paired with someone who could answer questions. Precise daily rhythms helped: knowing when we start, when we eat, and when there is free time. It was essential to say openly that it is okay to be late, to be quiet, to take a break, or to ask for help. Simple group agreements about respect, language and personal space also made a difference.

In both the garden and the clean-ups, the message was: "You are welcome as you are. We are glad you are here."

## 3. Give real tasks and visible results

Many young people with fewer opportunities feel they are "not good at anything". One strong antidote is real work with visible results. When someone can see a change because they were there, their story about themselves starts to shift.

In permaculture activities, this was as simple as preparing a bed, planting seedlings, building compost or cooking dinner from harvested vegetables. In clean-ups, it was seeing how many bags of trash had been collected and how different a place looked afterwards. The tasks were not symbolic; they were genuinely needed.

Good design means planning activities so that participants can complete at least one full task during their time with you. Then reflection is grounded in something concrete: "We did this together," not only "We talked about this."

## 4. Think in paths, not single events

A one-day activity can be a beautiful memory, but for many young people, it is not enough to truly change their lives. What made a difference was when there was a next step – and then another one.

After a first clean-up, someone might be invited to help plan the next one, or to speak at a school action. After a garden day, they might join a weekend camp, and later an international youth exchange. Not everyone will walk the whole path, but it should exist and be visible.

Designing with fewer opportunities in mind, youth in mind means asking: "If this is their first contact with us, what could be a realistic next step for them in one month, in six months, in a year?" The answers should fit their real lives, not our ideal timetable.

## 5. Move from "for them" to "with them"

Finally, the most significant shift is in how we see the young people themselves. If they stay only "participants" or "target group", we will keep deciding everything for them. Our project may be kind, but it will not truly belong to them.

During this project, some of the most valuable ideas came from young people with fewer opportunities: which places needed cleaning the most, which schedule worked with bus times, which parts of the programme felt too long, and what kind of music or games would help people relax. When we listened and adapted, motivation went up, and the project became more rooted in local reality.

Good design keeps a few questions open in every project: Where can young people help plan? Which roles can they take over with support? How can they tell the story of the project in their own words? Step by step, they move from guests to co-hosts.

Designing projects with young people with fewer opportunities is not about lowering quality. It is about building spaces where more people can stand, work and grow together. When we do that, our organisations do not just serve communities; they become part of them.

### **Reflection Questions:**

*Use these questions to connect the ideas from this chapter with your own organisation's reality.*

1. If a young person in your area, with little money and low confidence, heard about your work today, what would be the easiest first step for them to take to join?
2. What small changes in welcome, rhythm or group rules could make your projects feel safer for someone who has had bad experiences in school or institutions?
3. In your current activities, where do young people experience clear, visible results of their work - and where is this missing?
4. Can you draw a simple path for one young person with fewer opportunities from "first contact" to "more responsibility" over the next year? What steps are realistic?
5. In which parts of planning or decision-making could you invite young people with fewer opportunities to contribute, even in a small way?

# 100

**REGENERATIVE  
FUTURE OF  
ORGANISATIONS**

When we started this journey, our focus was on building a sustainable future for organisations. Sustainability felt like the right goal, the responsible direction, the next step forward. Yet, as the project unfolded, we began to realise that being sustainable is not enough. Sustainability maintains what already exists, while regeneration creates conditions for life to flourish.

Through our shared work, reflections, and study visits, we discovered that the true power of organisations lies not only in their activities but also in how they think, connect, and evolve. Regenerative organisations are not defined by size, success, or visibility. Their relationships define them, their care for people and place, and their ability to adapt and learn.

The transition from sustainable to regenerative thinking begins with awareness. It is the awareness that every decision, every partnership, and every action either nourishes or depletes something within our system. To act regeneratively means to ask a different set of questions. Instead of asking how to sustain what we have, we ask how to restore what has been lost, how to create more value for life, and how to design processes that continuously give back more than they take.

As we said at the beginning, this guidebook was created with the intention of sharing the lessons we have learned from our case studies and from more than a year of daily work on developing our organisations with everyone who wants to learn more. If there is one thing we would like readers to remember, it is to finally clarify what truly stands behind the often-used word “sustainability”. To explore what degenerative, sustainable, and regenerative practices mean and to ask ourselves where we stand. Once we know that, we can reflect on our real state and recognise it. That awareness is the first step toward what we hope will be a regenerative future.

Another important message of this guidebook is the regenerative study visit method. Mentioned several times throughout the guide, it proved to be a key foundation for regeneration in our own journeys. It is incredible how such a seemingly simple method can create such deep change. By taking a moment to stop, observe, and see the reality with a fresh perspective, we make space to move forward consciously toward a regenerative future.

We hope and believe that through this guidebook, we have managed to explain what defines a degenerative, sustainable, and regenerative organisation of the future. We are also glad that the final chapter of our guidebook, “Sustainable Future of Organisations,” is titled “Regenerative future of organisations”, as this shows that our own process has evolved and followed the same principles we wrote about in these pages.

In the end, we hope that this guidebook becomes a seed of regeneration that will grow in your organisation and many organisations across Europe and continue to inspire a “Regenerative Future of Organisations”.



# **LIST OF RESOURCES**

This guidebook was not created through extensive academic research but through lived experience. We intended to draw knowledge directly from our organisations, from the daily work, and from the insights gained during our study visits. The aim was to capture authentic learning, shaped by real challenges, teamwork, and reflection.

The only external resource that significantly supported the development of our methodology is *Holistic Management* by Allan Savory and Jody Butterfield; alongside this, the work of Richard Perkins on holistic context has also been an important inspiration.

Beyond these references, no other literature was used. This guidebook is an original work of the Academy of Growth and Čisteći medvedići, created through practice, observation, and shared learning. At the same time, the authors wish to recommend several books that have personally helped them in their work with young people, in leading organisations, and in developing a regenerative mindset and leadership skills.

### **Recommended reading:**

- *Reinventing Organisations* - Frederic Laloux
- *Informal Education* - Tony Jeffs and Mark Smith
- *Atomic Habits* - James Clear
- *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* - Stephen R. Covey
- *Start With Why* - Simon Sinek
- *Man's Search for Meaning* - Viktor E. Frankl
- *Mindset* - Carol Dweck
- *The Magic of Thinking Big* - David J. Schwartz
- *The Compound Effect* - Darren Hardy
- *Creative Visualisation* - Shakti Gawain

12

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This guidebook grew out of many more hands, hearts, and conversations than could ever fit on a cover. What began as a simple wish to understand our own organisations better has turned into a shared journey through kitchens, gardens, city parks, Zoom calls, train rides, and long evenings of honest reflection. Before you close these pages, we want to pause and say thank you.

First, our deepest gratitude goes to the teams of Čisteći medvjedići and Academy of Growth e.V.: to everyone who cooks, writes, hosts, answers emails, fixes last-minute problems, and still finds the energy to care. Thank you for the courage to open your organisations not as a performance of “best practice”, but as living systems in all their messiness: the unfinished projects, the financial worries, the moments of doubt, and the small victories that rarely make it into official reports. Your willingness to be seen is the soil from which this guidebook grew.

We also wish to honour Re-Green and the people who shaped its spirit. Even though the partnership changed form along the way, their early input, land-based experience, and presence in our story have left a clear trace in these pages. This guidebook carries the imprint of that collaboration and the reminder that partnerships, like organisations, are alive: they evolve, they transform, and sometimes they conclude in one form so that something else can continue.

To all participants of the study visits and those who joined parts of this process - youth workers, volunteers, team members, friends and neighbours - thank you for bringing your questions, your realities, and your humour. Thank you for walking our fields and city streets with us, for sitting in circles, for sharing meals, and for naming what you saw with care. Your perspectives helped us recognise patterns we could not see on our own.

We are equally grateful to the local communities that hosted and supported this work: the volunteers who keep showing up for cleanups, the young people who try a first Erasmus+ experience, the families who share their homes and stories, and the local partners: schools, municipalities, libraries, and community groups who open doors so that learning can move beyond project borders. You remind us that organisational sustainability is always connected to a broader community.

A special chapter of appreciation goes to the group of 18 NGO leaders from across Europe who joined our training course in November 2025. You did not just “attend” a training; you stress-tested this guidebook in the most generous way possible. You brought in your own organisational realities, questioned our assumptions, tried out the tools with refreshing honesty, and offered detailed feedback from your practice. In your hands, the models and exercises in this guidebook were stretched, challenged, simplified, and strengthened.

We also want to acknowledge the Erasmus+ Programme of the European Union and the KA210 Small-Scale Partnership framework, which made this collaboration possible. Without public funding and the trust placed in small organisations to experiment, reflect, and share their learning, this guidebook would not exist. We are aware that behind each approved project, many people are working in National Agencies and EU structures, and we are grateful for your role in enabling youth work and organisational development across Europe.

Finally, we want to thank you, the reader. By picking up this guidebook, you have chosen to invest time and attention in your organisation’s inner life. That act alone is a step towards a more sustainable and regenerative future. We hope you treat these pages as an invitation, not a recipe: adapt the tools, question the ideas, test them in your context, and share back what you learn with others. In doing so, you become part of a wider network of organisations that are experimenting with new ways of working, caring, and leading.

From our organisations to yours: thank you for walking this path with us. May this guidebook serve you as a companion in moments of clarity and confusion, and may the seeds inside it grow into practices, relationships, and structures that are not only sustainable, but deeply regenerative - for you, your teams, your communities, and the places you call home.



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## **SUSTAINABLE FUTURE OF ORGANISATIONS**

Dedicated to youth workers, trainers, mentors, activists, NGO leaders, volunteers,  
and all people and organisations daring to build resilient, regenerative and caring futures.