

# ESDN Report Youth Workshop 2024

## Context and Purpose of the Report

This report, created by ESDN Youth Representatives from across Europe, is the result of the ESDN Youth Workshop held from September 4-7, 2024, in Berlin, Germany. The outcomes were later presented at the 9th ESDN Peer Learning Platform on October 22-23, 2024, in Bucharest, Romania. It explores critical issues facing Europe's future, focusing on actionable fields identified by youth representatives. Through a scenario-based approach during the workshop, we identified what an ideal future for Europe entails, examining key action areas necessary to realize this vision.

## Summary of Findings

### Mindset Shift & Cultural Behaviour

In today's world, where sustainability is increasingly tied to collective well-being, we must shift toward a mindset that prioritizes long-term goals over short-term gains. This cultural shift needs to be integrated across all sectors of society, from education to corporate strategies, to ensure that sustainability is mainstreamed. The alignment of goals with core values such as inclusivity, transparency, and the prioritization of impact over profit is key. By fostering this mindset, we ensure that our actions are sustainable and universally beneficial, rooted in responsibility, accountability, and ethical behaviour.

### Power

Power imbalances exist across multiple sectors, including between urban and rural areas, within youth decision-making processes, and between multinational corporations and local communities. Addressing these disparities requires systemic change. We propose targeted measures, such as enhancing opportunities for youth in rural areas, promoting genuine youth participation in decision-making processes, and reducing the undue influence of corporations in politics. Key to this is the enforcement of transparency and accountability mechanisms to ensure that both governments and corporations are held to their commitments. Youth must also be empowered to lead and shape sustainable policies that reflect their future.

### Trust & Strong Institutions

Trust in institutions is foundational for societal stability and prosperity. Strong institutions must be built on democratic structures that promote inclusivity, transparency, and accountability. We propose the integration of sustainability studies into educational curricula to combat institutional mistrust and the establishment of youth focal points in all government ministries to ensure meaningful youth engagement. By fostering collaboration, resilience, and effective communication within institutions, we can rebuild trust and ensure that institutions remain relevant and responsive to the needs of all citizens.

## Financing a Sustainable Future

The global financial architecture must be reformed to better align with sustainability goals. This includes cancelling debt for the Global South, decentralizing climate finance, and restructuring national budgets to prioritize sustainable development. A globally harmonized tax system that closes loopholes and taxes harmful activities can generate revenue for sustainable initiatives. Earmarking funding for youth-led sustainability projects and simplifying the process for accessing national subsidies will ensure that financial resources are available to those most in need.

## Key Areas for Action

### 1. Mindset Shift & Cultural Behaviour

We must prioritize a mindset that nurtures a proactive approach to societal, corporate, and individual growth. Achieving this alignment requires a shift in mindset at all levels of society, from individuals to corporations, with a focus on long-term impact over short-term gain in order to mainstream sustainability. This report explores the relationship between values and goals, emphasizing the need for sustainable action that is meaningful and universally beneficial.

To transform our current system into one that is truly sustainable, we must integrate sustainability into every facet of society, including education, media, healthcare, businesses, and institutions. By embedding sustainability into these core areas, we can reach a broader audience in a more impactful and meaningful way, fostering greater awareness, responsibility, and accountability.

#### Key Elements:

- **Alignment of Goals with Core Values:** For sustainability efforts to succeed, our goals must be deeply rooted in core values such as inclusivity, transparency, and the common good. When goals are disconnected from values, they often lead to short-sighted or superficial outcomes that lack the depth needed for lasting change. Goals should focus on long-term societal impact rather than immediate personal or corporate profit. In this way, we ensure that actions taken today contribute to a more equitable and sustainable future.

**ESDN Youth Core Values**

The ESDN Youth has defined a set of core values that should serve as a benchmark for societal transformation. These values are essential for building a sustainable future that benefits everyone:

- **Leave No One Behind:** Inclusivity is key. We must ensure that everyone, regardless of background, is involved in the sustainable development process.
- **Quality over Quantity:** Success should not be measured by how much we produce or consume but by the quality and impact of our actions.
- **Impact over Profit:** The focus should shift from maximizing financial profit to prioritizing positive social, environmental, and ethical impact. Financial gain should never take precedence over our core values.
- **Sustainability as a Shared Core Value:** Sustainability should be a guiding principle for individuals, businesses, and governments alike, driving decisions and policies toward long-term well-being for the planet and society.
- **Common Good above Personal Interests:** Decisions should prioritize the collective good, ensuring that the benefits of sustainable actions are shared by all.
- **Responsibility, Transparency, Accountability, and Credibility:** Individuals, corporations, and governments must take responsibility for their actions, ensuring transparent communication about their sustainability efforts. They must be accountable for their impact on society and the environment, with clear, measurable outcomes that foster trust. Credibility is built through genuine actions rather than superficial claims, ensuring that sustainability initiatives are authentic and meaningful.
- **Culture of Discussion and Active Participation:** A rich culture of open dialogue and active participation is crucial for the society and values we strive for. Engaging

- **Cultural Norms and Sustainability:** Shifting cultural norms is crucial in embedding sustainability into the everyday decisions of individuals, communities, businesses, and institutions. Cultural contexts significantly influence how mindsets evolve, making it important to create sustainability narratives that resonate with different audiences. These narratives must focus on sustainability as a value-driven necessity rather than a burden or luxury. Media, education, and government policies must collaborate to promote sustainability as part of cultural identity, inspiring individuals to see responsible living as the norm.
- **Community and Education as Drivers of Change:** Local communities play a vital role in fostering collective responsibility and embedding sustainability into daily life. Grassroots movements and community-led initiatives allow individuals to actively shape the decisions that affect their environment and future. Education is equally important; a focus on sustainability from an early age will prepare future generations to integrate responsible values into their personal and professional lives. From

primary schools to adult education, curricula must emphasize sustainability, responsibility, and accountability. Communities and schools must work together to provide the tools and resources needed to make sustainability knowledge widely accessible.

### **Proposed Actions:**

- **Integration of Sustainability into Education Systems:** Education systems should be redesigned to prioritize sustainability and values-based learning. Schools must teach responsibility, transparency, and ethical decision-making from a young age, ensuring future generations are equipped to contribute to a sustainable future.
- **Shift in Media Narratives:** The media must play an active role in shaping public opinion toward sustainability, promoting fact-based narratives that elevate sustainability as an attractive and desirable way of life. Destigmatizing sustainable living and showcasing success stories can help change public perceptions, encouraging responsible behavior at all levels of society.
- **Business and Corporate Responsibility:** Corporations must lead by example, embedding sustainability into their corporate strategies and operations. Moving beyond traditional profit-driven models, businesses should focus on creating long-term societal value, prioritizing transparency, accountability, and ethical behavior.

Ultimately, sustainability is not just a solution—it is the new foundation upon which all progress must be built. The future depends on our ability to embrace this shift wholeheartedly, embedding it into our collective consciousness and daily decisions. Only by elevating sustainability from a peripheral concern to a core value can we create a world where people and the planet thrive in harmony. This is the challenge of our time, and how we meet it will define the legacy we leave behind.

A mindset shift is crucial because it underpins and reinforces the changes needed in power redistribution, trust in institutions, and financial systems. Without a cultural commitment to sustainability, efforts to decentralize power, hold institutions accountable, or reform finance will falter. For example, empowering marginalized communities or youth requires a societal shift that values inclusivity and long-term thinking over short-term profit or corporate dominance. Trust in institutions will only grow if citizens adopt values like transparency and responsibility as non-negotiable standards. Likewise, financial reforms aimed at sustainability can only be effective if both individuals and institutions embrace ethical behavior and shared accountability. This mindset transformation provides the critical foundation for the systemic changes needed across all key areas.

---

## **2. Power Redistribution**

Power imbalances, particularly between marginalized communities, youth, and multinational corporations, significantly hinder progress toward equitable and sustainable development.

Tackling these disparities requires systemic changes that empower underrepresented groups and create more inclusive and transparent decision-making structures.

### **Key Challenges:**

- **Geographic Disparities:** Rural communities face distinct challenges, including limited access to resources, education, and employment opportunities. These regions often experience a "brain drain," where young people migrate to urban centers in search of better opportunities, leaving their home communities economically weakened and socially disadvantaged. This rural-urban divide exacerbates existing inequalities, creating pockets of underdevelopment that are disconnected from broader national progress.
- **Superficial Youth Inclusion:** Despite an increase in youth representation in decision-making bodies, much of this involvement is tokenistic. Often, young people are invited to the table but are not given real power to influence decisions, reducing their participation to symbolic gestures that fail to reflect their contributions. This practice, sometimes referred to as "youth washing," undermines genuine efforts to engage youth in shaping the future.
- **Corporate Influence and Lobbying:** Multinational corporations hold disproportionate influence over political decisions, particularly in environmental and social policy. Corporate lobbying often prioritizes profit over the well-being of local communities and the environment, resulting in decisions that can exacerbate inequality and environmental degradation. Without robust accountability mechanisms, these imbalances continue unchecked.

### **Proposed Solutions:**

- **Support for Rural Areas:** Governments must create incentives to retain young talent in rural regions, including providing access to seed funding, mentorship, and sustainable local economic opportunities. Enhancing digital infrastructure and providing equal access to education and innovation platforms can reduce the rural-urban divide and empower rural communities to lead their development efforts.
- **Genuine Youth Participation:** Governments and organizations should create structured, meaningful avenues for youth participation in decision-making processes. This includes establishing youth advisory roles within decision-making bodies and developing youth-targeted participatory processes such as consultations and intergenerational dialogue. Youth scorecards, which measure the quality of youth engagement in development projects, should be implemented to hold governments accountable for meaningful youth inclusion.
- **Reduction of Corporate Influence:** To reduce corporate overreach, stricter transparency laws must be implemented, requiring corporations to disclose lobbying efforts and political donations. Public consultations that include communities and youth must be a standard part of policy development, ensuring that decisions reflect the common good and are not solely driven by corporate interests.
- **Strengthening Accountability Mechanisms:** Independent monitoring bodies, including youth representatives, should be established to track the progress of corporate and governmental commitments toward sustainability. These bodies should

publish regular reports on key development initiatives, ensuring that commitments are met and progress is visible to the public.

By redistributing power and giving marginalized groups, particularly youth and rural communities, a more significant role in shaping policy, we can create more equitable and sustainable outcomes that benefit society as a whole.

---

### 3. Trust & Strong Institutions

Trust in public institutions is the cornerstone of a functioning society, enabling effective governance and collective progress. However, mistrust in institutions often arises from perceived or real shortcomings in transparency, accountability, and inclusivity. To build strong, resilient institutions, governance systems must be adaptable, democratic, and open to meaningful youth engagement.

#### Key Principles:

- **Democratic Structures:** Strong institutions require democratic structures that balance power across different segments of society. Bottom-up and top-down approaches should be combined to ensure that citizens, particularly youth and marginalized communities, have a voice in the decision-making process. This inclusion strengthens the legitimacy of institutions and promotes fairness in governance.
- **Leadership and Accountability:** Ethical leadership is critical for institutional success. Leaders must take responsibility for their actions and decisions, ensuring that they serve the public interest. Accountability mechanisms, such as independent oversight bodies, are essential for maintaining public trust and preventing the concentration of power.
- **Youth Involvement:** A lack of youth representation in decision-making processes undermines the long-term resilience of institutions. Establishing youth focal points in government ministries and involving young people in advisory roles can ensure that youth perspectives are considered in shaping policies that impact their future. These focal points should exist across all government sectors, ensuring youth engagement on issues from climate change to economic policy.

#### Proposed Actions:

- **Education for Institutional Trust:** Education plays a critical role in building trust in institutions. Integrating EU studies and sustainability into school curricula will provide young people with the knowledge they need to understand and engage with institutions. Educators must also receive ongoing training to keep up with evolving policies and societal challenges.
- **Youth Focal Points in Government:** Every government ministry should establish a youth contact point responsible for addressing young people's concerns and ensuring their active participation in policy development. These focal points will serve as bridges between youth and decision-makers, ensuring that young people are heard and their ideas are implemented.

- **Annual Best Practices Exchange:** We propose an annual EU-level conference where youth and institutional representatives can exchange best practices and learn from one another. This will help ensure that institutions across Europe align with modern governance standards and remain responsive to youth engagement.

By strengthening institutions through transparency, ethical leadership, and youth participation, we can rebuild trust and create governance systems that are resilient, adaptable, and inclusive.

---

## 4. Financing for Sustainability

The global financial architecture plays a central role in determining how resources are allocated for sustainable development. However, the current system often exacerbates inequalities and impedes progress toward climate goals. To create a more equitable and sustainable financial system, structural reforms are needed.

### Key Issues:

- **Debt Burden in the Global South:** Many developing nations are saddled with unsustainable levels of debt, which prevent them from investing in climate resilience and sustainable development. Debt cancellation or restructuring is essential to provide these countries with the financial breathing room they need to focus on long-term sustainability rather than short-term debt servicing.
- **Centralized Climate Finance:** Large, centralized institutions such as the World Bank often impose top-down solutions that fail to consider the specific needs of local communities. This creates bureaucratic hurdles and limits access to necessary funds, particularly for smaller, local, and indigenous communities.
- **Inequitable Access to Subsidies:** National subsidies for energy efficiency, housing, and innovation are often difficult to access for lower-income groups and marginalized communities due to complex application processes. Simplifying these processes and providing proactive outreach can ensure that subsidies reach those most in need.

### Proposed Solutions:

- **Debt Cancellation for the Global South:** Canceling or restructuring debt for the Global South is a crucial step toward enabling these nations to invest in sustainable development and climate resilience. This must be a key agenda item at international forums like the 2025 Financing for Development Conference.
- **Decentralization of Climate Finance:** Climate finance should be decentralized to empower local governments and indigenous communities to manage their resources. Smaller, localized budgets within the UN system can reduce bureaucratic barriers and make climate finance more accessible to those on the frontlines of climate impacts.

Restructuring national budgets to align more closely with sustainable development goals is essential. Too often, current budgets are allocated to activities that may counteract sustainability efforts. By ensuring a higher percentage of national budgets is dedicated to

sustainability across all departments, governments can drive progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Additionally, earmarking funding for youth-led and innovative sustainability projects would empower the next generation to take the lead in addressing climate and development challenges. Through these comprehensive reforms, the global financial architecture can become a driving force for sustainability, enabling a more equitable and resilient future.

## Conclusion and Call to Action

The path to a sustainable future requires a profound shift in mindsets, institutional frameworks, and financial systems. It is not enough to implement isolated policies or reforms—sustainability must be woven into the very fabric of our society, guiding every decision and action. We call on governments, businesses, civil society, and the youth to actively collaborate in driving this change.

To achieve our vision for the future, we urge decision-makers to:

- **Shift societal mindsets:** Promote sustainability as a core value in education, media, and institutions to build a culture of responsibility and long-term thinking.
- **Empower youth:** Ensure genuine youth participation in policy-making and governance, particularly in decisions impacting their future.
- **Reform financial systems:** Democratize climate finance, implement progressive tax reforms, and allocate national budgets in alignment with sustainable development goals.
- **Build stronger institutions:** Foster transparency, inclusivity, and accountability in institutions, ensuring that they serve the collective good and remain trusted by the public.

The time to act is now. Only through concerted and sustained efforts across all levels of society can we create a future where people and the planet thrive together. Let this report be a foundation upon which we build that future, ensuring that no one is left behind.



