Environmental and Social Responsibility: EU Policies & Youth Impact

Introduction

Environmental sustainability and **social responsibility** are core values of the **European Union**. As the world faces growing challenges, such as **climate change**, **inequality**, and **biodiversity loss**, the EU has taken a leading role in developing comprehensive policies to protect the planet and promote **social justice**. In today's rapidly changing world, **young people** play a crucial role in shaping a sustainable and inclusive future.

Youth are at the heart of this transition. Through participation in **EU initiatives** and the adoption of **responsible everyday practices**, young people can become powerful **agents of change**.

◆ From **climate action** and the **circular economy** to **social justice** and **ethical consumption**, the EU provides platforms for youth involvement that contribute to **democratic participation** and **civic responsibility**.

◆ This topic connects deeply with **active citizenship**, encouraging young individuals to take part in shaping a **fairer, greener Europe**.

Environmental and social responsibility are deeply connected to the **core values of the EU**: human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, and respect for human rights. Understanding these topics empowers youth to become **active citizens** and **advocates for positive change** in their communities and beyond.

Key concepts and definitions

◆ **Environmental Responsibility**: The duty to protect natural resources and ecosystems through sustainable practices.

◆ **Social Responsibility**: Ethical behaviour that contributes to societal wellbeing, including inclusion, equality, and justice.

◆ **EU Green Deal**: The European Commission's roadmap to making the EU climate-neutral by 2050.

◆ **Circular Economy**: A model focused on reducing waste and making the most of resources.

◆ **Youth Action Plan (2022-2027)**: A strategy to increase youth engagement in EU external action, especially in green and digital fields.

◆ **European Solidarity Corps**: An EU initiative that allows youth to volunteer or work in solidarity projects.

Real-world examples

◆ **LIFE Programme**: This EU funding program supports environmental and climate action projects across Europe. Youth-led initiatives, such as community recycling campaigns or biodiversity preservation efforts, have been funded under LIFE, or the **LIFE BioTHOP initiative**, which turns vineyard waste into biodegradable plastics.

◆ **Horizon Europe**: The EU's flagship research and innovation program includes green projects with youth participation, such as sustainable agriculture innovations developed by university teams, research on clean energy and climate resilience technologies.

◆ **Erasmus+ Green Mobilities**: Many mobility projects now focus on sustainable travel and eco-awareness education.

◆ **Youth Exchanges on Climate**: Programs allow youth from different countries to collaborate on sustainability campaigns.

◆ **Erasmus+ Green Initiatives**: Many Erasmus+ projects now incorporate sustainability components, such as low-impact travel or environmental education. Some examples are: **Carbon Neutral Schools** (which aims to promote carbon-neutrality-supporting activities in school); **School Sustainability** (which aims to empower teachers to become sustainability managers); **Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and ethics in training centres** (which aims to contribute to "sustainable investment, performance and efficiency" by promoting CSR in the European educational field).

Data and statistics

- The **EU budget allocates 30%** of its funding to climate-related actions (European Commission).

- Over **100,000 young people** have participated in the European Solidarity Corps since its launch (ESC Annual Report).

- According to Eurostat, **over 80% of Europeans** are concerned about climate change, with youth being the most concerned age group.

- A 2022 study (Springer) found that youth participation in environmental protests and advocacy **has significantly increased in recent years**.

- According to CSR Europe, sustainable business practices are **increasingly influencing consumer behaviour**, especially among those under 30.

Challenges and controversies

The EU addresses these issues by strengthening monitoring tools, promoting inclusion in program design, and encouraging transparency.

- **Unequal access**: Not all young people benefit equally from EU programs due to socio-economic or geographic barriers. This issue is being improved by simplifying application procedures for programs like Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps, and by offering support through national agencies and microgrants.

- **Greenwashing**: Risk of misleading environmental claims in projects or policies. Through new EU regulations like the Green Claims Directive and CSRD, companies are required to prove and publish their environmental claims.

- **Youth tokenism**: Young people are often invited to consultations but lack real decision-making power. Youth tokenism is being addressed by involving young people in co-decision processes such as the EU Youth Dialogue and including youth representatives in institutional bodies.

◆ **Policy implementation gaps**: Difficulty in translating EU-level strategies into local action. Climate and social justice measures often face resistance from political and economic stakeholders.

◆ **Lack of education and skills:** Many young people across Europe do not yet have sufficient knowledge or competencies in key areas like sustainability, climate action, social responsibility, and civic participation, especially in relation to the green and digital transitions the EU is promoting. This issue is being addressed through EU frameworks, like **GreenComp** and **DigCompEdu**, which promote sustainability and digital literacy in formal and informal education.

Further reading and resources

✦ CSR Europe. (n.d.). *European business network for corporate sustainability and responsibility*. https://www.csreurope.org/

✦ European Commission. (2019). *Priorities 2019-2024*. https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024_en

✦ Council of Europe & European Commission. (2024). *Youth and democracy in the climate crisis*. Youth Knowledge #31. https://pjp-eu.coe.int/documents/42128013/47261623/076824_YKB%2031%20Youth%20and%20democracy%20in%20the%20climate%20crisis.pdf

✦ Council of Europe & European Commission. (2024). *Young people and climate litigation: situation mapping and recommendations for the youth sector*. Youth Partnership. https://pjp-eu.coe.int/documents/42128013/266866041/Young%20people%20and%20climate%20litigation%20-%20situation%20mapping%20and%20recommendations%20for%20the%20youth%20sector.pdf

✦ Cifuentes-Faura, J. (2022). European Union policies and their role in combating climate change over the years. *Energy Policy, 162,* 112780. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11869-022-01156-5

✦ Ecker, E. (2021). *Sustainability in the European Union: Analyzing the discourse of the European Green Deal*. Sustainability, 13(10), 5486. https://www.mdpi.com/1911-8074/14/2/80

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