

REPORT FROM THE CONSULTATION WITH ENVIRONMENTAL DEFENDERS

**We called Environmental Defenders
in Europe, and you responded!**



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Introduction

The [Consultation](#) was launched as part of the BE LIFE project in Autumn 2024, with the aim to better understand what risks environmental and climate defenders, especially youth environmental and climate defenders, face in Europe, and what resources they are most in need of. The aim was to collect data from a wide spectrum of environmental and climate defenders from EU Member States. Combined with the other project activities, the newly acquired knowledge will be turned into clear policy recommendations for the EU and suggestions for civil society.

Through the consultation of environmental defenders' needs, the project aims to improve the level of understanding of the support they require.¹

The report is based on qualitative responses provided by participants. The aim of this process is to spotlight some of the needs and key challenges faced by environmental defenders. The insights reflect the personal experiences, perceptions, and opinions of those consulted, and are not intended to be statistically representative of a wider population.

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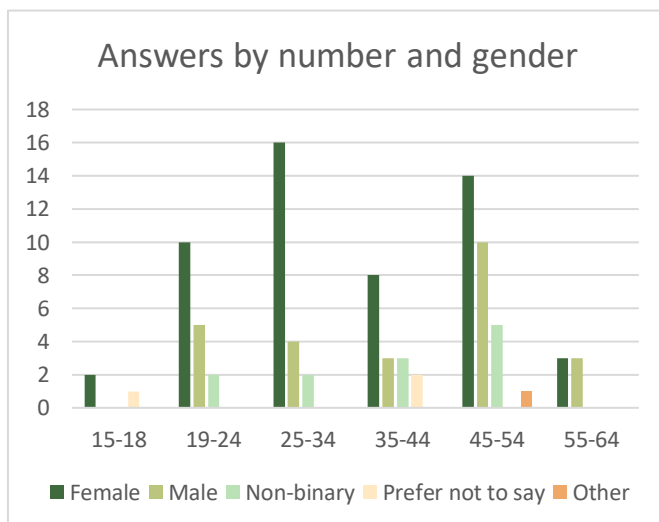
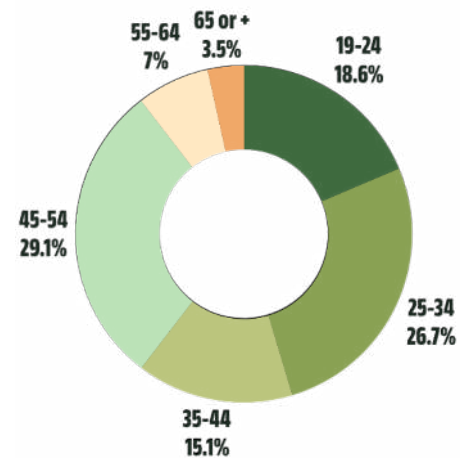
The consultation remains open to allow for additional input, particularly from countries where responses have so far been limited, in order to strengthen representation and inclusivity. The aim is to gather deeper insights into the challenges and difficulties faced by environmental defenders, especially from participants of the upcoming BeLIFE workshops.

General Information

The form received **93 Responses** so far.

1. AGE DISTRIBUTION

- 25–34 years old: by far the largest group, with 36+ respondents.
- 19–24 years old: second largest, with 20+ respondents.
- 45–54 years old: also around 20+ responses.
- Under 18 and seniors (65+): very minimal representation (2 and 3 respectively).



2. GENDER

- Female: 54 respondents, the majority.
- Male: 26 respondents.
- Non-binary: 2 respondents.
- Prefer not to say: 4.

3. COUNTRY

The survey received responses from 14 EU Countries, reaching a geographically diverse and EU-wide group, and two countries outside of the EU (UK and North Macedonia).

Hungary (29 responses) and Croatia (17 responses) were clearly overrepresented. Other countries the respondents were coming from were Germany, Austria, Italy, the Netherlands, Finland, Estonia, Portugal, Bulgaria, Spain, France, Belgium, Latvia.

4. ORGANISATIONAL AFFILIATION

Most respondents are deeply embedded in formal or semi-formal structures, though a notable minority comes from grassroots spaces.

- NGOs: over 50 respondents identified with NGOs.
- Environmental movements: over 28 identified, with many overlapping with NGOs.
- Unorganised youth groups: 10–15 mentioned, reflecting grassroots, informal organising.
- Unaffiliated (No): only 7 respondents stated they had no affiliation at all.

Resources Assessment

1. MATERIAL NEEDS

In terms of material needs, respondents indicated a strong need for sustainable and structural resourcing.

- **Funding:** mentioned in 80+ responses, an overwhelming priority.
- **Equipment:** cited in 39+ responses (includes technical, campaign, or field tools).
- **Office space:** a significant issue for about 24+ respondents.

2. ENVIRONMENTAL RESOURCES

2.1. Main needs:

Respondents identified several key types of environmental resources that would strengthen their work as environmental defenders, particularly in accessing and using information and expertise.

- **Online resources** (e.g. scientific and policy data platforms) (60 mentions): need to have centralised online hubs for environmental data, legal standards, and technical reports.
- **In-person training** (51 mentions): localised, expert-led training in areas like biodiversity protection, environmental monitoring, and data interpretation.
- **Ad-hoc support:** expert consultation for issues like mining, land defence, forest planning, and public health/environment overlaps. There were mentions of the need for translation or simplification of complex environmental documents.

Practical suggestions:

- A “one-stop-shop” for credible data, updated maps, and EU regulations.
- Field support or mobile expertise teams for vulnerable communities.

- Regular briefings or “digest” versions of new reports for easier dissemination.

3. LEGAL RESOURCES

3.1. Main needs:

Participants highlighted a strong need for legal support in various forms, emphasising the importance of accessible information, practical training, and responsive assistance to help navigate legal risks and defend their rights.

- **Online resources:** 51+ asked for materials explaining their rights, how to navigate legal threats (e.g., Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation), and access legal contacts.
- **In-person training:** 27 asked for training on regulations, protest law, local legal contexts, and campaign-based legal workshops.
- **Ad-hoc legal assistance** (36 mentions):
 - Support for urgent cases, expert legal reviews, and on-call advisors for protests or investigations.
 - Defending against SLAPPs, permits, land rights issues, environmental assessment reviews, and urgent litigation.

Practical Suggestions:

- Regular legal updates in plain language to address barriers.
- A “legal hotline” or legal presence in Brussels to represent defenders at EU-level meetings.
- Scientific expertise to provide, together with legal (transdisciplinary) expertise.

4. IT RESOURCES

4.1. Main needs:

Participants expressed demand for tools, training, and expert support to strengthen their digital advocacy and communication efforts, both online and in community settings.

- **Online tools:** most requested were advocacy tools, campaign management platforms, and media planning resources (57 mentions). Examples: secure messaging apps, web-based campaign design platforms, mass mailing tools.
- **In-person training:** 32 respondents sought digital skills training in media engagement, online security, etc.
- **Ad-hoc legal assistance:**
 - PR specialists, communications reviews, graphic designers, and help with community platform building.
 - Other specific requests included assistance in terms of digital security.

Specific insights:

- Concerns about social media censorship of activism content.

5. MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT

Many participants emphasised the need for both on-site training (44 mentions) and accessible online resources (32 mentions) focused on mental health support, highlighting the emotional toll of environmental defence work and the importance of building resilience and well-being within their communities.

6. REGULATORY ENVIRONMENT

6.1. Main needs:

A significant number of respondents recognised the need for legal and policy reforms, including better implementation of existing laws, the introduction of new

protections for environmental activism, and the revision of harmful legislation that restricts protest and civic space.

- Better implementation of already existing legislation: 67 responses.
- New legislation (for example, legislation that introduces safeguards to peaceful protest and civil disobedience, protection for activists carrying out environmental actions/campaign, etc.): 50 responses.
- Revising harmful legislation (for example, legislation that criminalises activists, limits the right to protest and freedom of expression, etc.): 50 responses.

6.2. Analysis:

6.2.1. Restrictive and repressive regulations (majority).

Most respondents described their regulatory environments as:

- Criminalising or limiting protest and dissent.
- Increasingly hostile toward youth and civil society.
- Using bureaucratic hurdles (e.g. protest permits, NGO audits) to delay or prevent activism.

REGIONAL VISIONS EXPRESSED BY RESPONDENTS:

Countries flagged for concern:

- **Hungary:** seen as “authoritarian”, hostile to NGOs, with laws targeting foreign-funded entities.
- **France:** increasing restrictions on protests, strategic lawsuits, and surveillance.
- **Croatia:** intimidation tactics, opaque enforcement of rules.

QUOTES:

- *"Laws are being passed that actively target young activists and NGOs."*
- *"Even speaking out carries legal consequences in my country."*

6.2.2. Unclear/weak legal frameworks

Some regions report:

- Grey zones: vague rules that can be applied selectively.
- Unclear roles of youth in lawmaking, creating legal vulnerability.
- Gaps between constitutional freedoms and actual enforcement.

QUOTES:

- *"Our constitution protects us, but local laws ignore this completely."*

6.2.3. Supportive or neutral regulations (minority)

A few comments suggested:

- Some progressive frameworks exist, though rarely applied well.
- Legal protections on paper are not always respected in practice.

QUOTES:

- *"In theory we are protected, but authorities don't enforce it."*

REGIONAL VISIONS EXPRESSED BY RESPONDENTS:

- Respondents from Central and Eastern Europe highlighted repression via audits, foreign agent laws, police surveillance.
- Respondents from Western Europe highlighted shrinking space for protest, SLAPPs, media repression.
- Respondents from Southern Europe focused on unstable or under-enforced protections.

6.2.4. Conclusion

Many environmental defenders operate in unsafe or legally ambiguous contexts, where repression is increasingly normalised, often through laws that specifically target civil society. Supportive environments remain rare, and existing protections are applied unevenly and inconsistently.

7. OTHER NEEDS:

44 respondents mentioned the need for external consultations and support, 48 indicated the need to receive staffing support – fundings to include internal staff of the team.

8. YOUTH-SPECIFIC SUPPORT

8.1. Main needs:

Participants highlighted several youth-specific needs to ensure meaningful, sustained engagement in environmental activism, including dedicated funding, safe spaces, and tailored support for personal and leadership development.

- Youth-specific grants and funding: 60.
- Safe spaces for youth activism: 55.
- Platforms to amplify youth voices: 50.
- Psychological support: 50.
- Leadership training: 40.
- Mentorship programs: 35.

These were often chosen in combination (e.g., “grants + safe spaces + mentorship”), indicating a strong preference for holistic, interlinked support systems.

8.1.1. Key insights

- **Sustainable support:** respondents emphasized that leadership training should not be one-time: *“leadership training should not just be in the form of one-time interventions, but rather longer-term mentorship to help new leaders grow into their roles.”*
- **Physical v online:** multiple entries noted that current grants often do not cover physical meeting space: *“only working online from home takes a toll on motivation and the sustainability of activism.”*
- **Equity and inclusion gaps:** many raised concerns that youth voices are heard symbolically, but not structurally empowered.

- **Participatory policy design:** some raised the need to increase funding to support actual decision-making involvement.

REGIONAL VISIONS EXPRESSED BY RESPONDENTS:

- German responses called to enable cross-border collaboration.
- Hungarian respondents flagged loss of support and oppressive regulatory environment.
- Italian and Spanish inputs emphasised legal and psychological support along with safe spaces for youth activism.

8.1.2. Judicial and Legal Defence

Several noted the need for legal financial support in response to SLAPPs and repression.

8.1.3. Patterns by Theme

Respondents are calling for a system of care and development, not just individual tools, such as:

- Capacity building (mentorship, training).
- Community safety (psychological and legal support).
- Civic participation (decision-making platforms).

To conclude, respondents highlighted the great gap between what youth defenders are doing (high-stakes activism) and what resources they have to sustain that work.

Threats Faced

Respondents were asked to highlight the main threats faced by themselves and by their peers, as well as to describe how these threats affect their work as environmental defenders.

1. THREATS FACED BY THE RESPONDENTS THEMSELVES

Most reported threats:

- Online hate and harassment (35+).
- Verbal intimidation (34+).
- Legal procedures/SLAPPs (24).
- Public shaming (15) and discontinued funding (22).
- Physical attacks (9) were documented.

Many face overlapping institutional (legal), social (shaming), and digital (harassment) threats.

2. THREATS FACED BY OTHERS THAN THE RESPONDENTS

Reports of peer experiences:

- Online harassment (49).
- Verbal intimidation (43).
- Legal procedures (48).
- Repressive regulatory environments (39).
- Public shaming (31).
- Physical attacks (28).
- Discontinued funding (22).

- Loss of employment (11).

These trends highlight how threat profiles often extend across multiple actors within a network or regions.

3. SPECIFIC THREATS TO YOUTH

Youth-specific vulnerabilities:

- Mental health burden is amplified due to age (50).
- Online harassment (42).
- Verbal threats (27).
- Repercussions at school or university (26), and workplace (21)
- Lack of institutional response (28) and lack of funding support (35)

Added stress of family opposition and dependence on unsupportive adults was noted.

4. MOST COMMON THREATS

Perceived universal risks:

- Governmental repression (62).
- Legal persecution (41).
- Social stigmatisation (43).
- Corporate harassment (21).
- Other: media disinformation, internal movement division, lack of institutional transparency.
- Hungarian respondents cited bureaucratic suppression (audits, inspections) as indirect forms of harassment.

5. HOW THESE THREATS AFFECT THE ACTIVITY AS ENVIRONMENTAL DEFENDERS

Top impacts:

- Psychological stress (53 mentions) and eco-anxiety (50).
- Reduced engagement in protests (40) and public activism (38).
- Life plans changed due to legal, social, or emotional repercussions (24).

Quotes show fear of police violence and public persecution leads to withdrawal from activism.

Support from Authorities

The overwhelming tone across the responses is critical and frustrated. While some respondents acknowledged neutral or symbolic support, most described interactions with authorities as hostile, repressive, performative or inaccessible, and absent altogether.

1. LOCAL AUTHORITIES

- Generally seen as passive or disengaged.
- Some offered platforms to speak (e.g., local youth councils), but respondents often felt not genuinely heard or included in decisions.

QUOTES:

- *“Locally there may be platforms to speak, but not to be heard.”*

1.1. Positive Exceptions:

- A few noted individual supportive municipalities, but these were rare and inconsistent.
- Localities that provided spaces for meetings or engaged in public education were mentioned as helpful.

2. NATIONAL AUTHORITIES

- Described as oppressive, disconnected, and antagonistic.
- Many respondents detailed:
 - Criminalisation of protest.

- Surveillance of activists.
- Slander campaigns in national media.
- Overt political hostility toward youth movements.

QUOTES:

- *“Environmental defenders are considered parasites who take government money and offer illusions of democracy.”*
- *“It is difficult to talk about support when there is active repression.”*

3. EU INSTITUTIONS

- Mixed reviews: more formalised access but often perceived as symbolic, elitist, or bureaucratic.
- Youth from non-EU countries were more likely to cite EU support as helpful, especially legal and project funding.
- Common critiques:
 - Long delays.
 - Token youth inclusion.
 - Lack of enforcement of environmental laws.

VISIONS EXPRESSED BY RESPONDENTS:

- *One respondent said the EU “does not do much better” than national governments in enforcing actual rights.*

- *Others expressed that EU programs exist on paper but are inaccessible in practice.*

REGIONAL VISIONS EXPRESSED BY RESPONDENTS:

- **French** and **Hungarian** respondents emphasised:
 - Systemic “stigmatisation and repression” of activists.
 - Government refusal to engage beyond public relations optics.
 - State-driven propaganda blaming environmentalists for societal problems.
- Youth in **Eastern and Southern Europe** focused more on direct repression, while those in **Western Europe** highlighted the symbolic and bureaucratic obstacles faced.

4. CONCLUSION

There is a deep trust gap between youth environmental defenders and all levels of government:

- Local: occasionally supportive but mostly unresponsive.
- National: often hostile.
- EU: well-intentioned but ineffective.

What youth defenders called for is not just support, but **structural inclusion, protection, and genuine democratic participation.**

Main Motivations to be an Environmental Defender

1. MORAL AND ETHICAL DUTY

Many respondents see environmental defence as a moral imperative, often invoking:

- Future generations.
- Intergenerational responsibility.
- A sense of justice and empathy for the planet.

Common language: *"I had no choice," "It's the right thing to do," "to protect life."*

2. ECO-ANXIETY AND EMOTIONAL RESPONSE

Eco-anxiety, grief, and helplessness were mentioned as emotional drivers—turning fear into action.

QUOTES:

- *I was terrified for the future and realized that despair would paralyze me unless I turned it into action."*

3. FIRST HAND EXPERIENCE WITH ENVIRONMENTAL INJUSTICE

Many defenders were motivated by personal exposure to:

- Polluted environments.

- Deforestation.
- Extractive industries.

These experiences sparked early interest and a desire to protect their homes or communities.

4. SCIENTIFIC BACKGROUND AND KNOWLEDGE

Several respondents came from **scientific fields** (e.g., biology, environmental science), where knowledge of ecosystem collapse led to activism.

- Some viewed activism as a **natural extension of academic training** or professional ethics.

5. CULTURAL AND SPIRITUAL CONNECTION

A minority cited **deep cultural or spiritual bonds** with nature as their motivation:

- This includes indigenous frameworks or traditional ecological values.

6. FRUSTRATION WITH INACTION

Some became involved after witnessing the **inaction or hypocrisy** of governments, corporations, or older generations.

- Others were inspired by **failed negotiations or greenwashing** at the international level.

7. EMERGING THEMES

- **Personal triggers:** many stories began with a single, vivid experience (e.g. a dying river, a polluted hometown, a protest crackdown).
- **Hope despite fear:** most respondents, despite pessimism, framed their actions as a form of resistance infused with hope.

- **Youth leadership:** there is a recurring narrative that young people are stepping up where institutions and older generations have failed.

QUOTES:

- *"It is a matter of survival".*
- *"Out of love for life and Earth".*

Youth-targeted Questions

1. UNIQUE CHALLENGES FACED BY YOUTH

1.1. Organizational Fragmentation

Respondents frequently cited lack of cohesion, coordination, or shared vision within environmental movements.

- Problems with competitiveness and poor collaboration between NGOs and grassroots groups.

1.2. Burnout and emotional strain

Many activists reported exhaustion, overwhelm, and emotional fatigue:

- “Burnout and psychological toll are real.”

Feelings of hopelessness due to the slow pace of change, scale of the crisis, and lack of recognition.

1.3. Discrediting and tokenism

Several young defenders said they are not taken seriously, especially by older stakeholders:

- Youth are “consulted for show” but not granted real decision-making roles.
- Concerns about being used for public image or as “greenwash tokens.”

1.4. Social stigma and isolation

Many described feeling socially or politically isolated:

- Being mocked or bullied in schools.

- Dismissed by family or peers.
- Attacked for radical or critical positions online.

1.5. Fear of professional repercussions

A consistent concern was being **blacklisted from employment** or facing career stagnation due to visible activism:

- Especially relevant for those with radical messaging or those from politically sensitive regions.

1.6. Gender, age, and identity barriers

- Young women and non-binary respondents reported facing ageism, sexism, and intersectional prejudice.
- These intersect with threats of violence and online harassment.

1.7. Exclusion from funding and decision-making

- Smaller or youth-led groups are often excluded from grant systems, and legal structures favour large, well-established NGOs.
- There is bureaucratic resistance to youth-driven innovation or civil disobedience as legitimate tools.

QUOTES:

- *"I am told I am too radical for jobs in my field—climate activism is a risk on your CV."*
- *"The movement is fragmented and elitist. There's not enough training or mentoring."*
- *"We are included in panels and youth events but excluded from real decisions."*

- *"It feels like we are burning out in silence, unseen and unsupported."*

REGIONAL VISIONS EXPRESSED BY RESPONDENTS:

- **France:** respondents expressed concern that some politicians appeared dismissive or uninformed about environmental issues.
- **Germany:** respondents highlighted lack of time, funds and emotional energy.
- **Hungary:** respondents focused on government hostility and youth exclusion: *"the authorities are not interested in our opinions"*.
- **Italy/Spain:** respondents made several emotional reflections about the loss of hope and calls for "real support" and "safe spaces".

1.8. Conclusion:

Activists are not only confronting external challenges, but also navigating invisible internal struggles within their own communities and movements. Psychological strain, systemic exclusion, and reputational risks often converge, making it difficult for youth to sustain their activism over time. These insights highlight the urgent need for holistic support systems, stronger leadership pathways, and meaningful inclusion in both governance and funding processes.

2. HOW THE ROLE OF YOUNG ENVIRONMENTAL AND CLIMATE DEFENDERS CAN EVOLVE WITH BETTER SUPPORT

Respondents across age groups expressed that youth are already doing vital work in:

- Raising awareness.
- Mobilising movements.
- Challenging political inertia.

- Creating alternative visions for the future.

However, they noted that this role is often undervalued or unsupported, especially at the policy or institutional level.

2.1. Most needed forms of support

Young environmental defenders identified key structural needs that must be addressed to enable their meaningful participation and long-term impact, ranging from genuine inclusion and sustainable funding to mentorship, capacity-building, and protection from tokenism.

1. **Recognition and inclusion:** youth want to be *actively included* in decision-making, not just consulted symbolically.
2. **Funding and infrastructure:** many face burnout and organizational limits due to lack of sustainable funding, office space, or salaries.
3. **Mentorship and intergenerational dialogue:** youth call for access to experienced mentors and two-way dialogue between generations.
4. **Training and tools:** there is a need for strategic planning, legal knowledge, and organizing skills to enhance effectiveness.
5. **Greenwashing/"Youthwashing":** many oppose corporate sponsorship or top-down control that compromises grassroots values.

QUOTES:

- *"People are afraid to take part in climate activism due to fear of police violence. They don't know their rights, and that leads to silence."*
- *"There are platforms for youth, but we're used for image—not for impact."*
- *"We need to move away from just performance and art and start targeting institutions with concrete political demands."*
- *"More mentoring from experienced climate defenders is key – learning from those who came before us without being told what to do."*

3. STRUCTURAL CHANGE NEEDED IN THE SUPPORT STRUCTURE

3.1. Legal and regulatory reform

Strong calls for:

- Anti-SLAPP laws to prevent strategic lawsuits against activists.
- Criminalisation of hate speech targeting climate defenders.
- Clear protections for protest and assembly.
- Accountability for state repression.
- The need for enforcement of existing environmental law, not just creation of new ones. *"Create laws that protect climate defenders and recognise civil disobedience as a legitimate form of protest."*

3.2. Funding and resources

- Calls for small, flexible grants especially for:
 - Grassroots, youth-led, and rural groups.
 - Basic organisational costs (salaries, space, materials).
- Some expressed concerns over bureaucratic grant processes.

QUOTES:

- *"Create simple, accessible, and sustained funding opportunities for local youth groups. We do not need million-euro grants, just help us survive."*

3.3. Mental health and safety

- Need for free, trauma-informed psychological services.
- Creation of safe spaces—both physical and political—for activism.
- Support for those facing burnout, grief, and fear.

QUOTES:

- *“Activism is emotionally exhausting. We need care systems, not just toolkits.”*

3.4. Education and training

Emphasis on long-term leadership development, not just workshops.

Desire for critical thinking curricula, especially around:

- Power structures.
- Legal literacy.
- Strategy and negotiation.

QUOTES:

- *“Train us not just to protest, but to win.”*

3.5. Intergenerational and cross-movement dialogue

- Importance of mentorship from older defenders and NGO professionals.
- Avoiding power imbalances or dismissive attitudes toward youth.

- Promotion of **horizontal collaboration** between movements.

QUOTES:

- *“Let youth learn from past generations, but stop telling us how to lead.”*

REGIONAL VISIONS EXPRESSED BY RESPONDENTS:

Hungarian respondents highlighted:

- Loss of funding.
- Repressive government environments.
- Need for decentralized solidarity structures like community gardens and resource-sharing hubs.

French and **Spanish** voices emphasized:

- *“Respect for environmental defenders as experts.”*
- Importance of science-based decision-making and democratic access.

German input stressed:

- Need for recognition, fair pay, and meaningful roles in policy-making.

3.6. Practical proposals

- Legal defences centres.
- Mental health networks for activists.
- Mobile expert support teams for local issues.
- Clear documentation explaining rights and risks.

In general, respondents want support structures that are:

- Responsive, localised, and accessible.
- Centred on safety, sustainability, and legitimacy.
- Designed with (not just for) young people.

4. HOW TO BETTER INVOLVE YOUTH: KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

4.1. Meaningful youth participation

Youth want genuine power, not just symbolic roles:

- Requests for youth to have voting rights, budget influence, and drafting power in climate and environmental policies.
- Critique of “youth panels” and consultations that do not result in actual policy changes.

QUOTES:

- *“We are included to tick boxes, but we are never really listened to.”*

4.2. Structural integration into decision-making

Respondents proposed formalised participation mechanisms, such as:

- Youth environmental councils.
- Youth co-drafting roles in legislation.
- Public hearings led or co-led by young people.

Others emphasized bottom-up engagement, such as local assemblies, community forums, and school-level civic education.

QUOTES:

- *"We need formal spaces, beyond just being invited to conferences."*

4.3. Simplification and accessibility

Bureaucracy and inaccessible language are significant barriers:

- Need for transparent and simplified policy processes tailored to young people.
Requests for clear language summaries of laws and participatory mechanisms.

QUOTES:

- *"Even when there is a chance to participate, it is too complicated to understand."*

4.4. Education and political literacy

Many noted the lack of civic or environmental education in schools.

Youth demand:

- Curriculum reform.
- Training on legal processes and democratic structures.
- Peer education networks.

QUOTES:

- *"We cannot be part of the process if we do not know how it works."*

4.5. Intersectional and localised participation

Participation should reflect diverse identities and local realities, including:

- Underrepresented regions.
- Marginalised youth.
- Rural and indigenous voices.

Respondents also want recognition of different ways of knowing and acting (e.g., traditional ecological knowledge).

QUOTES:

- *"We do not just need seats at the table, we need different tables."*

REGIONAL VISIONS EXPRESSED BY RESPONDENTS:

German respondents proposed youth climate councils with actual policy roles, not just advisory ones.

Hungarian responses stressed:

- A need for civic camps and extracurricular activism education.
- State support for democratic education that is currently missing.

French inputs emphasised responsibility and decision-sharing rather than passive listening.

Italian/Spanish responses focused on the power of youth assemblies and called for civil disobedience as a form of expression.

4.6. Tensions highlighted

Some youth felt burned out by past participation, citing:

- Consultations where feedback was ignored.
- Token invitations without context or preparation.
- Performative inclusion at high-level events with no follow-up.

To sum up, youth respondents highlighted the need to have:

- Clear, binding roles in governance.
- Accessible platforms with real influence.
- Legal and political education.
- Structural power-sharing, not symbolic participation.

Conclusion

The Consultation underscores the pressing need for systemic change in how environmental defenders (especially youth) are supported, protected, and included across Europe. Respondents from across the continent shared consistent experiences of repression, burnout, and legal uncertainty, compounded by insufficient mental health resources, structural exclusion from decision-making, and limited access to sustainable funding and training.

Despite these challenges, the findings also reflect a deep sense of commitment, courage, and collective purpose. Youth defenders are not only mobilising for climate justice but also demanding structural reforms—from meaningful participation in governance to trauma-informed care systems and intergenerational solidarity. Their experiences highlight that tokenism, greenwashing, and bureaucratic barriers remain widespread, while real, responsive support is too often out of reach.

To bridge the growing trust gap between young defenders and institutions, it is essential to translate recognition into concrete action: accessible funding, inclusive legal frameworks, protection from harassment, and formal roles in shaping policy. Defenders are already doing vital work—what they need now is for governments, civil society, and the EU to match their efforts with the care, credibility, and resources their role demands.