

CLIMATE JUSTICE THINK TANK

Position Paper:

Advancing Climate Justice in the European Youth Field



Introduction

Young people are among the social groups most deeply affected by the unprecedented climate crisis. As they look towards the future, they face what is often described as *intergenerational injustice* - inheriting the consequences of emissions produced by previous generations while having little influence over the decisions that created today's environmental challenges. This growing ecological crisis has deepened young people's perception of injustice and awareness that they may face the consequences of the climate crisis throughout their entire lives. As a result, many experience ecological anxiety, grief, and depression, reflecting their concern for the future of the planet and their place within it.

The accelerating impacts of the climate crisis also fall disproportionately on marginalised communities, deepening existing inequalities in access to resources, participation, and opportunities. These young people are often more exposed to both physical dangers - such as extreme weather events - and psychological strain arising from the constant awareness of risk. Without meaningful action, they will face even greater disadvantages across every aspect of their lives.

Addressing climate change in the youth field must therefore go beyond environmental sustainability measures and embrace **climate justice** - a framework that recognises climate change as a human rights issue, demanding equity, inclusion, intergenerational justice and systemic change.

This position paper was developed by the Climate Justice Think Tank convened by SALTO Inclusion & Diversity, which brings actors from the fields of environmental sustainability, social justice, inclusion & diversity, and democratic participation. Building on the **EU Youth Programmes 2021-2027**, the **European Green Deal**, and the **EU Youth Goals**, as well as the **UN 2030 Agenda**, the think tank seeks to support the implementation of these frameworks through tangible, youth-led climate action. In parallel, it aligns with the **Council of Europe's Strategy on the Environment**, the **Recommendation on Climate Action and Young People**, and the **Youth Sector Strategy 2030**, which together recognise climate justice as a **fundamental human rights and democracy issue**.

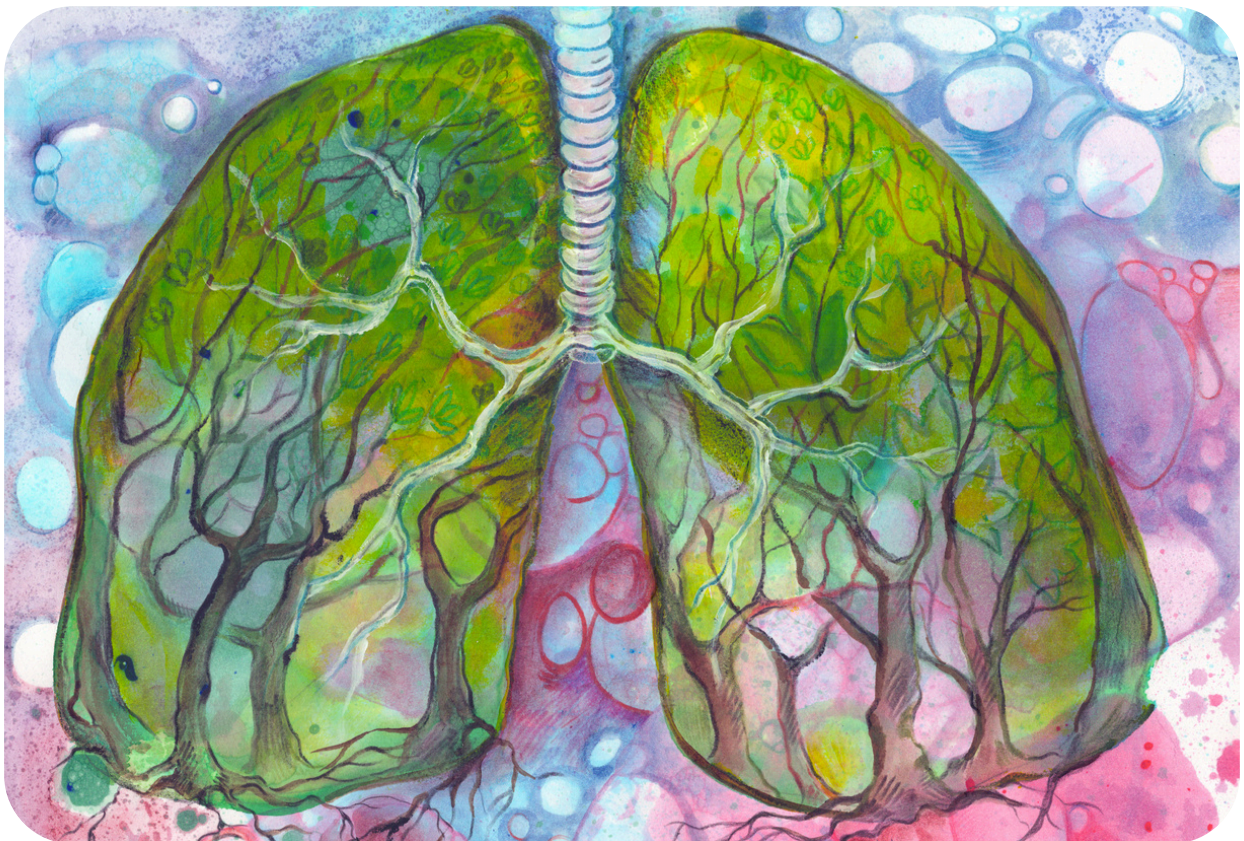
As the EU advances new strategies on **Preparedness, Resilience, a Union of Skills, and Intergenerational Solidarity**, the think tank sets out priorities for institutional actors to embed climate justice as cross-cutting principles within the **EU Youth Programmes**, National Agencies (NAs), and wider European frameworks. This means strengthening cooperation between the **EU and Council of Europe**, empowering young people as policy partners, and ensuring that those with fewer opportunities are not only protected but also enabled to shape Europe's green and just transition.



Defining Climate Justice in the Youth Field

For European Youth Policy, **climate justice** should be defined as:

- **Normative (Values & Principles):** Climate justice is a rights-based commitment to fairness, dignity and intergenerational equity, which recognises that ecological integrity is inseparable from human rights, democratic participation, public health, a safe and healthy environment, social inclusion and equity. It calls for youth policies that uphold these principles by dismantling systemic barriers, safeguarding young people's rights, and ensuring all young people can meaningfully shape a just, sustainable and democratic future.
- **Descriptive (Facts & Dimensions):** Climate justice recognises that the climate crisis is inseparable from issues of inequality, human rights, and social justice, as it creates new structural inequalities and exacerbates existing ones by disproportionately impacting young people already facing intersecting and systemic discrimination. It further acknowledges young people, particularly those most affected, as rights-holders and critical stakeholders in shaping equitable, democratic, and ecological responses.
- **Pragmatic (Actions & Movement):** Climate justice is a youth-led movement driving concrete action, such as building climate leadership, expanding equitable access to opportunities, protecting civic space and supporting young environmental human rights defenders. It is a principle that guides the EU youth programmes (Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps) to ensure equitable access to resources, opportunities, and decision-making for all young people, particularly those with fewer opportunities or facing discrimination.



Policy Priorities



1. Advocating towards climate justice in the programmes with support from the European Commission, National Agencies and other relevant actors.

- **Integrate climate justice as a way of addressing the horizontal priorities** within Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps.
- **Create and fund Long-Term Activities (LTAs) and Strategic NA Cooperations (SNACs)** explicitly addressing climate justice, inclusion, and solidarity.
- Provide guidance and tools for NAs to support organisations, including checklists, training modules, and best-practice repositories.
- **Introduce monitoring and support mechanisms** by including climate justice indicators in project applications and reporting.
- **Ensure inclusive mobility schemes by re-evaluating “green travel”** rules to make them accessible for young people with fewer opportunities.
- **Actively encouraging and supporting beneficiaries** in submitting activities on climate justice-related topics.



2. Capacity Building in the Youth Work Sector.

- **Provide training and develop practical toolkits for youth workers and educators** linking climate justice with competences for democratic culture and sustainable development.
- **Develop sustainability competences in line with the GreenComp Framework**, which tackle climate justice in the youth field, such as supporting fairness, systems thinking, political agency and collective actions.
- **Empower and equip youth workers, educators, advocates, and activists** with knowledge and skills to clearly link climate and social justice by amplifying diverse perspectives and examples of the impact of climate issues in various contexts.
- **Support non-formal education initiatives** (e.g., simulations, youth-led campaigns, peer education, games) to build climate literacy and civic engagement.
- **Invest in institutional capacity building to ensure a shared understanding of climate justice** among EU programme staff, NA officers, evaluators, and organisations in the youth field.
- **Promote evidence-based monitoring and evaluation** of the project results, provide opportunities for networking and exchange of good practices.



3. Building Alliances and Coalitions

- Establish a **European Coalition on Climate Justice in the Youth Field**, uniting NGOs, NAs, SALTO Resource Centres, research institutions, and youth-led initiatives.
- Facilitate **cross-sector dialogue** between inclusion, democratic participation, and environmental actors, including climate activists and activists for indigenous communities and other communities impacted by climate and environmental issues, breaking silos and fostering mutual learning.
- Encourage joint **position statements and policy recommendations** to reinforce coherence across the youth field.
- Align with the **Council of Europe Strategy on the Environment**, Youth Strategy 2030, and the UN Agenda 2030 to ensure consistency and synergies.



4. Listening to and Including Marginalised Young Voices

- Support intergenerational fairness by guaranteeing **meaningful youth participation** in shaping and monitoring EU youth policies, including representation in decision-making structures and supporting agency of young people.
- Support **young environmental human rights defenders and climate activists**, providing mentorship, protection, and access to funding.
- Adapt **communication strategies** and engage in sustained dialogue with minority groups and communities to co-design solutions that are culturally relevant and locally grounded, ensuring climate justice resonates across diverse contexts (e.g. framing issues around water scarcity, food security, forest fires, sustainable infrastructure, and equitable access to healthcare and housing).
- Prioritise **equity measures** that ensure meaningful participation of underrepresented young people, including those with disabilities, health or educational barriers, migrant or refugee backgrounds, ethnic minorities, or those facing social exclusion, economic hardship, geographic isolation, or any other discrimination. Use an intersectional approach to recognise and address overlapping forms of disadvantage.

Call to Action

We call on the **European Commission, National Agencies, and the Council of Europe** to recognise that climate justice is fundamental to safeguarding **democracy, the rule of law, and human rights** in Europe. A fair and sustainable transition cannot be achieved without protecting civic space, enabling democratic participation, and ensuring that environmental and social rights are upheld in line with European legal frameworks. This is particularly urgent given the unequal impacts of the climate crisis on young people and the growing restrictions on civic space that limit their ability to participate, organise, and advocate for their future

To deliver on these commitments, we urge institutions to:

- **Embed climate justice as a guiding principle of the EU Youth Programmes**, ensuring alignment with the EU Climate Law, the European Green Deal, and the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, and integrating environmental priorities across inclusion, participation, and human rights dimensions.
- **Strengthen funding and institutional support** for long-term, intersectional projects that support young people (including those from underrepresented groups and marginalised communities) and their organisations to act transformatively. For example, projects integrating gender equality, disability inclusion, socio-economic equity, and the needs of young people with migrant or minority backgrounds into climate-related youth work.
- **Invest in coalition-building** that bridges youth, inclusion, and ecological fields, fostering European-wide collaboration.
- **Ensure meaningful youth participation** by creating continuous and structured opportunities for young people, particularly those from marginalised backgrounds, to shape policies and programmes, while removing barriers to engagement and providing appropriate support and compensation, in line with the Aarhus Convention on public participation and access to justice in environmental matters, and the Council of Europe standards on democracy, human rights, and the rule of law.
- **Protect and expand civic space for youth environmental and human rights defenders** by ensuring accessible and long-term support mechanisms for young people advocating for social and ecological justice, in line with the European Convention on Human Rights and the Council of Europe's Recommendation on the protection of youth civil society and human rights defenders.

Conclusion

The youth sector has a unique and essential role in shaping a just and sustainable future. Institutions should embrace climate justice as an **integrated, systemic priority** in policy and practice. By embedding climate justice into the EU Youth Programmes, supporting coalition-building, and ensuring spaces and means for participation of young people with fewer opportunities, Europe can ensure that the next generations are equipped, supported, and heard in striving for a just, equitable, more resilient and more ecological society.



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