

Youth in Charge:

RCE Leaders Shaping Sustainable Societies



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Foreword by UNU-IAS

Young people today live with sustainability challenges as everyday realities. Climate change, biodiversity loss, inequality, conflict and rapid technological change are not abstract issues far in the future — they are already shaping the lives, choices and opportunities of youth worldwide. Many young people face barriers that limit their ability to act, including a lack of resources, limited opportunities to influence decisions and a growing sense of uncertainty about the future. Education must therefore help young people to go beyond awareness towards agency, leadership and sustained engagement.

Indeed, youth are much more than mere bystanders to these global challenges. They are already developing practical responses to local needs, with their leadership bringing energy, imagination and calls for institutions to act with greater consistency and ambition.

This publication highlights what becomes possible when youth are recognized as partners in transformation. Through 12 unique case studies from the global network of Regional Centres of Expertise on Education for Sustainable Development (RCEs), it showcases young people advancing sustainability through community projects, advocacy, education, innovation and intergenerational collaboration. Their efforts demonstrate that sustainability is not only a matter of future aspiration; it is now being pursued through grounded, locally relevant action.

RCEs have a unique role in enabling this work. As local hubs of education for sustainable development (ESD), they bring together stakeholders in local communities to connect learning with action. They create spaces where young people can work on real world issues they can touch, listen to community needs, design responses and inform practice, policy and social change.

This action-oriented approach is essential for developing youth agency and leadership.

It enables learners to move from concern to participation, and from participation to responsibility. It also strengthens the wider community by fostering dialogue, empathy, interdisciplinary cooperation and collective responsibility. When young people are trusted and empowered to contribute ideas, test approaches and lead initiatives, education becomes a driver of transformation.

The publication comes at a crucial time, as the international community advances the [Pact for the Future](#), the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, ESD for 2030 and the [Youth Declaration on Transforming Education](#). These frameworks urge more inclusive and transformative approaches to sustainable development. The experiences presented here show how those commitments are already being realized through the work of RCEs and their youth leaders across the world.

UNU-IAS is pleased to support the Global RCE Network in strengthening meaningful youth engagement for sustainability. As we look towards 2030 and beyond, young people must be at the forefront in shaping the societies they will inherit. Their voices, actions and leadership are essential to advancing sustainable development.

I extend my sincere appreciation to the RCE youth leaders, coordinators, educators, partners and communities whose work is featured in this volume. Their efforts remind us that sustainable societies are not only imagined by young people — they are already being built by them.

Shinobu Yume Yamaguchi
Director
United Nations University
Institute for the Advanced
Study of Sustainability (UNU-IAS)



Foreword by UN Youth Office

The challenges facing our world today — from climate change and biodiversity loss to inequality, exclusion and growing social fragmentation — demand solutions that are collaborative, intergenerational and grounded in local realities. Young people are not only among those most affected by these challenges; they are also essential partners in shaping more sustainable, inclusive and resilient futures.

This publication offers a powerful reminder of what becomes possible when young people are recognized not merely as beneficiaries of sustainable development efforts, but as co-creators, decision makers and leaders. Through diverse case studies from across the Global RCE Network, it showcases how youth-led action is already driving meaningful change in communities around the world.

This research comes at an important moment. As the international community works to advance the implementation of the *Pact for the Future* and related global commitments — including the Youth Declaration on Transforming Education — there is growing recognition that meaningful youth participation must move beyond consultation alone. Young people must be empowered to help shape priorities, influence decision-making, and lead implementation efforts across sustainable development processes.

Across the United Nations system and beyond, there is increasing momentum to strengthen more meaningful, inclusive and sustained approaches to youth engagement. This includes recognizing young people not only as advocates for change, but as partners in governance, innovation and community leadership. education for sustainable development (ESD) plays an especially important role in this effort by helping equip young people with the knowledge, values and opportunities needed to

take action in their communities and contribute to collective solutions.

The experiences highlighted in this publication demonstrate what this looks like in practice. Across regions and contexts, young people are leading community-based solutions, advancing climate action, strengthening inclusion, promoting intergenerational learning, and transforming education into a more participatory and action-oriented process. Importantly, these initiatives also show that youth leadership flourishes when supported by enabling ecosystems — including mentorship, institutional trust, access to resources and opportunities for shared decision-making.

Most importantly, this work reinforces the value of moving from episodic engagement toward more sustained partnerships with young people. Meaningful youth participation requires structures, resources and accountability mechanisms that allow young people not only to contribute ideas, but to influence outcomes and help shape the policies and initiatives that affect their lives and futures.

I commend the United Nations University Institute for the Advanced Study of Sustainability, the Global RCE Network and all contributing authors — especially the young leaders whose experiences and perspectives shape these pages. I hope that this publication inspires educators, policymakers, institutions and communities to continue investing in youth leadership and creating spaces where young people can meaningfully contribute to building sustainable futures for all.

Felipe Paullier
Assistant Secretary-General
for Youth Affairs
United Nations Youth Office



Photo by a125studioai-6281440 | pexels

Featured RCE Youth Projects

A Regional Centre of Expertise on ESD (RCE) is a network of existing formal, non-formal and informal organizations that facilitate education for sustainable development (ESD) in local and regional communities. RCEs bring together institutions at the regional and local level to jointly promote ESD. They aspire to use education as a mechanism to translate global objectives for sustainable development into the context of the local communities in which they operate. RCEs build innovative platforms to share information and experiences, and to promote dialogue among regional/local stakeholders through partnerships for sustainable development. An RCE can involve local school systems, higher education institutions, environmental NGOs, museums, zoos, botanical gardens, local governments, local enterprises, volunteer groups, media, civic associations and/or individuals who work in the spheres of sustainable development such as economic growth, social development and environmental protection.

RCEs Worldwide

As of August 2026, 200 RCEs have officially been acknowledged by the United Nations University worldwide.

Africa & Middle East

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| Cameroon: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Buea Egypt: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cairo Eswatini: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Eswatini Ghana: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ghana Jordan: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Jordan Kenya: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Central Kenya • Greater Nairobi • Greater Pwani • Kakamega-Western Kenya • Mau Ecosystem Complex • Mount Kenya • North Rift • Nyanza • South Rift | Lesotho: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lesotho Malawi: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Zomba Mozambique: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mozambique Namibia: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Khomas-Erongo Nigeria: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Greater Yenagao • Ilorin • Kano • Lagos • Minna • Ogun • Port Harcourt • Zaria Senegal: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Senegal Somalia: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mogadishu | South Africa: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gauteng • KwaZulu-Natal • Makana and Rural Eastern Cape Tanzania: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dar es Salaam Uganda: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Greater Eastern Uganda • Greater Kampala • Greater Masaka • Greater Mbarara United Arab Emirates: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Abu Dhabi Zambia: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lusaka Zimbabwe: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Harare • Mutare |
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Europe

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| Albania: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Middle Albania Austria: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Graz-Styria Belarus: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Belarus Czechia: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Czechia Denmark: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Denmark Finland: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Helsinki Metropolitan France: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bordeaux Aquitaine • Brittany • Paris Seine Germany: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hamburg • Munich • Nuremberg • Oldenburger Münsterland • Ostwürttemberg • Ruhr | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Southern Black Forest Greece: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stettiner Haff <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Central Macedonia <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Crete Ireland: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dublin Italy: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Euroregion Tyrol Lithuania: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vilnius Netherlands: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fryslân Poland: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • South Poland • Warsaw Metropolitan Portugal: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Açores • Creias-Oeste • Porto Metropolitan Area Regional: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Basque Country - Navarre • Rhine-Meuse | Russia: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nizhny Novgorod • Samara Serbia: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vojvodina Spain: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Galicia Sweden: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • North Sweden • Skane • Uppsala-Gotland • West Sweden Switzerland: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Zurich United Kingdom: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • East Midlands • Greater Manchester • London • North East • Scotland • Severn • Wales • Yorkshire & Humberside |
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Americas

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| Argentina: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chaco • Cuenca del Plata Brazil: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Curitiba-Paraná • Rio de Janeiro • São Paulo Canada: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • British Columbia • Greater Sudbury • Mauricie/Centre-du-Quebec • Peel • Peterborough-Kawartha-Haliburton • Saskatchewan Colombia: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bogota Guatemala: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Guatemala Mexico: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Borderlands Mexico-USA • Western Jalisco | Peru: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lima-Callao Puerto Rico: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Puerto Rico United States of America: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Detroit Windsor • Georgetown • Grand Rapids • Greater Atlanta • Greater Burlington • Greater Cincinnati • Greater Phoenix • Greater Portland • Hawaii • North Texas • Salisbury • Shenandoah Valley Venezuela: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gran Caracas |
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Asia-Pacific

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| Australia: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gippsland • Greater Western Sydney • Murray-Darling • Tasmania • Western Australia Bangladesh: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Greater Dhaka • Sundarbans Cambodia: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Greater Phnom Penh China: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anji • Beijing • Greater Shangri-la • Hangzhou • Hohhot • Kunming • Ningbo • Qingdao • Shanghai • Suzhou • Tianjin • Zhangjiakou | India: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bengaluru • Chandigarh • Chennai • Delhi • East Arunachal Pradesh • Goa • Guwahati • Jammu • Kodagu • Kozhikode • Lucknow • Mishmi Hills • Mumbai • Pune • Srinagar • Thiruvananthapuram • Tirupati Indonesia: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bogor • East Kalimantan • East Java • Yogyakarta | Japan: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chubu • Greater Sendai • Hokkaido Central • Hyogo-Kobe • Kitakyushu • Okayama • Omuta • Yokohama Kyrgyzstan: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Kyrgyzstan Malaysia: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Central Semenanjung • Greater Gombak • Greater Kuala Lumpur • Iskandar • Kuching • Melaka • Penang Mongolia: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mongolia Nepal: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nepal New Zealand: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Otago • Waikato | Philippines: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bohol • Cebu • Davao • Ilocos • Negros Island Region • Northern Mindanao Regional: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pacific Island Countries Republic of Korea: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Changwon • Dobong-gu • Gwangmyeong • Incheon • Inje • Sejong • Tongyeong • Ulju Thailand: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cha-am • Maha Sarakham • Phayao Municipality • Sakon Nakhon • Trang Viet Nam: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Southern Vietnam |
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Editorial

RCE Youth Leadership in Sustainability: From Participation to Meaningful Partnership

Dr. Nafissa Insebayeva
Research Consultant
UNU-IAS

It is often said that younger generations are inheriting a world that faces many complex and interconnected issues: environmental degradation, socio-economic inequality, technological disruption, and threats to peace and well-being, to name a few. Yet, youth are rarely offered to sit at decision-making tables and meaningfully contribute to the very processes that define their livelihoods. When called upon, youth are often assigned the responsibility of “saving the world” without proper mechanisms, tools and structures. “Youth-washing” initiatives that lack real and meaningful youth leadership opportunities but market themselves as innovative and empowering have become commonplace. Youth are often invited to speak but not given power to shape decisions; consulted occasionally but not included in the long-term leadership. This gap is particularly important for ESD, which seeks to prepare societies to build more just, inclusive and sustainable futures for all.

The good news is that, despite facing several barriers, young people are already leading societal transformations on the ground. Even when resources are limited, youth drive change by leveraging resources and capacities in their immediate environments, as shown by youth-led university-based initiatives from RCE Tasmania and RCE Detroit Windsor. Young people are also demanding drastic changes and fundamental shifts in how we learn, govern, build, produce and live together with the aim of shaping sustainable societies that truly leave no one behind. For instance, RCE South Poland’s case shares valuable insights into how youth reimagine our cities as spaces for

sustainability, inclusion and learning. Another example from RCE Davao highlights how youth help strengthen Indigenous leadership by co-designing and co-delivering capacity-building programmes for Indigenous women. Increasingly, youth initiatives employ digital innovation and technology-driven approaches to sustainability as shared by RCE Greater Nairobi and RCE KwaZulu-Natal. The question is, therefore, no longer whether youth voices matter but how institutions and structures can transform to embed continuous and influential youth engagement and leadership in their core function. As demonstrated by RCE Kitakyushu’s story of establishing a youth-led Future Creation Committee within the city’s ESD Council, young people need clear pathways to leadership and representation within governance and capacity-building activities.

At the same time, we must ensure that equity is central to any serious commitment to youth leadership in ESD. As explained by RCE Tongyeong and RCE Rio de Janeiro, young people need role models, mentors, resources and spaces that uplift their voices and instill in them the confidence and agency required to make a positive difference. The case presented by RCE East Arunachal Pradesh also reminds us that young people often face financial, educational, linguistic and social barriers that limit their ability to participate consistently in global and local sustainability processes. That is, without equitable access to resources, mentorship and institutional backing, youth engagement risks becoming reachable only to a privileged few. Therefore, to raise a generation of leaders, we must remember that (i) youth



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leadership starts in childhood, as shown by RCE Abu Dhabi's school-based greening initiatives, and (ii) that meaningful engagement with sustainability must be accessible to all regardless of their background, as emphasized by RCE Basque Country-Navarre.

Indeed, across the RCEs, young people are already demonstrating what youth leadership can look like in practice. While youth engagement had long been encouraged within our network, encouragement alone was insufficient. As part of efforts to institutionalize meaningful youth engagement, the Global RCE Network established the formal role of Regional Youth Coordinators (RYCs) in 2023. RYCs are nominated by the RCE Regional Advisors, endorsed by the Ubuntu Committee of Peers and appointed by UNU-IAS for a term of two years. They play a key role in advancing ESD by working with a diverse cross section of youth, strengthening youth engagement in decision-making processes and facilitating youth-led and youth-focused initiatives at the regional and global levels. At the same time, each RCE designates their own Youth Coordinators to represent the youth within their RCE and to serve as focal points for youth seeking to network and engage with cross-RCE initiatives and activities. It is important to note that this initiative was not a mere administrative change but a broader signal that young people are not only beneficiaries of ESD; they are co-creators of it.

In 2025, the Global RCE Network celebrated its [20th anniversary](#) at the 14th Global RCE Conference, which was held on 21-23 October in Okayama, Japan. As part of this important event, one of the three main plenary sessions was entirely designed and led by RCEs youth representatives. The session titled “*I am _____, Youth from RCE _____: Mobilizing the Youth for Global Transformation Through Problem-Based Approaches to ESD*” was not a symbolic inclusion in the conference programme; it served as a space for substantive reflection on intergenerational collaboration and the shared responsibility of shaping sustainable futures

together.

Most notably, the conference concluded with the adoption of [“The 2025 Okayama Declaration: RCEs’ Collective Commitment for Sustainable Futures.”](#) This milestone document, co-created with youth, reaffirmed RCEs’ shared commitment to harnessing ESD as a transformative force for societal change. Among the declaration’s five priority areas, *Priority Area 3: Empowering and Mobilizing Youth Leadership* recognizes the essential role of youth in shaping sustainable societies as co-creators of knowledge and action. The declaration calls for meaningful and inclusive youth participation in decision-making spanning planning, implementation and evaluation of ESD initiatives.

In line with this commitment, we developed this case study publication, which aims to spotlight impactful youth-led sustainability projects from the Global RCE Network. This publication demonstrates real-world examples of youth action that drives sustainable development on the ground, shedding light on how youth from diverse backgrounds transform our societies. Each case is written by or in collaboration with RCE youth representatives and highlights meaningful youth engagement and leadership in local ESD initiatives. We hope that this publication empowers young people around the world to advance their engagement and leadership in sustainability. It serves as both a source of inspiration and a practical reference for policymakers, educators and community leaders seeking to strengthen youth participation in building sustainable futures. It also serves as an important reminder that young people should not just inherit the future but should be given resources and power to co-create it now.





Photo by Tresor Kande 8-mZguqR5-c | unsplash

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With activities such as a nurdle (plastic pellet) hunt, SSI students increase their awareness on the effects of microplastics and contribute to citizen science.

Sustainable Schools Initiative

RCE Abu Dhabi

Ahmed Abdulmuttaleb Baharoon, Rasha Ali Al Madfai, Shamma Saeed Alkhoori and Arwa Diab



What We Face

Younger generations are growing up under increasing environmental pressures, globally referred to as the triple planetary crisis (Passarelli, et al., 2021) and “code red for humanity” (Guterres, 2021). These interconnected challenges — biodiversity loss, increasing pollution and the climate crisis — are shaping daily life through rising heat exposure, waste generation and ecosystem degradation, which are exacerbated by unsustainable

resource consumption patterns (Richardson, et al., 2023; Ceballos & Ehrlich, 2023; Calvin, et al., 2023).

In Abu Dhabi, this is particularly critical given its hyper-arid context, where essential resources such as freshwater are scarce. Against this backdrop, it is vital that local youth develop the knowledge, values, attitudes and agency required to understand ongoing and emerging challenges and develop meaningful

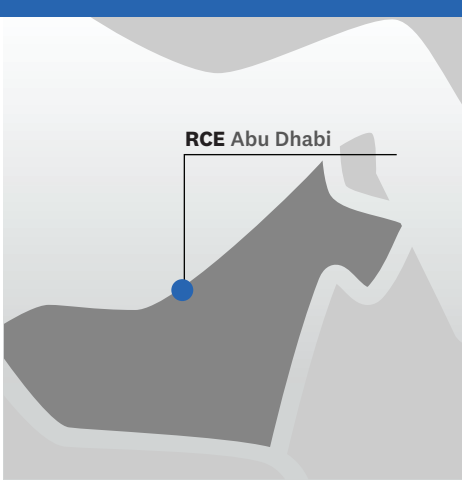
responses (Chen & Liu, 2020). This is not only important for youth themselves, but also for families, community members and other stakeholders, as youth-led efforts can help accelerate behavioural changes, strengthen community resilience and contribute to Abu Dhabi’s sustainability goals through real, tangible and community-based results.

Common barriers, including the lack of dedicated resources, structured curricula and institutional knowledge for environmental education in schools, prompted the Environment Agency – Abu Dhabi (EAD) to intervene through offering teacher training opportunities, learning materials development and capacity building. As part of these efforts, the Sustainable Schools Initiative (SSI) was established in response to the call for sustainability education set out in the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD) 2005–2014 (UNESCO, 2014), which emphasized that sustainability should be integrated across school culture, rather than taught solely as a subject. SSI transforms schools into living laboratories where students develop practical, real-world skills through leading eco-clubs and taking part in activities that measure and improve the environmental performance of their school.

How We Respond

Founded in 2009 by young professionals at the EAD, SSI is the first whole-school programme developed by Abu Dhabi to embed ESD into the daily routines of schools as well as their learning and school management practices. The primary goal of SSI is to build youth leadership and sustainability competencies and achieve measurable improvements in how schools operate sustainably. Youth decision-making is embedded at every stage: students lead eco-clubs and community action projects, conduct school audits and present their findings to peers, staff and the wider community.

SSI employs the whole-school approach, which recognizes that the interconnected global challenges require collective action. In line with this, teachers, students and the surrounding community all learn to measure, understand and improve their resource efficiency together. What is important is that students learn by doing: they audit school consumption, calculate baselines and identify where reductions are achievable, focusing on energy and water conservation, waste reduction, sustainable sourcing, biodiversity awareness and climate literacy. Schools receive ongoing support through guidelines, training of trainers workshops, the e-GREEN learning platform, the Abu Dhabi Quality and Conformity Council manual, field trips and certification pathways,



RCE Abu Dhabi

Region:
Africa & Middle East

Country:
United Arab Emirates

Target SDG(s):
4 6 7 12 13 15

Target audience(s):
Youth; Teachers and parents associated with public and charter schools

ESD for 2030 Priority Action:
4 6 7 12 13 15

Language(s) of the project:
English, Arabic

Stakeholders:
Ministry of Education; Abu Dhabi Department of Education and Knowledge; BP

Duration of project:
September 2009–ongoing

 **562**
Schools participating in SSI

 **68,904**
Students participating in green school audits

 **47,910**
Students participating in eco-clubs

 **384,270**
Students participating in environmental field trips

 **15,345**
Teachers trained through an e-learning platform (e-Green)

practices in participating schools, providing a tangible path from awareness to behaviour change. Accountability is maintained through the Green Stars rating system and structured eco-club plans, while SSI's recognition on the Global Environment Education Partnership (GEEP) best practice platform provides an external feedback loop that benchmarks impact globally.

What We Have Achieved

To this day, SSI continues to be led by young professionals within the EAD and has grown from 84 schools to 562 schools across the United Arab Emirates (See Figure 1), engaging both government and private schools across diverse communities. SSI has evolved from a small pilot programme into a nationwide environmental education framework integrated into the Ministry of Education and UNESCO's Greening Education Partnership.

SSI has also influenced policy: the programme is now mandated through Abu Dhabi's Department of Education and Knowledge (ADEK) School Policy on Sustainability, and our method is codified in the Abu Dhabi Guideline for Green Schools (ADG 17/2017).

The results (See Figure 2) indicate year-on-year improvements amongst schools across all eco-audit areas, with improved environmental performance in land (83 per cent of schools showing improvements, water (82 per cent), waste (80 per cent), air (78 per cent), energy (67 per cent) and overall eco-audit index (77 per cent).

In terms of less tangible outcomes, a recent survey (2025) amongst SSI participants indicated statistically significant knowledge and awareness amongst both students and teachers participating in the SSI programme. Similarly, there was evidence of behaviour change with participants reporting increases in positive environmental behaviours such as reducing water use (78.8 per cent) and recycling (70.8 per cent).

enabling them to track performance and demonstrate measurable improvements over time.

A defining element of SSI is that students are co-designers and champions of sustainability. Eco-clubs identify priorities, create campaigns, collect data and communicate results to the wider school community. Student-led initiatives — hydroponic farming programmes, water-saving campaigns, waste recycling systems, greening and planting projects, and the Tide Turners Plastic Challenge engaging over 1,000 students — have been adopted as permanent



Students participate in an environmental field trip activity (mangrove planting).

What We Have Learned

Three lessons from SSI's 15-year evolution may guide similar initiatives globally.

First, transitioning from external funding to self-sufficiency strengthens longevity. SSI operated with corporate sponsorship from 2009 to 2018 before becoming financially independent by migrating training resources to freely accessible platforms such as e-GREEN on-line learning, partnering with ADEK, the Ministry of Education, and Tadweer Group (responsible for waste and resource management in Abu Dhabi) to co-deliver programme materials, and embedding the training of trainers model to reduce reliance on external facilitators. This shift, coupled with replacing monetary prizes with an accredited Green Stars rating system, transformed SSI from a competition into an institutionalized quality framework, improving long-term sustainability and programme integrity.

Second, policy integration is essential for scaling. SSI's formal recognition by ADEK, and its subsequent mandate through official school sustainability policy, enabled expansion from a handful of schools to 562 across the UAE. This was a collaborative process: EAD directly supported ADEK in drafting the sustainability policy and alignment with UNESCO's Greening Education Partnership through the Ministry of Education, who extended the framework nationally. Embedding environmental education within policy structures secures institutional commitment beyond individual champions.

Third, digital infrastructure reduces barriers to participation. Replacing paper submissions with an automated management system streamlined evaluation for schools and experts alike. An online training platform eliminated cross-country travel for teacher workshops, saving time, resources and reducing travel-related emissions. Building this infrastructure required early corporate investment from the

private sector, alongside sustained attention to accessibility and end-user training. Course content is developed by environmental education specialists to maintain credibility and pedagogical integrity.

Student consultations confirmed what drives engagement: hands-on activities and opportunities to lead and take on responsibility. As one student noted, “when we participate in practical and fun activities and work in groups, we become more active.” Seeing visible impact

schools to implement SSI eco-audits, ensuring consistent annual reporting across 562 schools. We are enhancing our methodology, including official expansion into Cycle 1 (Grades 1-5) to engage learners from an earlier age, and refining teaching materials toward observable competencies aligned with UNESCO’s ESD learning objectives through our e-GREEN learning platform.

To expand reach, we are extending SSI into universities, vocational institutions and

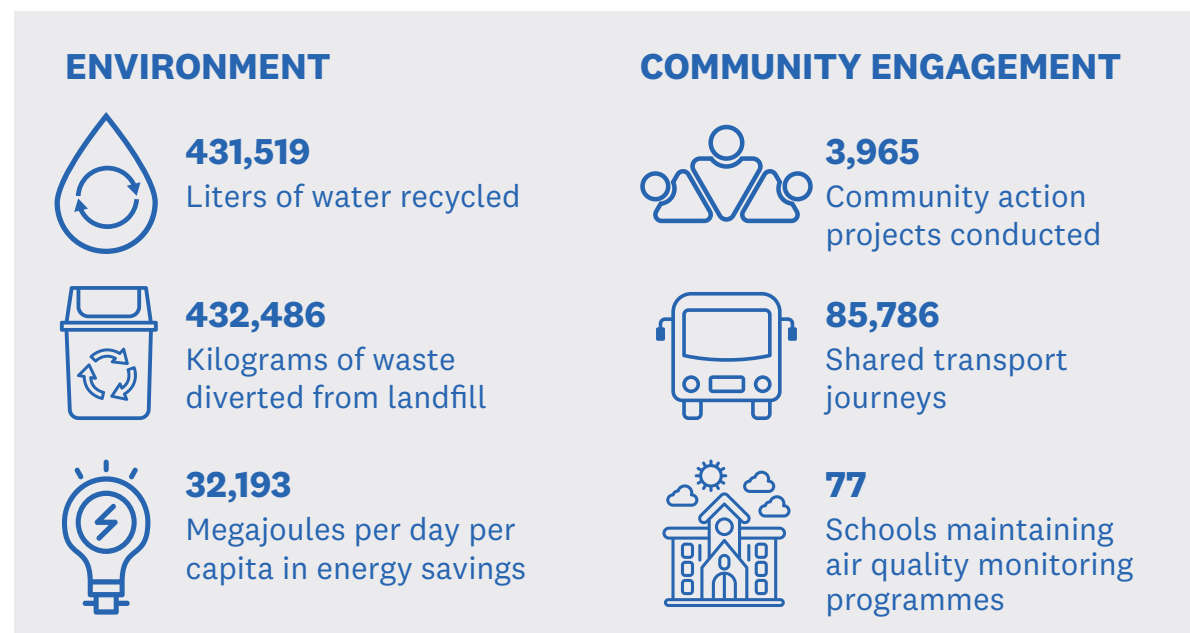


Figure 2. Sustainable Schools Initiative, delivering results for the environment and local communities (Source: RCE Abu Dhabi).

— cleaner grounds and successful campaigns — helps sustain student motivation.

What Needs to Change

With SSI’s recent recognition by UNU as a Regional Centre of Expertise on Education for Sustainable Development, we are positioned to share our approach regionally — exporting training materials, guiding rubrics and audit frameworks while maintaining data standards.

To strengthen programme quality, ADEK’s sustainability policy now mandates all

community settings through home-school kits and partnerships with local suppliers and recycling agencies.

Student feedback highlighted key areas for improvement: time constraints in balancing academics with SSI activities and uneven awareness across schools. We are addressing this through flexible participation options and broader outreach.

To refine course content, we are also analysing SSI against international frameworks — including UNFCCC (1992) Article 6 (development and



Students as youth rangers in a mangrove monitoring activity.

implementation of educational and public awareness programmes on climate change and its effects), Paris Agreement Article 12 (measures to enhance climate change education), Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) target 4.7 (By 2030, ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development) and SDG target 13.3 (Improve education, awareness-raising and human and institutional capacity on climate change mitigation, adaptation, impact reduction and early warning).

Our Message

We founded SSI in 2009 as young professionals with a Nature Bus (EAD’s first environment education initiative), a handful of schools and a belief that students could lead environmental change. As we grew, the programme grew with us: from 84 schools to 562, from paper

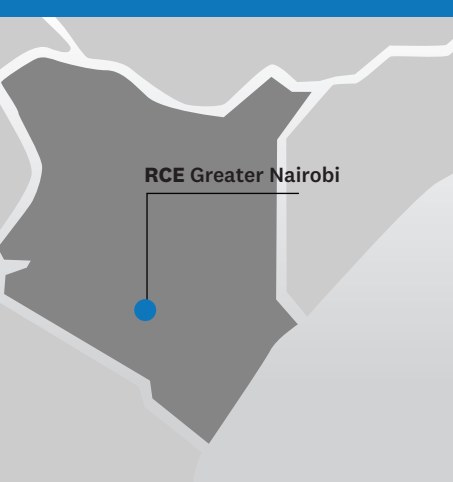
submissions to digital platforms, from a pilot to a nationally mandated initiative. Today, we supervise a new generation of youth leaders who run SSI — the same way we once did. We have always powered this programme, whether behind the scenes developing strategy or in schools leading eco-clubs and audits. Our vision now is to take SSI beyond schools — into universities, vocational institutions and communities — building a connected system of lifelong sustainability learning across the region. To our peers: you do not need to wait for permission to build something meaningful. Start where you are and let the work grow with you.

More Information:

[SSI website](#)

[EAD e-GREEN platform](#)

[SSI in naha \(AI-enabled web app\)](#)



RCE Greater Nairobi



Region:
Africa & Middle East



Country:
Kenya

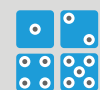


SDG(s):



Target audience(s):

Children with developmental disabilities;
Caregivers; Educators; Youth innovators;
Government; Universities; Youths;
Impact donors



ESD for 2030 Priority Action:



Language(s) of the project:

English, Kiswahili



Stakeholders:

Children with developmental
disabilities; Caregivers; Therapists;
Special Needs Education (SNE)
teachers; Youth innovators;
Community-based organizations;
Disability advocates



Duration of project:

2025–ongoing



Photo by Senses Hub

A co-creation and co-design session with youths living with speech disabilities.

WeLove Assistive Technology

 **RCE Greater Nairobi**

James Riri, Okwakau Abednego and Bancy Wawira Ileri



What We Face

Children with developmental disabilities such as autism spectrum disorder (ASD), cerebral palsy (CP) and speech-related disabilities, including stuttering and dysarthria, face persistent barriers to communication, learning and social participation in Kenya. Access to assistive technology remains limited due to high cost, lack of locally adapted solutions, low public awareness and minimal integration into educational and community settings (NCPWD, 2024; UNDP, 2025). As a result, many children are excluded from meaningful learning opportunities and struggle to express themselves in daily interactions.

At the same time, youth-led digital innovation ecosystems are growing rapidly, particularly in urban centres such as Nairobi. However, these innovation spaces often focus on commercial or mainstream digital solutions, with limited attention to disability inclusion or assistive technology. This

disconnect leaves children with developmental disabilities without appropriate tools, while youth innovators miss opportunities to address pressing social challenges.

As youth innovators, we recognize that inclusive and sustainable development cannot be achieved without addressing the rights and needs of people with disabilities. Assistive technology is not only a health or education concern, but also a matter of social justice and sustainable development. The lack of affordable, culturally responsive and locally relevant assistive solutions motivated us to establish WeLove Assistive Technology.

Our initiative responds to the need for youth-led, ethical and inclusive digital innovation that supports children with developmental disabilities while empowering young people to actively contribute to ESD within their communities.

How We Respond

WeLove Assistive Technology (WeLove) is a youth-founded and youth-led initiative focused on researching, designing and developing digital assistive solutions for children with developmental disabilities. Our approach emphasizes user-led design, ethical innovation and meaningful community engagement. We oversee the technical aspects and ensure inclusivity is embedded throughout the whole process. Youth involvement is central, and our team contributes to key decisions at each stage of the process, from design to testing and implementation (See Figure 3).

WeLove begins by conducting needs assessments through direct engagement with caregivers, therapists, educators and children. These interactions help us understand the real-world communication, learning and accessibility challenges children face and receive feedback from them. We work with partners like Kilimanjaro Blind Trust Africa (KBTA) and Senses Hub — Kenya-based organizations

focused on disability inclusion and assistive technology — who help us test and pilot our solutions. KBTA's Live Labs program allows us to gather real-time user feedback and iterate on the designs, ensuring we stay on track with what the end users need. These sessions incorporate all target users, including caregivers, families and professionals like speech-language pathologists (SLPs) and educators.



YOUTH-LED INNOVATION

100% youth-founded, youth-led initiative



INNOVATION APPROACH

Ethical, inclusive and locally responsive assistive technology



ESD ALIGNMENT

Promotes inclusive education, reduced inequalities, and youth leadership in digital transformation



CORE PRINCIPLE

“Nothing about us, without us.”



USER-CENTRED DESIGN

Children with developmental disabilities, caregivers and educators co-design and test solutions



TARGET GROUPS

Caregivers, therapists, educators and youth innovators participate in consultations and pilots



FOCUS AREAS

Autism spectrum disorder, cerebral palsy, speech and communication-related disabilities

Figure 3. WeLove Assistive Technology — from lived experiences to practical tools (RCE Greater Nairobi).

Our work integrates digital technologies and emerging tools such as AI-assisted personalization, accessibility-focused interfaces and low-cost digital platforms to ensure solutions are inclusive and scalable.

We prioritize youth capacity building. Team members develop skills in inclusive design, accessibility standards, ethical technology use and disability-sensitive innovation (See Figure 3). While we do not offer formal online courses, our team regularly attends webinars and

workshops focused on inclusive and assistive technology to stay informed and develop our skills. We use tools like Figma, TensorFlow, HuggingFace and Canva to design and develop our tools, ensuring they meet accessibility standards and genuinely support children with developmental disabilities.

Through this integrated approach, WeLove demonstrates how youth-led digital innovation can respond effectively to local challenges while advancing ESD principles.

What We Have Achieved

Although the initiative is ongoing, WeLove Assistive Technology has achieved both tangible and intangible outcomes. To date, we have engaged core stakeholders, including caregivers, educators, therapists and youth innovators through research activities, pilot testing and community consultations. It is crucial to include people with disabilities and caregivers in these stages, as they bring valuable, real-world insights into the challenges they face daily. Their involvement ensures that the solutions we design are truly relevant and effective. Caregivers offer a unique perspective on children's needs, preferences and learning environment, while persons with disabilities provide feedback on accessibility, usability and the practicality of assistive technologies.

We have developed early-stage assistive technology prototypes focused on communication support and inclusive learning. These prototypes are informed by direct user feedback and local context, contributing to improved understanding of how digital tools can support children with developmental disabilities in Kenya.

Beyond technical outputs, the initiative has generated important intangible impacts. Awareness of disability inclusion and ethical technology development has increased within youth innovation spaces that previously lacked engagement with assistive technology. Youth team members report strengthened

leadership skills, increased empathy and greater confidence in working with marginalized communities.

The project has also contributed to shifting perceptions among stakeholders by positioning youth not only as beneficiaries of innovation programmes, but as capable leaders addressing complex social and educational challenges. These outcomes highlight the potential of youth-led assistive technology initiatives to advance inclusive education and contribute to sustainable development at the community level.

What We Have Learned

Several key lessons have emerged from our experience. First, inclusive innovation is most effective when end users — children, caregivers and educators — are involved from the earliest stages of design. Their perspectives challenge assumptions and lead to more relevant solutions. For example, during user testing, a user with cerebral palsy and dysarthria proposed a simpler way to record her voice by tapping instead of pressing and holding. In another setting, a user with a severe stutter suggested a “calming” feature such as an anxiety-management action button to support communication during moments of stress. Similarly, one parent pointed out that the insight charts in the app were technical and unnecessary; they preferred something simpler and straightforward. These insights continue to directly influence our design choices.

Second, youth-led teams can drive meaningful innovation when they are trusted and supported. Trust builds confidence, encouraging creativity and entrepreneurial spirit. Support ensures credibility, which is crucial particularly in sensitive spaces like disability inclusion where building trust with underserved communities is essential.

However, barriers remain. Limited funding for assistive technology research, low awareness of disability inclusion within technology spaces,



OPEN-SOURCE FINE-TUNING

We fine-tune AI models exclusively with open-source datasets — ensuring training data is transparent, auditable and ethically sourced.



OFFLINE-FIRST ARCHITECTURE

Data is never transmitted unless the user explicitly allows it. Privacy is the default — not an afterthought.



AI LITERACY TRAINING

We equip both our team and the children using our tools with the knowledge to understand how AI works, its benefits, its limits and the safeguards we have in place.

100%

Open-source training data

0

Data transmitted without consent

2X

AI literacy training — team & children

Figure 5. AI-powered speech support: using automatic speech recognition and personalized therapy modules to help children with speech and language impairments (Source: RCE Greater Nairobi).

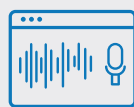
and the complexity of working across health, education and digital sectors present ongoing challenges. Addressing these issues requires collaboration, patience and sustained advocacy.

Our experience demonstrates that ESD is strengthened when youth innovation is intentionally inclusive, values lived experiences and prioritizes social impact alongside technological advancement.



DATA

Collect atypical speech data from local sources for AI training.



TRAINING

Custom-train automatic speech recognition (ASR) models using the collected data to understand unique speech patterns effectively.



PROCESSING

AI processes the child's speech, converting it into accurate text or spoken output for improved communication.



THERAPY

Offer personalized speech therapy modules that motivate and engage through gamification.



IMPROVEMENT

Continuously track progress in articulation and clarity to support ongoing communication development.

Figure 4. Using automatic speech recognition and personalized therapy modules to help children with speech and language impairments (RCE Greater Nairobi).

What Needs to Change

Looking ahead, we must move from designing assistive technology solutions for children with developmental disabilities and communities to design solutions with them. RCE Greater Nairobi looks forward to bringing together stakeholders who will work with WeLove to bring our solutions closer to the communities that need them most. Our direct interactions with learners, caregivers and educators have reinforced that sustainable solutions can only emerge through deep collaboration with those who experience these challenges daily. RCE Greater Nairobi is committed to facilitating collaboration within the RCE's network which includes Kenyatta University Directorate of Disability Services. The goal of the collaborations is to co-organize workshops, user feedback sessions and co-design activities, where educators and students share their needs and test prototypes. These interactions will help us refine our tools to be more intuitive, accessible and culturally relevant.

Moving forward, WeLove Assistive Technology is committed to strengthening co-creation partnerships with Special Needs Education schools, therapists, caregivers and disability-focused organizations to ensure our assistive tools are grounded in lived experience, dignity and real educational needs. We aim to expand pilot testing in community settings and schools, continuously gathering feedback to refine functionality, accessibility and cultural relevance.

Sustaining and scaling this work requires greater recognition of assistive technology as a core pillar of inclusive education and ESD. We will continue advocating for increased investment in youth-led, disability-inclusive digital innovation, while building pathways for more young people to contribute meaningfully to assistive technology development.

Through collaboration with RCE Greater Nairobi, we aim to amplify learning, convene diverse



User testing session with parents, caregivers and educators of children with speech and language disabilities.



PARTICIPATION AT EVERY STAGE

People with disabilities are involved in design, testing and piloting — shaping every decision from the ground up.



OWNERSHIP OVER THEIR OWN TOOLS

When communities help build the tools they use, they trust them — and adopt them long term. Participation creates genuine agency.



FUNCTIONAL & DEEPLY HUMAN

Solutions grounded in real disability experiences are sensitive, relevant and meaningful — not just technically sound.



Co-designed with communities

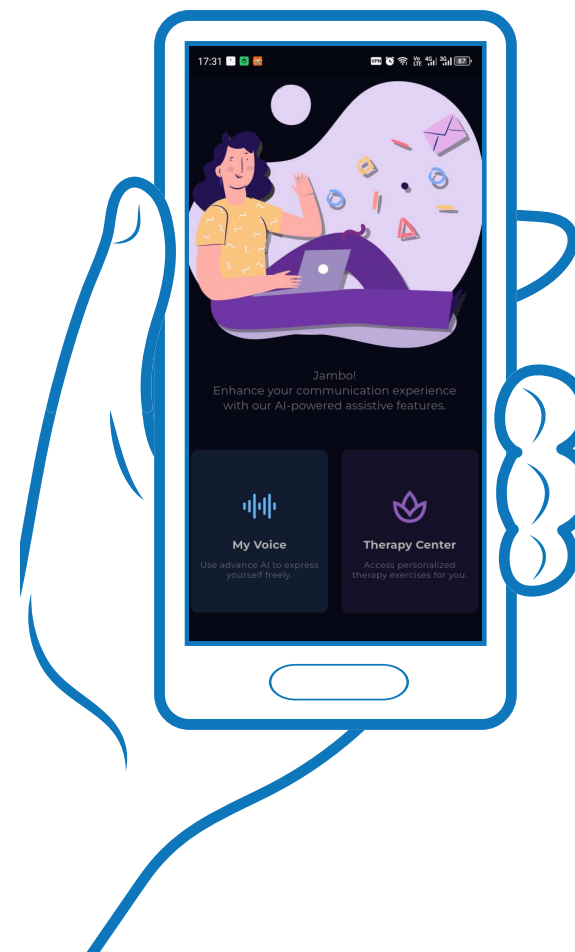


Empowering ownership & voice



Grounded in lived experience

Figure 6. Involving people with disabilities in the design of project tools ensures that the technology is responsive to their needs. (Source: RCE Greater Nairobi).



stakeholders and contribute to regional dialogue on inclusive digital transformation, ensuring that children with developmental disabilities are not left behind as technology advances.

Our Message

As youth innovators, we have learned that real solutions emerge when we listen first and work alongside the communities affected. Through WeLove Assistive Technology, our interactions with children with developmental disabilities, their caregivers and educators continue to shape how we design, innovate and lead.

We believe assistive technology must be rooted in dignity, lived experience and inclusion; not charity or convenience. When youth, communities and institutions collaborate with intention, digital innovation becomes a powerful tool for equity, learning and sustainable development.

More Information:

[Social media posts and updates \(LinkedIn\)](#)

[Article on the Allamano special school and disability-inclusive education](#)



Participants from the Lake Sibayi region of Northern KwaZulu-Natal demonstrate their newly acquired knowledge of miniSASS — enriched by sharing of knowledge across gender barriers and generational gaps.

From Learning to Action: Youth Participation in Water Quality Monitoring for Water Security

 RCE KwaZulu-Natal

Zaniel April and Nkosingithandile Sithole



What We Face

Access to clean water and sanitation is a fundamental human right that underpins health, dignity and overall quality of life (Ledger, Rampedi & Ndhlovu, 2024). However, South Africa still struggles to ensure equitable access to water for all. Unequal access remains a persistent challenge, particularly for rural communities and informal settlements, reflecting historical disparities linked to apartheid systems (Jegede & Shikwambane, 2021).

South Africa faces significant difficulties in achieving Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 6, which aims to ensure universal access to safe water and sanitation by 2030. Progress has been slowed by weak municipal governance, aging and poorly maintained water and wastewater infrastructure, limited funding, insufficient technical capacity and inadequate monitoring systems (Parliament of South Africa, 2025). These systemic challenges are further compounded by population growth, rapid urbanization, agricultural runoff, industrial

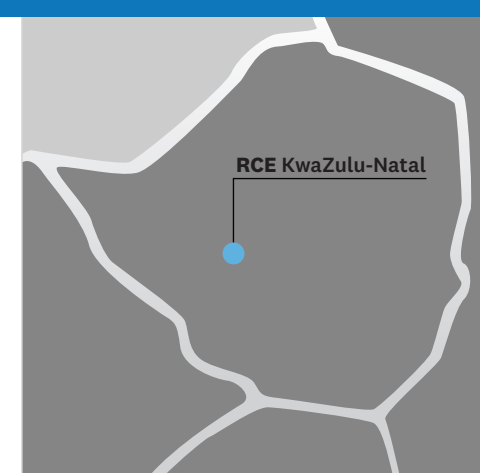
pollution and the growing impacts of climate change. Together, these pressures have contributed to declining water quality, rising treatment costs and increased risks of waterborne diseases, particularly for vulnerable communities (Saleem et al., 2024; Department of Water and Sanitation, 2024).

In response, community-based water quality management (CBWQM) initiatives have gained momentum in South Africa as effective community-led responses to water quality challenges (Buckland-Nicks et al., 2016; Naiga, 2018). In line with this approach, GroundTruth — our water science organization — initiated a citizen science approach that enables local residents to collect and share water data. This participatory model strengthens environmental awareness, improves access to locally relevant information and helps bridge critical data gaps, particularly in under-resourced areas (Fraisl et al., 2022; IWMI, 2025a). It further supports youth skills development, inclusive governance and collaboration aligned with Integrated Water Resource Management principles (Lotz-Sisitka et al., 2022).

How We Respond

Youth representatives from RCE KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) have actively supported local citizen science initiatives by providing training opportunities, resources (e.g. data, citizen science tools), and project management support. A key example is the Enviro-Champs model, which originated in the Mpophomeni community in 2011 to empower local residents to monitor pollution in streams flowing through their area and foster community awareness and action (Sithole et al., 2025a). The Mpophomeni Enviro-Champs initiative brought together a wide range of stakeholders, including local government, water utilities, NGOs, research institutions and community groups.

The success of this approach led to its expansion across Southern Africa, with initiatives adapted to local contexts and increasingly supported by digital tools, such as the mini-Stream Assessment Scoring System (miniSASS) application developed by GroundTruth in partnership with the International Water Management Institute (IWMI). The miniSASS app uses a machine learning and an artificial intelligence algorithm to automatically identify aquatic macroinvertebrates in real time (See Figure 7). The app enables simple data collection by logging information of sample sites and aquatic macroinvertebrate photographs with precise location data.



Region:
Africa and Middle East



Country:
Botswana, Mozambique, South Africa, Zimbabwe



SDG(s):



Target audience(s):
Unemployed youth aged 18–35 years old; Other adult learners



ESD for 2030 Priority Action:



Language(s) of the project:
English, Portuguese, isiZulu and Sesotho



Stakeholders:
International Water Management Institute - Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (IWMI-CGIAR); UNICEF; UNESCO; Biosphere Reserves; Department of Water and Sanitation (DWS) of the Republic of South Africa; Limpopo Watercourse Commission (LIMCOM)



Duration of project:
2021–ongoing

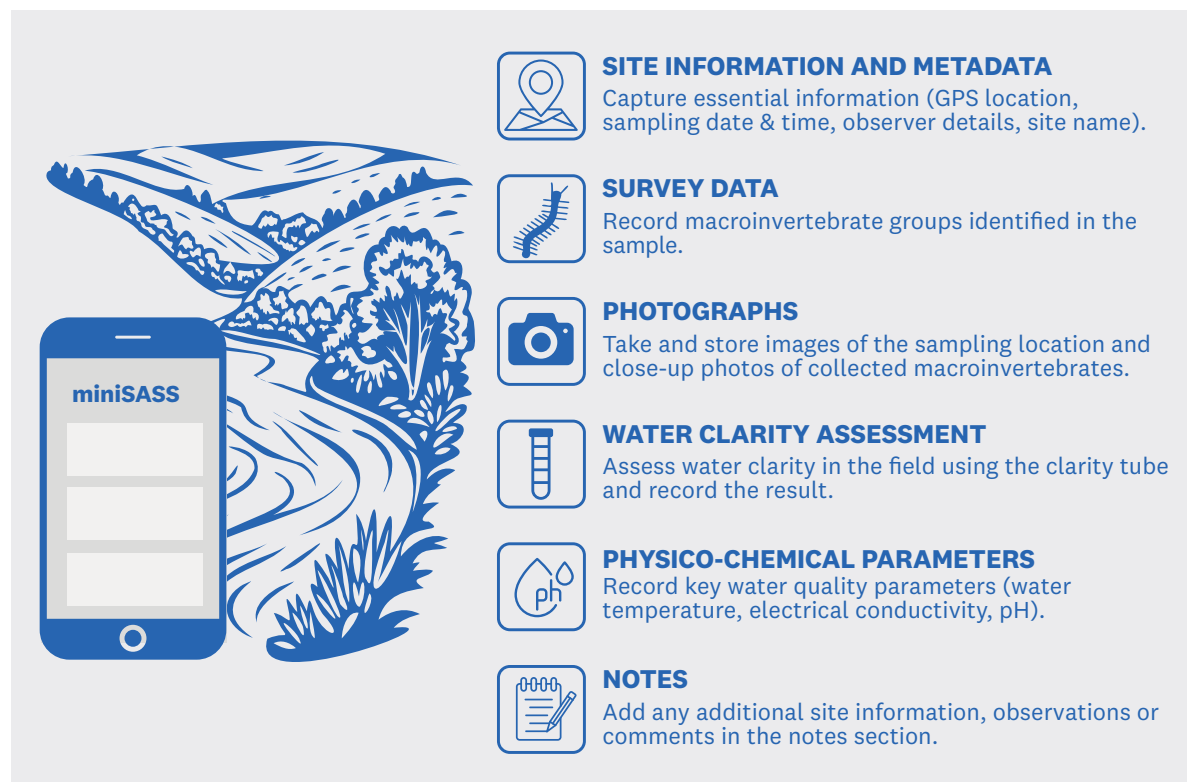


Figure 7. The miniSASS app enables local residents to monitor pollution in streams flowing through their areas (Source: RCE KwaZulu-Natal).

Several upgrades were made to the miniSASS app to enhance user experience and maintain data integrity, including privacy and data safety upgrades, website-mobile app interoperability, geolocation accuracy, data upload flexibility, bug fixes and stability and single sign-on (SSO) integration with Yoma — a digital marketplace which gives youth access to green skilling, learning to earning opportunities and potential access to employment.

What We Have Achieved

Over the past three years, GroundTruth has been involved in research and development initiatives focused on Enviro-Champs, miniSASS and online learning to earning opportunities within the Yoma environment, in collaboration with local and international partners (Mickelsson et al., 2024; Russell et al., 2024). Steering citizen science across

multiple African countries has been a major achievement for water science organizations such as GroundTruth. Curtis et al. (2025), in the State of the River Report, highlight the need for a coordinated citizen science network across South Africa and potentially the wider Southern African Development Community (SADC). Such coordination, supported by shared platforms for data exchange, communication and long-term continuity, is essential for strengthening collaboration between communities and government institutions.

The Limpopo River Basin Project responded directly to this need by supporting coordinated citizen science networks and fostering strong relationships with rural communities across Botswana, Mozambique, South Africa and Zimbabwe (IWMI, 2025c) (See Figure 8). This project delivered tangible capacity-building and professional development outcomes. Trained

champions, trainers and university students have extended this impact by training others, accessing additional funding and participating in further citizen science initiatives. Engagement has been overwhelmingly positive, with biosphere reserves increasingly requesting collaboration. This strengthened youth pathways and institutional trust.

What We Have Learned

The 2030 deadline for achieving the SDGs is near and conventional approaches may not illicit real change in the SADC region, where socioeconomic factors often limit participation in water management (Ashepet et al., 2024). Citizen science addresses health burdens, environmental degradation, natural hazards and biodiversity loss. Training can be delivered in person or online (Curtis et al., 2025), but both need to facilitate social learning and collaboration especially for rural communities. Effective strategies include setting up local

communities of practice through in-person sessions to build trust, group-based tasks for discussion and knowledge-sharing using social media. Key recommendations include forming diverse groups, using visual tools for a wide range of contexts and sharing citizen science tools through accessible platforms (Russell et al., 2024).

Key outcomes from our citizen science projects have found that ensuring inclusivity requires multiple engagement channels, participation across age groups and support for building digital skills (Golumbic, 2015). Emerging technologies such as digital twinning, miniSASS apps and the Yoma online learning platform enhance engagement, while training of trainers workshops build capacity to support real time, data-driven decision-making (Botín-Sanabria et al., 2022; Yang et al., 2024). These approaches demonstrate the effectiveness of contextual, experiential learning in empowering youth to contribute to conservation (Ballard et al., 2017).

Participants learning to use the Velocity Plank (tool for measuring water flow) during the practical session of the training of trainers workshop in Gonarezhou National Park, Zimbabwe.



What Needs to Change

A key lesson for future citizen science initiatives is the importance of understanding local needs and adapting engagement strategies accordingly (Ashepet et al., 2024). Some of the ways in which this was achieved include the translation of learning materials into the local languages of the participating communities, including isiZulu, Sesotho, Tsonga, Setswana, Shangaan, Portuguese and Afrikaans. Although this slowed the pace of teaching, it strengthened participant understanding and was recognized as a key component of effective capacity building. In some remote project communities with limited internet access, facilitators provide mobile data and support through account setup and navigation of digital platforms. By tailoring their approaches, projects can more effectively address development challenges and contribute to the SDGs.

There is a clear need for an information and coordination hub to support the long-term sustainability of citizen science projects.

While training is essential, trainers often require ongoing guidance, motivation and structured systems to coordinate activities beyond the initial training phase. Establishing such mechanisms takes time and sustained funding; yet support often ends before these systems are fully embedded, placing continuity at risk. Motivation and connection have been maintained through social media and online engagement following in-person training. Post-training, participants continue to organize events, develop proposals and lead environmental awareness days in their communities, but they often require guidance and encouragement to sustain momentum. Maintaining active connections between trained facilitators, government organizations and community leaders, with a central coordination hub facilitating communication and guidance rather than direct implementation, would be beneficial. Typically provided without additional cost, this approach strengthens coordination, reinforces motivation and supports long-term impact beyond individual project funding cycles.

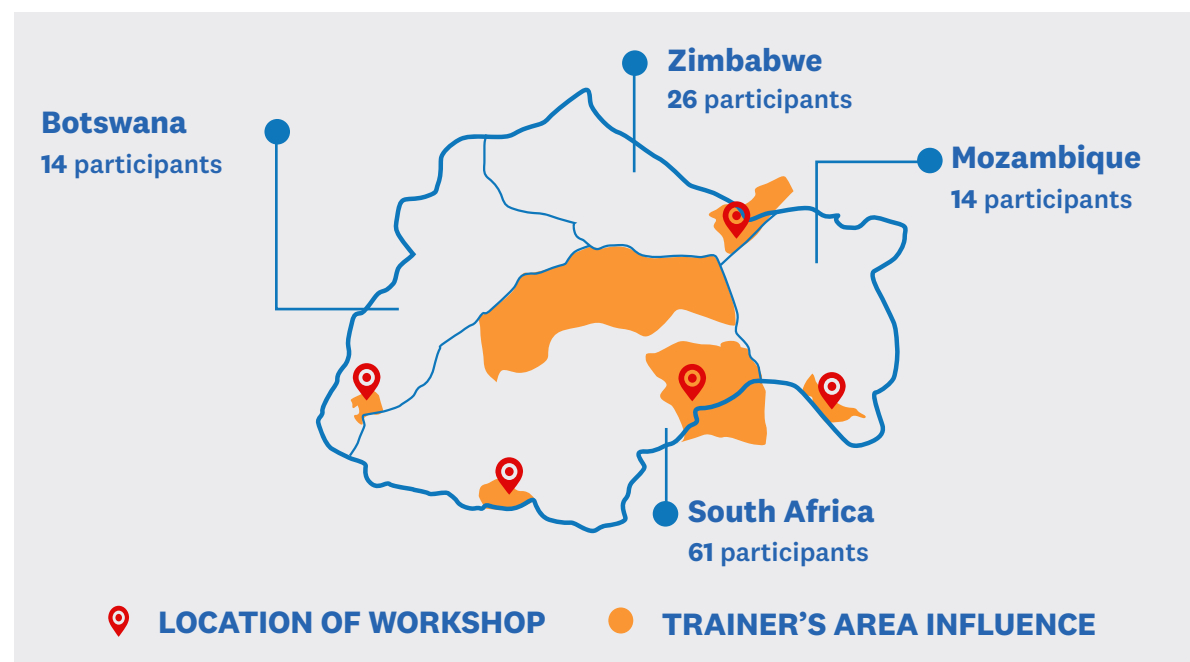


Figure 8. Training of trainers workshops across the Limpopo River Basin (Source: RCE KwaZulu-Natal).

GROUNDTRUTH-WRC PROJECT



Transforming a toolbox into an online learning system
Transformed a South African citizen science toolbox into an online learning system, enabling marginalized communities to contribute to SDG 6 reporting (Russell et al., 2024).

TOOLS & TRAINING
COMMUNITY ACTION
ONGOING SUPPORT
CONTRIBUTING TO SDG 6

GREEN LEARN2EARN PROJECT



Developing youth career pathways in green economy skills
Sponsored by Accenture and implemented with Rhodes University, the Duzi-uMngeni Conservation Trust and UNICEF.

RIVER MONITORING COURSE
EARN INCENTIVES
LEARNING-TO-EARNING OPPORTUNITIES
CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

LIMPOPO RIVER BASIN TRANSBOUNDARY PROJECT



Strengthening youth skills and participation across borders
Extended the approach by training communities across four countries in water quality monitoring, strengthening youth skills and participation in water resource management.

YOUTH ENGAGEMENT
ONLINE SUPPORT
LOCAL CHAMPIONS
TRANSBOUNDARY IMPACT

COLLECTIVE IMPACT



Improved water quality monitoring and data for decision-making



Empowered communities and youth leading local action



Strengthened skills for green jobs and entrepreneurship



Enhanced collaboration across communities, sectors and borders



Advancing inclusive water governance and a just green transition

Figure 9. RCE KwaZulu-Natal's interconnected projects demonstrate the scalability and impact of the model (Source: RCE KwaZulu-Natal).

Our Message

As the GroundTruth team, our contribution to citizen science initiatives has empowered young people across both rural and urban areas to become active environmental ambassadors. By embracing digital technology and emerging tools such as AI, we can expand access to citizen science learning and scale these efforts globally. Through our engagement with a broader community of practice in water

resource monitoring and management, we are well-positioned to leverage partnerships and expertise to maximize project impact and create synergies with aligned initiatives. Ultimately, our focus remains on establishing sustainable citizen science projects that contribute to long-term research, environmental monitoring and stewardship, ensuring lasting benefits for communities, ecosystems and the future of our planet.



Chapter Americas

When the Territory Educates: Community Leaders Weaving Dialogue and Action Through the Esperançar Project

RCE Rio de Janeiro..... 34

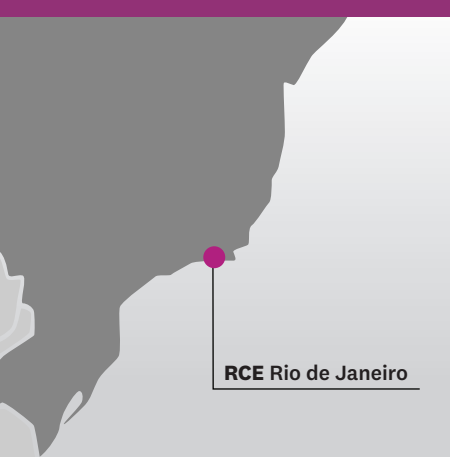


From the Stands to Sustainability

RCE Detroit Windsor..... 40



Photo By Victoria Gonzales - 2088 FCDL 9XW | Unsplash



RCE Rio de Janeiro



A socioemotional education activity (Emotion Wheel) to build self-awareness of different emotions and how to express them.

When the Territory Educates: Community Leaders Weaving Dialogue and Action Through the Esperançar Project

RCE Rio de Janeiro

Catarina dos Santos Vitorino de Oliveira, João Pedro Alcantara Gomes, Searon de Moraes Cabral and Mariana Sá Alcantara Gomes



What We Face

The Esperançar Project is an initiative led by university students in the West Zone of Rio de Janeiro, which operates within a context marked by social, educational and racial inequalities, exacerbated by the historical absence of effective public policies and the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic (See Figure 10). The project addresses limited access to education, culture, leisure and basic rights, particularly experienced by Black children, youth and families who face educational inequalities, social marginalization and limited opportunities for development.

The main objective of the Esperançar Project is to promote emancipatory educational practices, grounded

in the principles of Paulo Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed — valuing local knowledge, participants' lived experiences and the territory as a legitimate pedagogical space (Freire, 1974). All project activities are guided by local reality and dialogue between participants and community residents. Conceived and implemented by young people from the community, knowledgeable about the territory, culture and difficulties faced by the local population, the project uses a participatory management model, which guides all decision-making from within the territory itself.

The project provides young people with educational spaces that value their stories and knowledge, strengthening their self-esteem, agency and critical consciousness. For the local community and other stakeholders, the Esperançar Project demonstrates that community-based initiatives grounded in volunteerism and collaborative action can generate tangible impacts, strengthen social ties, and contribute to collective and lasting transformation (Oliveira; Alcantara Gomes, 2025).

How We Respond

The Esperançar Project is comprised of several working groups — Education, Management, Territory, Culture, Communication, Sports and Environment — which operate in an integrated manner to respond to the needs of the communities they serve. Implemented activities include school tutoring and literacy training for children and adolescents, pedagogical workshops, educational sports practices, cultural events, such as Cine Esperançar, Festival Esperançar and Natal Solidário (Solidarity Christmas), and other activities focused on cultural production and collective memory (See Figure 11). Since 2025, the project also organizes the Esperançar Seminar with the aim of affirming the territory as a space for knowledge production and academic research beyond the walls of formal institutions, recognizing community knowledge as legitimate, necessary and socially relevant.

All implemented activities are guided by the Esperançar Method, which understands learning as the result of a dialogue between academic knowledge and everyday knowledge.



INCOME AND LIVELIHOODS

43.7% of households report monthly income of up to two minimum wages

8.9% live on less than half a minimum wage

30% of the economically active population is unemployed

22.1% of individuals are engaged in informal economic activities

7.9% have access to formal employment



BASIC INFRASTRUCTURE

56.3% of respondents assessed public lighting as poor or very poor

45.8% reported inadequate or irregular water supply



HEALTH SERVICES

34.2% evaluated services as poor or very poor key challenges: shortage of medical professionals, long waiting times, limited availability of essential medicines



EDUCATION

66.3% evaluated access to education as very good

23.7% evaluated access to education as good

Community reports indicate shortage of teachers and school mediators

Figure 10. Key challenges faced by residents of the 29 de Março Territory (Source: Esperançar Project).

In coordination with public schools, families and local initiatives, the project responds to the real demands of the community, strengthening the sense of belonging, autonomy and processes of social transformation (Oliveira and; Alcantara Gomes, 2025) in the local territory.

The project is a voluntary, non-profit initiative developed in partnership with a local community football club, which supports educational sports activities and contributes financial support for other community activities, such as local fairs. Most activities are sustained through donations, and financial accountability is managed directly with partner institutions.

Monitoring and evaluation processes take place through different means. One form of feedback is the production of academic works, such as undergraduate theses and dissertations developed by volunteers, which document and analyse the project's impacts on the community. In addition, the territorial unit (project sector) is responsible for maintaining direct contact with

the families served, producing monthly reports that systematize feedback and identify local needs and areas for improvement.

What We Have Achieved

The initiative presents consistent results in strengthening the educational, social and community outcomes of the families it serves. Currently it supports over 45 families, directly reaching 98 children and youth — predominantly Black — who continuously participate in educational, cultural and formative activities. The project maintains partnerships with public institutions, such as Family Clinics and Social Assistance Reference Center (CRAS), strengthening comprehensive support and coordination with public policies and consolidating its role as a space for care, education and social transformation.

Among the tangible results, notable highlights include improvements in literacy, increased retention in educational activities, strengthened



Figure 11. Activities of the Esperançar Project help address key challenges of local communities (Source: Esperançar Project).



Tutoring session on angles, explained through sonas (drawings generated through the oral histories of the African people Quico).

school support and improved access to cultural and sports activities. According to the primary data, collected from the presentation of student report cards, around 85 per cent of students showed improvements in literacy after participating in the project's activities. Academic support is aligned with the formal curriculum but is structured around each students' specific needs and circumstances through a proprietary approach — the Esperançar Method — which integrates considerations of territory and race. Data from the dissertation (Cabral, 2025) also indicates a positive community evaluation regarding the quality of education, with high levels of trust from families and strong support for the project.

Among the activities contributing to intangible results, the initiative Black Biography/ Autobiography stands out. In this activity, the textual genre was explored through presenting the life trajectory of a Black actress and comedian from the local community. Learning about someone from their own territory generated surprise and identification among the students, who were previously unaware of this local role model. Inspired by her story, young participants developed

their own autobiographies, reflecting on their personal histories, aspirations and sense of belonging. The activity encouraged discussions on representation and future possibilities, strengthening participants' self-esteem and critical awareness. As a result, families reported that children began expressing a desire to follow similar paths, inspired by the artist's life trajectory. Subsequently, the project organized a tribute to the artist, who later received formal recognition from the Rio de Janeiro City Council.

What We Have Learned

The experience of the Esperançar Project demonstrates that community initiatives can generate significant impacts when based on collective commitment, active listening and valuing of the territory. One of the project's main lessons is that the engagement of youth, educators and community leaders is strengthened when initiatives are built on social bonds and mutual trust, volunteerism, and a shared commitment to transforming the community from within.

Among the enabling factors, local partnerships played a central role by providing space,

coordination, educational activities and connections to public services. These collaborations strengthened integrated support for participants, expanded the reach of actions and enhanced responses to local social needs. On the other hand, the project faced significant barriers, including the lack of continuous funding, structural limitations, logistical challenges and the demands associated with volunteer work. Nevertheless, we have learned that networked action, collective management and the recognition of local knowledge are essential strategies for sustaining and strengthening community-based initiatives.

What Needs to Change

The Esperançar Project recognizes that sustainability and the expansion of its impact depend on strengthening its institutional structure while preserving its community-based character. Among the priority future actions is the consolidation of local partnerships and the establishment of stable financial support mechanisms. These are essential to guarantee

the continuity of educational, cultural, sports, environmental and social activities, while reducing the burden of volunteer labour and securing the necessary resources for materials, transportation, food provision and the maintenance of physical spaces.

The project operates through integrated working groups responsible for planning and proposing concrete initiatives aimed at raising environmental awareness, appreciation of the environment and the local community, and taking care of collective spaces. These initiatives are closely linked to pedagogical and social practices developed with children, promoting reflections on belonging, responsibility and the preservation of their living environment. The learning generated through these activities extends beyond the project and is carried by students into schools, thereby strengthening critical and context-based educational practices.

Another key priority is strengthening existing and new partnerships with public facilities and

INTERNAL STAKEHOLDERS		EXTERNAL STAKEHOLDERS	
Area	Volunteers	Activities	Beneficiaries served
Education	10	 Basic food assistance	56 Families (with 98 children)
Culture	3	 Academic Tutoring	45 Children
Territory	2	 Cultural Festivals	Open to the community
Communication	1	 Social assistance	56 Families
Sports	1	 Sports activities	25 Children
Environmental	3	 Pedagogical workshops	39 Families

Figure 12. The Esperançar Project, by the numbers (Source: Esperançar Project).



Educational tour of the Little Africa Circuit in Rio de Janeiro. Cais do Valongo was the landing site for ships that carried more than one million enslaved people from Africa. Recognized as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2017, it is the only remaining physical trace of the arrival of enslaved Africans in the Americas.

local initiatives within the territory itself. In the long term, the Esperançar Project seeks to consolidate a solid community network based on solidarity, dialogue and collective social transformation.

Our Message

We believe that social transformation begins when the community recognizes its own potential and starts collectively building pathways of care, education and belonging. The Esperançar Project is composed of volunteer friends who chose to act through listening, solidarity, valuing local knowledge and understanding the territory as a legitimate space for learning, resistance and knowledge production. We act because we know the urgency of the demands experienced daily by children, youth and families, but also because we believe in the power of the collective to drive real change. At the same time, we hope that one day projects like ours will no longer be necessary. We envision a context in which public policies are fully effective, guaranteeing the rights, dignity and equitable access to education, so that such volunteer-driven actions cease to be a response to the State’s absence and become merely a memory of a time that needed to be transformed.

More Information:

- Esperançar project social media account (Instagram)
- Esperançar project blog
- Article, “The inaccessibility of a whitened curriculum in the training of Black students: the perspective of school-age children and young people of the Esperançar Project”
- RCE Rio de Janeiro blog
- Undergraduate thesis, “The Valuing of Black Identity through the Implementation of Law 10.639/03: The Emancipation of Sub-alternized Peoples through Popular Education” (Spanish)
- Undergraduate thesis, “The Literacy Process of Peripheral Children in the West Zone of Rio de Janeiro through Popular Education: an experience report” (Spanish)
- Master’s dissertation, “The Role of the Esperançar Project in the Perception of the Residents of March 29”
- Podcast episode, “Esperançar Group: Practicing Education from the Territory” (Spotify) Interview with the founder of the Esperançar Project
- YouTube video, “Building: The history of Santa Margarida and March 29th”
- News article, “Masks for Esperançar”



Student volunteers and leaders operate the waste stations at the zero-waste pilot basketball event with the new temporary recycling and composting bins.

From the Stands to Sustainability

RCE Detroit Windsor

Dylan McNay, Samantha Pickering, Genevieve Krembel, Julia Beltowski, Edna Lorenz and Donna Kashian



What We Face

From the Stands to Sustainability is a Zero Waste Athletic Events initiative at Wayne State University (WSU) in Detroit, Michigan, that uses campus sporting events as a visible and accessible platform for advancing institutional sustainability. Zero waste events occur when 90 per cent or more of the waste generated is diverted from landfills through recycling and composting. Developed by Students for Sustainable Development in partnership with the RCE Detroit Windsor and the Office of Campus Sustainability, the project responds to the persistent challenge of landfill-bound waste generated at large, recurring campus gatherings where, historically, only trash disposal has been available.

The Wayne State Field House seats 3,000 fans and hosts approximately 40–55 events annually, including basketball games, tournaments and commencement. These gatherings generate significant volumes of single-use food

packaging, plastic bottles and aluminum cans. Prior to this project, no recycling or composting infrastructure existed, limiting sustainable choices for attendees and vendors.

Food loss and waste contribute 8–10 per cent of global greenhouse gas emissions, while plastics generate emissions across their full life cycle (UNFCCC, 2024; Geneva Environment Network, 2023). In the United States alone, food waste accounts for roughly 170 million metric tons of carbon dioxide equivalent annually (Buzby, 2022). In Detroit, where communities face flooding, heat stress and poor air quality, reducing waste is both an environmental and public health priority.

University athletic events are an ideal starting point for zero waste initiatives because they are frequent, high-attendance and socially engaging. Our initiative pairs infrastructure improvements with student-led education. Trained volunteers manage zero waste stations,

conduct waste audits and engage peers in real-time sorting conversations. Athletic events serve as powerful platforms for peer-to-peer learning, reaching diverse audiences in familiar, high-energy settings. By embedding sustainability into sports culture, the initiative builds scalable solutions, climate literacy and strengthens student leadership.

How We Respond

The programme seeks to establish the infrastructure and operational practices needed to support Zero Waste Athletic Events at a university, while also educating attendees and vendors on sustainable waste practices to foster long-term behaviour change. With a goal of reducing landfill-bound waste by up to 90 per cent, the programme combines data-driven planning with student engagement to shift both systems and behaviours. Early vendor and waste audits revealed a critical challenge: the majority of materials discarded at games were recyclable or compostable yet ended up in landfills due to limited infrastructure and public awareness (Figures 13 and 14).

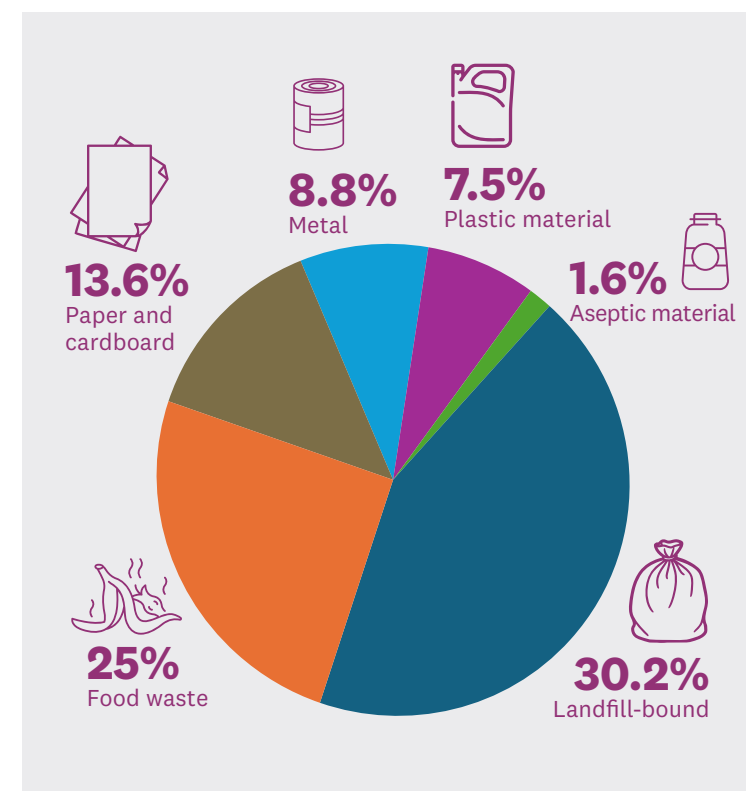
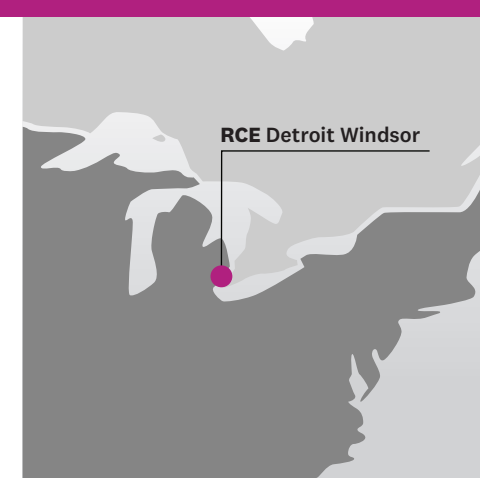


Figure 13. Detailed material composition of waste collected during the January 2026 waste audit at WSU basketball games (Source: RCE Detroit Windsor).



Region:
Americas



Country:
United States of America



SDG(s):



Target audience(s):
University students and adult learners



ESD for 2030 Priority Action:



Language(s) of the project:
English



Stakeholders:
Students for Sustainable Development (SSD); RCE Detroit Windsor; Wayne State University Campus Sustainability Office; Student volunteers; Green Living Science; Game attendees / fans; University staff and facilities management; Waste Management; Game attendees from the local community



Duration of project:
May 2019–ongoing

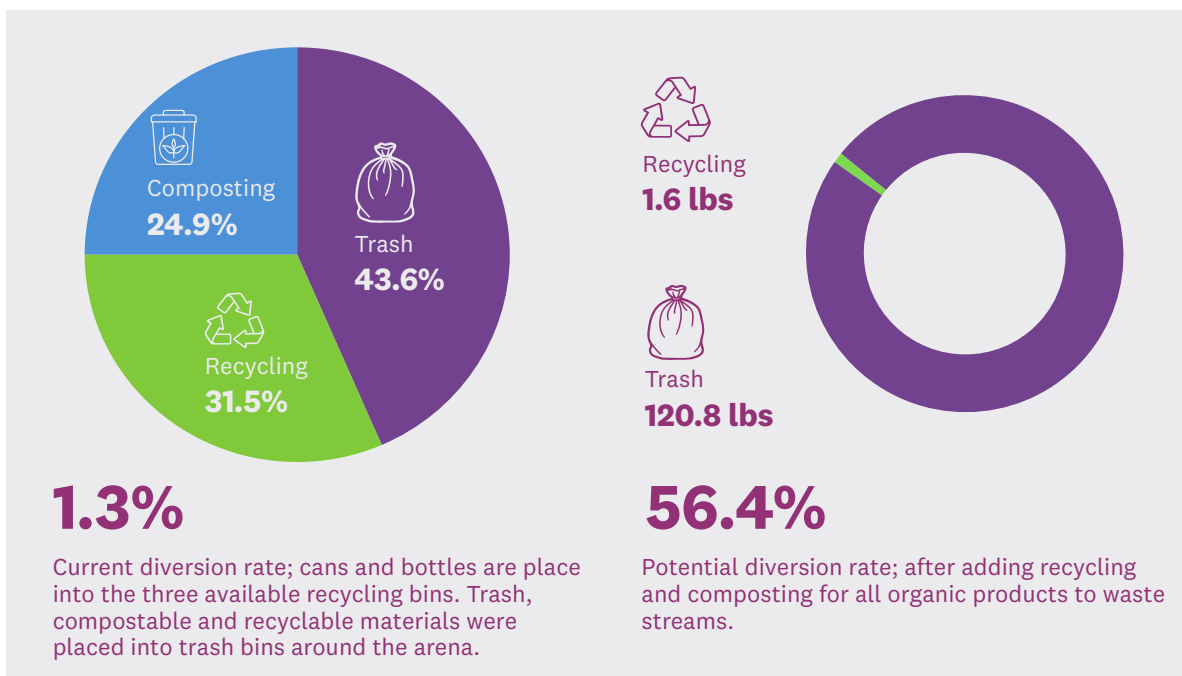


Figure 14. Waste composition and diversion potential from the January 2026 waste audit conducted at Wayne State University basketball games in the sports arena. Source: Green Living Science).

These insights directly informed the design of a zero-waste pilot game, where staffed sorting stations, active monitoring and post-event waste analysis transformed waste management into a shared, visible responsibility. This effort was designed and implemented by student leaders, who played active roles in decision-making throughout the project. Through the Green Warriors and the RCE Detroit Windsor student fellows, student leaders co-designed the audits, shaped event logistics and guided on-the-ground implementation. Decisions around bin placement, signage and volunteer coordination emerged from student-led analysis and weekly strategy sessions, ensuring that project design reflects lived experience and adaptive learning.

Sustained engagement of students is supported through a community of like-minded peers, faculty support and opportunities to build skills beyond college education. Students receive training, mentorship and hands-on experience,

with opportunities embedded in coursework, practicums and service learning. Partnerships with technical experts and community organizations further expand their skill sets and professional networks.

Equally important, the programme is built on continuous accountability and feedback. Through weekly reflections and post-event debriefs, students evaluate outcomes, interpret waste data and refine strategies. In this iterative model, youth contributions do not simply inform the project, they actively shape its evolution, ensuring that each event moves closer to a truly zero waste future.

What We Have Achieved

The project has produced both measurable outcomes and meaningful cultural shifts. During the first zero waste pilot at a January 2026 basketball game, a full waste audit was conducted on 25 bins throughout the sports



Student volunteers lining up to weigh each trash category from the basketball game waste audit.

arena. In total, 122.4 pounds of material were collected, sorted and characterized. The audit documented significant quantities of recyclable and compostable materials, including corrugated cardboard, mixed paper, plastic bottles, aluminum containers, food waste and compostable service ware, demonstrating that a substantial portion of event waste could be diverted from landfill with proper infrastructure and education.

Thirteen trained student volunteers staffed sorting stations, conducted the audit and directly engaged attendees in real-time conversations about waste impacts and proper sorting practices. Through this peer-to-peer model, hundreds of attendees were reached in a single event. Volunteers reported frequent questions from fans about composting, recycling contamination and how zero waste systems function, indicating strong interest and awareness-building.

Tangible outcomes include baseline waste data, documented material composition, trained student leaders and demonstrated operational feasibility. The audit also identified specific contamination patterns, such as compostable

food included in trash bins and recyclable water bottles in the general trash, informing improvements in signage, bin placement and vendor practices. Intangible contributions include increased climate literacy, visible normalization of sustainable behaviour in a sports setting, and strengthened collaboration among students, athletics, facilities and custodial staff. The pilot has already shifted campus conversations from whether zero waste events are possible to how they can be scaled and institutionalized.

What We Have Learned

The zero waste initiative pilot shows that youth leadership, paired with institutional partnership, can move sustainability goals into measurable action. Through hands-on waste audits and station monitoring, students developed skills in data collection, public engagement and systems thinking. A single-event audit captured more than 120 pounds of material, identifying significant recyclable and compostable streams and generating data to guide infrastructure and vendor improvements. For educators and community leaders, this demonstrates that combining quantitative evidence with visible,

real-time engagement builds credibility and accelerates institutional buy-in.

Key enabling factors include strong partnerships with campus sustainability staff, athletics and facilities, along with administrative openness to piloting new approaches. Student leadership was driven by two organizations, Students for Sustainable Development and the Green Warriors, which coordinated volunteers, outreach and implementation. Embedding the initiative within student groups and coursework strengthened continuity and recruitment. The project also created opportunities for students to develop grant-writing skills; notably, they secured external funding to support permanent recycling and composting infrastructure.

Important barriers remain. Limited funding for infrastructure, inconsistent vendor packaging and the need for ongoing volunteer training challenge scalability. Expanding to all athletic events and eventually campus-wide requires deeper institutional commitment, including permanent recycling and compost stations, standardized compostable or recyclable service ware and consistent, well-designed signage.

Long-term operational support for maintenance and education is also essential.

Overall, this project illustrates that when youth are empowered within supportive institutional frameworks, they can drive both cultural and operational change while building practical and scalable models.

What Needs to Change

WSU piloted the Zero Waste Athletic initiative at the women's and men's basketball games in February 2026. With support from Waste Management, a corporate event sponsor, temporary recycling and composting stations were installed, complemented by on-site education and bin monitoring to maximize diversion. Waste diversion rates were measured and shared, providing transparency and guiding future improvements. The pilot achieved a 42.6 per cent diversion rate, leaving a 47.35 per cent gap from our overall goal of 90 per cent. We diverted 73.1 lbs (33.2 kgs) of waste from the landfill. While this fell below the pre-pilot diversion potential, several system components were only partially implemented, including

A team photo of the student leaders and volunteers who organized, collected and performed the waste audit on the WSU basketball games.



The Wayne State University sports arena showcasing the Wayne State Warriors men's basketball game.

limited vendor compliance, compostable service ware and audience buy-in. Reaching 90 per cent diversion requires proper infrastructure supported by consistent implementation, vendor compliance and user education. The pilot demonstrated proof of concept; scaling, standardization and education are the final steps to achieving zero waste benchmarks.

This programme represents the first step toward a permanent, campus-wide shift. Lessons learned will inform our strategies for enhancing infrastructure, engaging vendors and increasing community participation. With additional resources, the university plans to install permanent recycling and composting systems at the arena and expand this approach to all campus events. Implementing compostable and recyclable server ware for food vendors will further reduce single-use waste and reinforce sustainable practices. Ultimately, the goal is to cultivate a culture in which all campus events strive for zero waste, positioning WSU as a leader in sustainable event management. By embedding sustainability into event planning, education and operations, this initiative seeks

to create lasting environmental impact and meaningful engagement across the campus community.

Our Message

By developing this programme, we aim to refine and share best practices for sustainable waste management at athletic events, showing other universities how visible, high-impact initiatives led by youth can normalize sustainable behaviour.

“Our hope is that this initiative inspires peers and stakeholders to adopt sustainable practices at their own events, showing that small, coordinated actions can have a meaningful impact on both our community and the environment.”



Photo by Arie Rachmat 2148724399_36419137 | unsplash

Chapter Asia-Pacific

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From Local Questions to Global Leadership: Bridge to the World & EverBridge

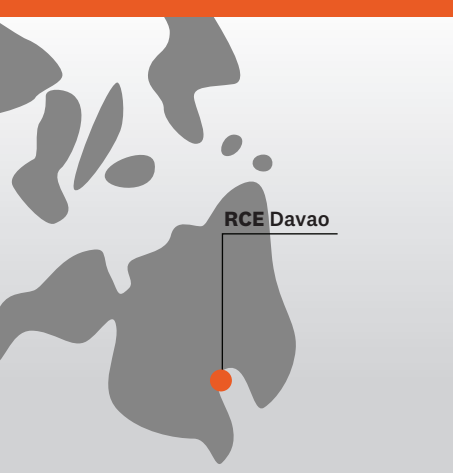
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RCE Davao



Photo by BPA Powerful

BPA students prepare materials for the capacity building workshop with the Blaen women leaders.

 **Region:**
Asia-Pacific

 **Country:**
Philippines

 **SDG(s):**
4, 5, 10, 16

 **Target audience(s):**
Indigenous women leaders;
Indigenous youth; Community
leaders; Local governance actors

 **ESD for 2030 Priority Action:**

 **Language(s) of the project:**
English, Cebuano-Bisaya

 **Stakeholders:**
Indigenous People of Kiblawan
(Blaen tribe); Local Government
Unit (LGU) of Kiblawan; National
Commission on Indigenous
Peoples (NCIP); Davao del Sur
State College (DSSC); Bachelor
of Public Administration (BPA)
students and faculty

 **Duration of project:**
February 2024–ongoing

Empowering Indigenous Cultural Communities: Strengthening Leadership and Governance from the Ground Up

RCE Davao

Neil Shane D. Ngojo, Roel Jr. D. Apas, Cherry Mae M. Rabaño, Winston Y. Malud, Joana Leah C. Aradan and Kristine C. Aballe



What We Face

Indigenous peoples make up approximately six per cent of the world's population, yet they continue to face persistent inequality (World Bank Group, 2026; Amnesty International, n.d.), remaining marginalized in governance due to limited representation and participation in decision-making. Indigenous women are especially underrepresented in leadership, despite their vital roles in communities.

Their contributions are often overlooked due to gender bias and limited institutional recognition.

Our initiative is implemented in the Municipality of Kiblawan, Davao del Sur, where the Blaen Indigenous Cultural Community comprises around 35 per cent of the local population. Although the Indigenous Peoples Right Act (IPRA) of 1997, a landmark legislation in the Philippines, formally recognizes Indigenous governance systems, many Indigenous women leaders face barriers to meaningful participation in decision-making, largely due to limited access to governance, leadership training opportunities and institutional support. Traditionally, leadership in the Blaen community has been male-dominated, with women and youth mainly serving as cultural bearers, peacebuilders and advisers. While women and youth are now increasingly acknowledged as emerging leaders within the Indigenous political structure, gaps remain in their practical knowledge of legal frameworks, financial management, participatory monitoring and accountability mechanisms required in contemporary governance.

How We Respond

To address governance capacity gaps among Blaen women leaders in Kiblawan, Davao del Sur State College (DSSC) implemented the initiative titled Empowering Indigenous Cultural Communities through its Bachelor of Public Administration (BPA) programme. The initiative integrates traditional leadership with public administration practices to deliver a series of hands-on capacity-building workshops for Blaen women led by BPA faculty and project leaders. The workshops covered a range of topics, including leadership and governance, legislative processes, financial management and monitoring and evaluation, among others. BPA student-leaders serve as partners and co-implementers by actively engaging in all stages of the project: from facilitating community consultations and assisting in planning to co-leading training sessions, managing logistics

and supporting monitoring and evaluation through follow-ups and feedback gathering.

Through a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) and with compulsory approvals from the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples (NCIP), the project is implemented in close cooperation with the Blaen Tribal Council. This ensures that Indigenous culture and traditions



Figure 15. Empowering Indigenous Communities, by the numbers (Source: RCE Davao).

are respected, in line with principles of Free and Prior Informed Consent (FPIC).

BPA students, comprised of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous youth, including Indigenous youth from Kiblawan, identify community needs and shape training modules, ensuring their voices drive the project cycle. Funded by the DSSC Extension and Community Relations Office, the initiative covers all logistical costs, including materials and transportation. Beyond financial support, youth receive mentorship and technical guidance, transitioning into formal facilitation roles. These continuous engagement opportunities are designed to strengthen their leadership skills and sustain long-term involvement.

The project positions students enrolled in the BPA programme as active partners rather than passive volunteers, promoting inclusivity, collaboration, mutual learning and shared responsibility. This approach strengthens

Indigenous leadership while giving students practical governance experience. It also ensures that empowerment efforts are community-driven, sustainable and aligned with ESD principles (See Figure 16). In a demonstration of participatory implementation, the students actively engaged in drafting their own ordinances, which were then formally presented to the municipal council. The ordinances focused on issues such as Indigenous cultural preservation, gender equality, youth protection, linguistic rights and local economic development.

What We Have Achieved

The project has produced clear results for Indigenous women leaders in Kiblawan, Davao del Sur. A total of 62 Blaan women leaders took part in the two phases of the project in 2024-2025. Participants, all of whom were women, represented women's organizations, Indigenous political structures and new community



YOUTH ENGAGEMENT

Active participation of BPA students positioned youth as key partners



EVIDENCED-BASED PROJECT DESIGN

Project initiated based on research study findings and community consultations



PARTICIPATORY AND CULTURALLY-GROUNDED APPROACHES

Close cooperation with the Blaan Tribal Council to ensure Indigenous culture and traditions are respected



MULTI-STAKEHOLDER COLLABORATION

DSSC faculty, BPA students, Indigenous Cultural Communities, NCIP, local government and community leaders working together to achieve desired project outcomes.

Figure 16. How it worked — key strategies to supporting Blaan women leaders (Source: RCE Davao).



BPA students, comprised of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous youth, join the Blaan women leaders in a workshop group photo.

leadership groups (See Figure 15). This directly helped improve gender-focused governance and leadership development.

Post-training assessments and reflection sessions showed clear gains in participants' skills. Over 80 per cent demonstrated improved understanding of legislative processes, including preparing resolutions, ordinances and meeting minutes. Participants also reported more confidence in managing community resources and monitoring and evaluation activities. These improvements resulted in increased participation of women in tribal consultations, better recordkeeping in women-led organizations and stronger coordination with local government and institutional stakeholders, consistent with evidence that strengthened local capacities support more inclusive and effective governance.

Beyond technical skills, the project resulted in important outcomes. Women leaders reported increased self-confidence, improved communication skills and greater acknowledgement of their leadership roles within the community. The involvement of BPA

student youth leaders as co-implementers further strengthened results by encouraging collaboration across generations and ensuring continuity in documentation, mentoring and follow-up. With approved institutional funding for Phase 3 (2026), the project demonstrates sustainable impact through continuous implementation, community ownership and ongoing leadership development. Through this involvement, students gain practical experience, improve communication skills and deepen their appreciation of Indigenous knowledge systems. Despite challenges like language barriers and cultural sensitivity, the experience fostered mutual learning, stronger collaboration and more inclusive, context-sensitive leadership.

What We Have Learned

This project showed that when youth are treated as partners and leaders instead of mere assistants, community initiatives become more inclusive, effective and sustainable. BPA students at DSSC took a leading role in planning, facilitating and carrying out capacity-building activities in collaboration

with faculty and Indigenous leaders. Their involvement demonstrated that young people can meaningfully bridge academic knowledge and community needs, particularly in culturally sensitive settings such as Indigenous Cultural Communities (ICCs). Educators and community leaders can learn that youth engagement works effectively when grounded in trust, mentorship and shared decision-making, which fosters collaboration across generations.

Key enabling factors included strong policy support through IPRA, institutional funding and logistical assistance from the college, and the cultural legitimacy gained through coordination with the Blaan Tribal Council and NCIP. This created a safe space for youth leadership and participation. However, barriers such as language differences, limited access to technology, scheduling conflicts and deeply rooted traditional norms initially hindered youth engagement. These issues were addressed

through culturally responsive methods, peer support and the involvement of students who shared Indigenous identity and language with the local community. Overall, the project empowered youth as leaders and strengthened governance while nurturing socially responsible future public servants.

What Needs to Change

To sustain and grow the impact, future efforts will focus on ongoing support, expanded partnerships and stronger youth leadership integration. Building on the outcomes of the earlier phases, Phase 3 scheduled for 2026 will work on improving strategic governance, policy engagement and leadership succession within Indigenous communities. This phase will further strengthen the role of students as youth leaders and co-facilitators, allowing them to mentor Indigenous youth and help with intergenerational leadership transitions.

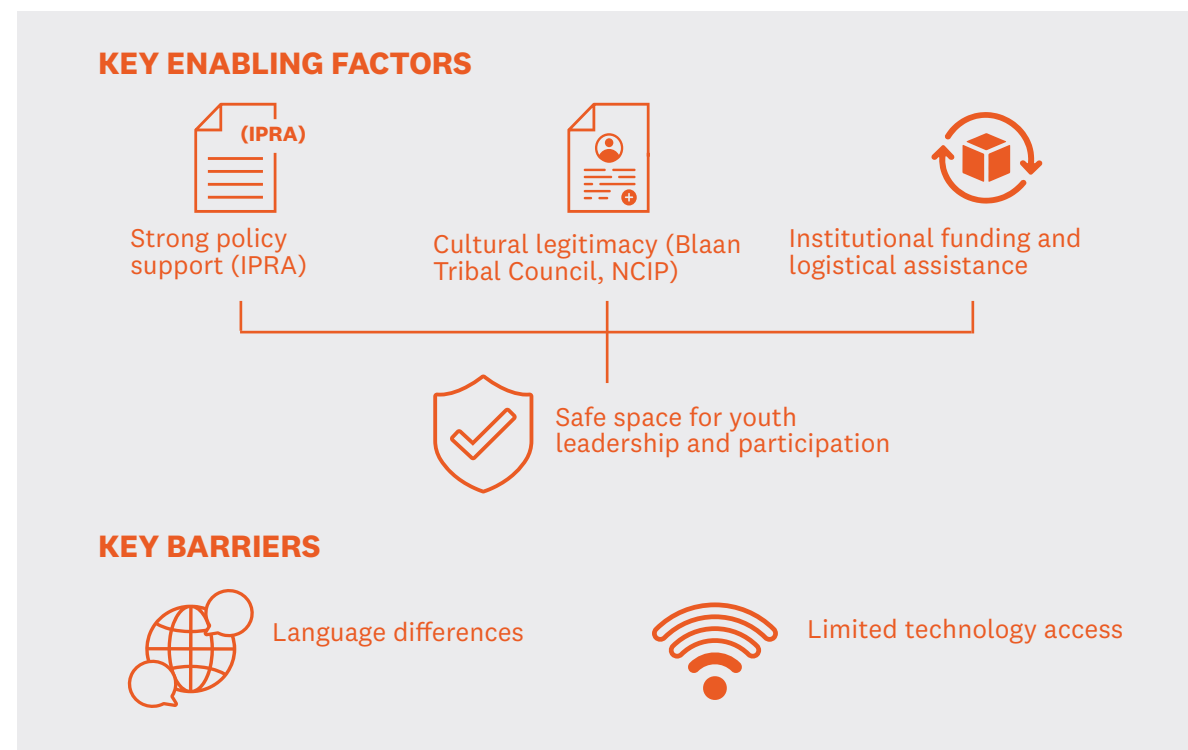


Figure 17. Project key enabling factors and barriers (Source: RCE Davao).



BPA students serve as facilitators in a project workshop and guide Blaan woman leaders on writing and structuring local policies.

A key component moving forward is the strengthened collaboration with the Local Government Unit (LGU) of Kiblawan, alongside the Blaan Tribal Council and the NCIP. The LGU's continued support is essential for connecting community-led initiatives with local development plans, mobilizing resources and establishing inclusive governance practices. Future actions will also include expanding funding partnerships, integrating culturally appropriate digital tools and developing modular training materials to reach more Indigenous women and youth across barangay villages. Ultimately, lasting impact requires long-term commitment, youth-led governance pathways and strong partnerships that view Indigenous communities as co-creators of development.

Our Message

Real change happens when young people are trusted as leaders, not just invited as token participants. We call on our peers and decision-makers to invest in youth leadership that is

rooted in Indigenous knowledge, mentorship and shared responsibility. Together, we can co-create governance systems that are inclusive, accountable and truly sustainable for future generations.

More Information:

- [Project materials and reports](#)
- [Social media post, third phase of BPA Extension Project \(Facebook\)](#)
- [Social media post, second phase of the BPA Extension Project \(Facebook\)](#)
- [Social media post, leadership workshop \(Facebook\)](#)
- [Social media post, inviting participants to the BPA Extension Project \(Facebook\)](#)
- [Social media post, completion of a seminar on monitoring and evaluation \(Facebook\)](#)
- [Social media post, launch of Phase 1 of the Bachelor of Public Administration Extension Project \(Facebook\)](#)



A storytelling session with a library volunteer and learners at the Medo village youth library.

Empowering Young and Adolescent Readers: A Case Study on Lohit Youth Library Network

RCE East Arunachal Pradesh

Banika Kri



What We Face

The Himalayan state of Arunachal Pradesh, the largest state in northeastern India, faces significant challenges in delivering basic education and ensuring quality education for all, ranking among the lowest in India's School Education Quality Index (NITI Aayog, 2019). Poor educational standards stem from a lack of qualified teachers, weak academic mentoring and an underdeveloped reading environment in schools, including limited access to reading materials and poor school infrastructure. The harsh geo-climatical conditions and poor road

connectivity in the state compound these challenges.

The Lohit Youth Library Network (LYLN) is a grassroots reading movement in eastern Arunachal that emerged in response to these constraints. Recognizing the vital importance of community intervention in supporting education, a few book lovers in the Lohit District, Arunachal Pradesh set out to establish a network of one room community libraries to enhance participants' reading skills. With local organizations and the local municipality

providing books and resources, Bamboosa Library — the first library — was opened in Tezu in May 2007. Within a year, youth volunteers had set up several more community libraries across the district, five of which remain active today. These libraries offer free reading opportunities for all irrespective of age, caste, gender and religion. The initiative now reaches readers across 300 km in five districts of the Lohit–Dibang region.

Each library is managed entirely by youth volunteers — mostly women and girls — and schoolteachers working with their students. This peer-led model allows children and youth to interact freely, practice reading skills and reach more learners with limited access to reading opportunities and materials. The volunteers are students and working youth who share their free time to lead reading activities. Patrons and well-wishers from across India and abroad support these youth-run libraries through financial contributions, in-kind donations and services such as theatre workshops, reading training programs, public talks, travel facilities and hospitality services.

How We Respond

Since the inception, the LYLN volunteers have been focusing on instilling the joy of reading in children by making libraries the centre of activities. Libraries conduct regular reading activities with school children of different ages (See Figure 18). Such activities include storytelling, skits, reading theatre, poem recitation and creative writing held within the library premises and through visits to off-site locations (Bamboosa Library, 2026). Programmes outside the libraries are organized with support from the State Education Department, school management or local non-governmental organizations (NGOs), targeting remote and underserved government schools.

The sessions are conducted by volunteers, with periodic support from the Library Coordinator — who has been a teacher-educator with four decades of experience — and other resource persons (well-wishers and mentors). The most enthusiastic participants are trained to become reader activists and conduct reading sessions among their peer groups on their own. Over the years many readers emerged as reader activists and volunteers in their neighbourhood libraries. Thus, the LYLN has emerged as a model where learners continue to support the initiative by becoming volunteers.

The Bamboosa Library receives contributions from patrons and mentors for its reading activities, including financial support, book donations and services. Library volunteers undergo periodic training to improve their reading and soft skills. In

RCE East Arunachal Pradesh



Region:
Asia-Pacific

Country:
India

SDG(s):
2 4

Target audience(s):
Youth; Students

ESD for 2030 Priority Action:

Language(s) of the project:
English and Hindi

Stakeholders:
Education department; District administration; Public libraries; Library patrons; Book lovers

Duration of project:
May 2007–ongoing

2022, senior volunteers established the Forum of Library Activists, a registered non-profit organization which helps with library resources management.

After each event, volunteers conduct reviews and offer feedback to the participants. The library coordinator and mentors also offer suggestions whenever necessary. All activities are documented through reports and photographs (See Figure 18). Press releases are prepared by the volunteers and are duly circulated among patrons and well-wishers through social media, annual reports of the library network and the Forum of Library Activists. However, as the reading movement relies entirely on volunteers, monitoring and

reporting mechanisms are limited by the amount of time each volunteer can commit.

What We Have Achieved

Volunteers, mostly women and girls from rural areas, who started as first generation learners have since achieved several academic and professional honours (Bamboosa Library, 2026). At the individual level, they have demonstrated significant improvements in language and speaking skills; enhanced reading abilities, along with broader exposure to various literary forms; peer learning and teamwork capacities; self-confidence and motivation; and a deeper sense of social commitment, including empathy and compassion toward communities and

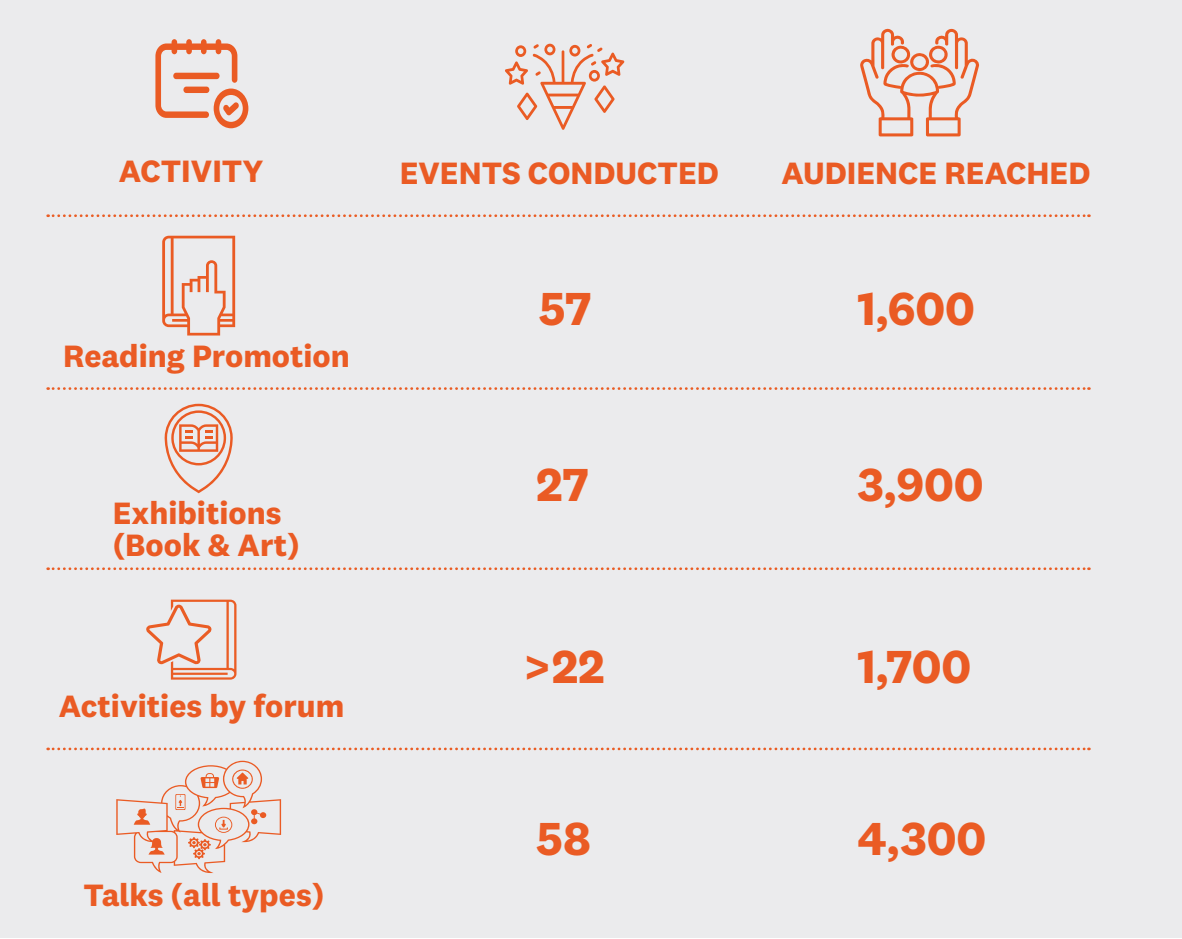


Figure 18. Lohit Youth Library Network, by the numbers (Source: RCE East Arunachal Pradesh).



Project volunteers join a National Youth Day recording for All India Radio (AIR) Tezu’s Yuva Vani (youth voice) radio programme.

groups facing educational inequalities. Figure 19 shows a steady increase on the number of readers, almost doubling within a three-year period. This growth is largely due to the regular support of senior volunteers who organize regular reading activities and provide guidance to the readers. In communities with limited reading opportunities, this proves that consistent support and mentoring from volunteers can enhance participants’ enthusiasm for reading.

What We Have Learned

In regions with scattered or low-density populations, volunteers can play a significant role in promoting the joy of reading and thereby supporting educational advancement of youth. Moreover, in communities where formal schooling may be conducted in a non-native

language, the involvement of volunteers who provide supportive adult guidance along with the presence of community-managed local libraries become particularly important.

Reading itself is most effective when it takes place in supportive, non-judgmental environments. In this context, after-school community libraries can strengthen formal education at the community level when they foster a culture of reading for enjoyment. The availability of reading materials in learners’ mother tongue languages is essential for improving educational outcomes in communities where languages are primarily oral. Models such as the LYLN demonstrate that community-managed libraries can be successfully adapted in different contexts, offering an accessible and effective way to connect youth with reading opportunities at the community level.

What Needs to Change

To ensure scalability and continuity of such community-driven projects, there is a pressing need for more volunteers — both youth volunteers to lead reading activities, and adult volunteers — to continue mentoring them. The number of reading promotion events dropped sharply from 35 in 2022–23 to just 4 in 2024–25, mainly due to a shortage of volunteers. Many of the existing volunteers — most of them young working women — moved out of Tezu and could no longer contribute as much time as before. As a result, the library had to focus on

organizing more talks by guest speakers from the community, as mobilizing youth and school students for reading training programmes became increasingly difficult without volunteer support. This highlights the need for more adults to share their time as volunteers, if communities like those in Arunachal are to advance educationally at the school level.

Moreover, there is an urgent need to prepare reading resources in different languages. Access to quality learning and reading materials in their mother language will greatly advance the

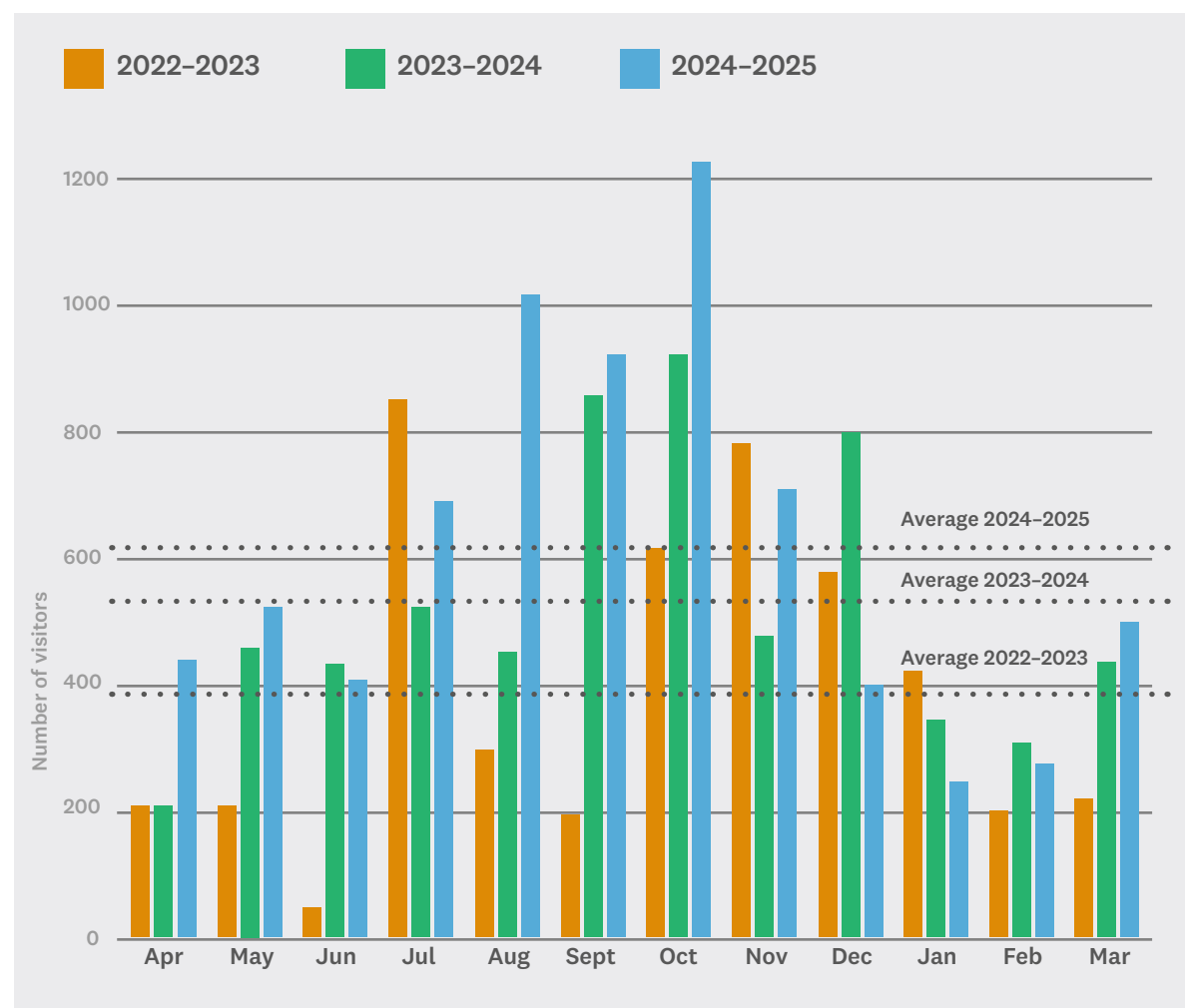


Figure 19. Number of readers and visitors at Bamboosa Library over a three-year period (Source: Er. Akhilesh K.R / RCE Arunachal Pradesh).



Learners present a book they will read at the National Reading Day event in the library of Lohit District, Tezu.

educational attainment of young learners in Arunachal Pradesh.

It is crucial that community-driven initiatives such as ours are formally recognized by policymakers. The state needs to officially and legally recognize people-managed libraries by creating a State Library Council and encourage NGOs and groups to open libraries across the state.

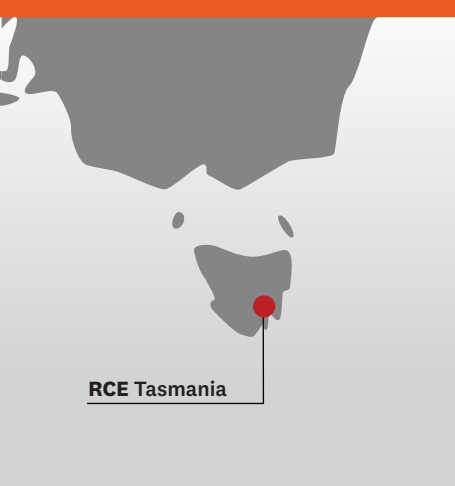
Our Message

“All the wealth of the world cannot help one little Indian village if the people are not taught to help themselves,” remarked Swami Vivekananda, a 19th-century Indian monk and philosopher.

The LYLN’s 19 years of experience affirm the universal value of community leadership and decentralized action. In regions with geo-climatic challenges and scattered populations, the model adopted by the LYLN offers an effective approach for achieving meaningful results.

More Information:

[YouTube video, Mission 2032: Joy of Reading \(Lohit Youth Library Network\)](#)



RCE Tasmania



Region:
Asia-Pacific



Country:
Australia



SDG(s):



Target audience(s):
University students; Community members



ESD for 2030 Priority Action:



Language(s) of the project:
English



Stakeholders:
University of Tasmania; City of Hobart; Youth Climate Action Fund



Duration of project:
August–December 2025



Circular Creativity Student Workshops

RCE Tasmania

Oliver Cohen-Velida, Jade Irvine, Sylvia Mackie, Alex McArthur, Ella Pointer, El Rowberry, Jun Soong, Evelyn Unwin Tew and Reuben Williss



What We Face

Circular Creativity Student Workshops is a collaborative youth-led project at the University of Tasmania (UTAS) that aims to empower participants through facilitating practical and creative sustainability workshops. Our project focused on promoting upcycling and inspiring participants to see potential in everyday items, such as pallets and magazines. As students are particularly vulnerable to financial pressures in the ongoing cost-of-living crisis, upcycling offers young people a way to embrace creativity, save money and reduce landfill waste.

Our university has been ranked #1 globally in Climate Action in the Times Higher Education University Rankings (2025) for four consecutive years. UTAS operates across

four regions — with several distinct campuses in the south of the state. This means that while many students have an interest in sustainability, they do not always have the opportunity to collaborate across disciplines and campuses.

To address this challenge, we joined together as seven student leaders from different studio groups: the Student Living University Gardening Society (SLUGS) in Hobart City and Sandy Bay, Source Eco Hub and the Togatus student magazine team. In our first meeting, we found our mutual interests and decided to focus on the following issues: (i) diverting waste from landfill and (ii) engaging the community in climate action through youth

leadership. Together with mentors from the UTAS Sustainability Team, we were involved in applying for a project grant, participating in the decision-making process and overall project oversight. The Sustainability Team supported logistics, materials preparation, the planning process (including risk assessments and managing ticketing) and workshop delivery.

How We Respond

Together we organized three community workshops that took place over the span of three weeks, each lasting for two hours. All events were free and made available for everyone to attend. The workshops focused on teaching participants practical ways to upcycle

Participants socializing during the planter box workshops.



Photo by Toby Rudov

**\$7,500**

Financial budget

**12**

Planter boxes

**2**

Pallets

**50**

Old paper magazines

**35**

Happy participants

**45**Paper seed packets
& crafts**7**Number of youth
leads

materials that would otherwise go to waste. We sourced pallets and magazines from existing campus collections as we wanted to show that it is possible to make beautiful and functional items through using inexpensive materials.

With many of us being involved in the gardening clubs, we aimed to reinforce the relationship between gardening and sustainability. Two of the three workshops built on each other, focusing on building a planter box and then painting it, while the third paper workshop was a standalone activity, which focused on using old magazines to make envelopes for seed libraries on campus. The UTAS Sustainability team helped us to stay on track, allowing us to make the most of our time together as a group. We used an online poll to manage our availabilities and stayed connected via a group chat outside events.

Although we faced some challenges, including a limited number of facilitators and tools for the planter box building activity, we were pleased with the busy and enthusiastic energy in the sessions. Building social connections was an important part of our project, and through encouragement and modelling techniques, participants' confidence and skills grew significantly in only a few hours. This has shown us the potential of practical, community-based workshops that bridge climate action and creativity.

At the end of the workshops, we had a shared lunch and debrief session in one of the campus gardens. This was a great way to get together again — to celebrate our wins and discuss what we might do differently in future events. An important takeaway for us is to remember the agency we have in driving sustainability and design sessions with our communities in mind. We have learned that it is okay to do things differently, and we were proud to have found a way to showcase how people can creatively upcycle materials that are often easy to source through local community networks.

What We Have Achieved

Twenty eight youth participants joined the project's activities with over 35 participants in total, including both students and community members (See Figure 20). Twelve planter boxes were made in total — creating new and tangible food growing spaces for students. Through this project, we increased awareness of upcycling practices, inspired creativity in our community

and offered practical support to interested participants. Our workshops were the catalyst for increased social connections and growing community spirit, which was wonderful to see. As the workshops progressed, participants increasingly exchanged support and ideas. In one case, two participants who met at the workshop teamed up to build a planter box together.

Participants making planter boxes at the first Circular Creativity workshop.



Figure 20. Circular Creativity Student Workshops, by the numbers (Source: RCE Tasmania).

Holding the planter box workshop in the Hobart Apartments plaza meant that students could easily drop in and observe different stages of the building process. It is important for students to feel welcome, and to know that this space is part of their home too. Holding the workshops here also helped promote the weekly gardening sessions and introduce more participants to the garden beds.

It was great being able to come together to plan how we wanted to run the events and decide which parts we wanted to be directly involved in — whether it was public speaking, leading different parts of the demonstrations and working with participants.

As part of our event planning, we also hired three young people to capture over 300 professional images at the workshops and two social media reels. Across 12 posts, our online content generated over 12,000 views, demonstrating strong public engagement. The level of support we have received has been particularly encouraging. Building on this momentum, we have continued to work with student accommodation teams and media students in organizing further gardening initiatives. Therefore, we strongly recommend collaborating with other student societies and organizations who are happy to cross-promote events.

What We Have Learned

We collaborated with other young people to deliver these workshops, and the support provided through the Youth Climate Action Fund grant was instrumental in making it possible. We learned that by documenting the process, you can raise community awareness and extend community engagement beyond workshop participants. It was particularly encouraging to see many people interested in what we were doing — including students in Northern Tasmania and people living interstate, who followed the project with interest. We have since received numerous requests for a “how-to”

guide, with people asking if and when we might run future workshops.

For our peers seeking to implement similar projects in their contexts, ensuring that extra materials are readily available and offering different ways for participants to engage, including through work benches or standing tables, can help create a more inclusive and flexible workshop environment, which is key to delivering creative workshops.

Looking ahead, we will take additional preparation steps to make the best of our time during workshops, including selecting pallets more deliberately and pre-cutting materials in advance. Having a structured plan and clearly assigned roles on various tasks can also strengthen coordination. As it can be difficult to anticipate the number of participants, being prepared to adjust on the day — and to enjoy the process — are key to successful workshop delivery.

What Needs to Change

We were encouraged by the positive feedback received and by the strong interest in practical building workshops that make use of recycled materials. To scale up our initiative, we would like to team up with local community sheds, which could offer opportunities for future growth and meaningful intergenerational collaboration. For example, community arts organizations may be able to loan equipment and event spaces, while also bringing their own audiences including people interested in sustainability.

In the future, we hope to expand our activities by creating different types of furniture from pallet wood, including benches, pot plant holders, animal kennels, beehives and chicken coops. Such items offer valuable opportunities for creative expression while proving the potential of upcycled materials. We have also found that our paper upcycling activity can be easily tailored to diverse

“Make the choice to get involved in something within your community because it will develop your skills, build new relationships and help you achieve new things that you can be proud of.”

audiences and environments. We have already facilitated it in settings such as a local art gallery and a children’s science event and aim to continue promoting such activities in the future.

Our Message

If any takeaways can be made from our project, we hope it is this — make the choice to get involved in something within your community because it will develop your skills, build new relationships and help you achieve new things that you can be proud of. Find what is important to you and be open to developing it. Through the Circular Creativity workshops, we have found it extremely rewarding to foster a greater sense of collectivity through learning and creativity. Being able to work with our hands and share our skills has been a meaningful experience, strengthening social connections while promoting everyday practices that support sustainable living.





Youth-led sustainability booths during the 15th cohort community forum, engaging local citizens in dialogue.

From Local Questions to Global Leadership: Bridge to the World & EverBridge

RCE Tongyeong

Woojin Lee



What We Face

Growing up in Tongyeong, a coastal city in the Republic of Korea, the sea has always been close to us. However, sustainability issues such as climate change, marine pollution and regional population decline rarely felt like “our” problems. From our perspective as young people, sustainability often felt confined to classroom learning and exam preparation, with limited opportunities to participate meaningfully in addressing the sustainability challenges within our own communities.

Although adults often discussed the future of the region, young people were rarely at the center of those conversations. We were observers rather than decision-makers. This led us to ask a simple but critical question:

“Why are young people not able to speak and participate in decisions that shape the sustainability of their own community?”

Communities lose the creativity, potential and long-term commitment of younger generations when youth are excluded from shaping the communities’ future. At the same time, young people lose opportunities to build their agency and a sense of responsibility for their own lives, communities and places. For schools, local governments and community stakeholders, designing meaningful pathways for youth participation becomes a structural challenge.

Bridge to the World emerged from this concern. We recognized the need for a space where youth can ask questions, explore real world

contexts and co-create responses to existing challenges in collaboration with local partners. Most importantly, we saw the need for a sustained structure — one that would ensure youth engagement beyond the project and continue as a set of evolving questions and long-term action.

How We Respond

Bridge to the World is a youth-led problem-based learning (PBL) programme where secondary school students (ages 14–18) from Tongyeong identify real community challenges and co-design solutions alongside local experts, community members and global RCE partners. The programme follows a structured cycle: orientation, foundational learning, local exploration, question development, investigation, solution design, presentation, exchange and community action.

Rather than beginning with predefined topics, participants start by exploring their own community: they review local news, conduct field visits and formulate questions based on real-life observations (See Figure 21). In this programme, youth are in charge — instead of adults providing answers,

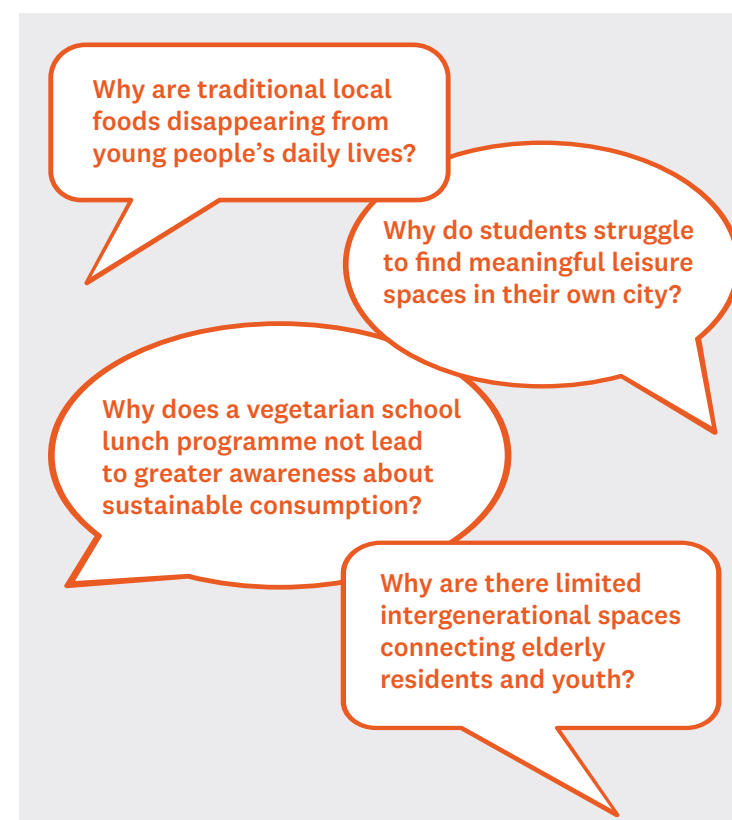


Figure 21. Through their questions, youth are uncovering the challenges in their communities.



RCE Tongyeong

Region:
Asia-Pacific

Country:
Republic of Korea

SDG(s):
4 11 13 17

Target audience(s):
Secondary school students (aged 14–18); Youth alumni (young adults); Local community members

ESD for 2030 Priority Action:

Language(s) of the project:
Korean

Stakeholders:
Secondary schools; Youth participants; Municipal government; Local NGOs; Community experts; International RCE partners

Duration of project:
May 2008–ongoing

facilitators create space for investigation. Participants conduct interviews, gather data, design solutions and present their proposals to local experts and stakeholders.

To ensure continuity beyond one cohort, the youth-led network EverBridge was established as a formal alumni community (See Figure 22). Most members are university students (ages 19–21), though current middle and high school students also participate, creating genuine intergenerational peer connections. Membership is open to any graduate who wishes to remain engaged. The network is entirely self-organized and youth-run (Han-san News, 2026). EverBridge members mentor incoming cohorts during orientations, co-facilitate community action sessions, and independently design and deliver sustainability education to local primary schools turning their own learning into leadership (RCE Tongyeong, 2025).

Throughout this cycle, youth receive concrete support to sustain their leadership: dedicated coaching from programme coordinators,

access to pro bono community organizations for meeting spaces and expert consultation, international exchange funding for RCE partner visits, and school transcript recognition for participation (RCE Tongyeong, 2025). Impact is assessed through pre- and post-programme competency surveys and structured final presentations open to local government officials, school representatives and community members. Findings from each cohort directly inform the design of the next cycle.

What We Have Achieved

Since 2008, a total of 1,014 young people have participated in Bridge to the World, with 203 engaging in international exchanges through RCE partnerships (See Figure 22). Across 17 cohorts, participants have implemented 96 locally grounded projects and conducted 49 international exchange activities.

Beyond these tangible outputs, measurable shifts in youth competencies have been

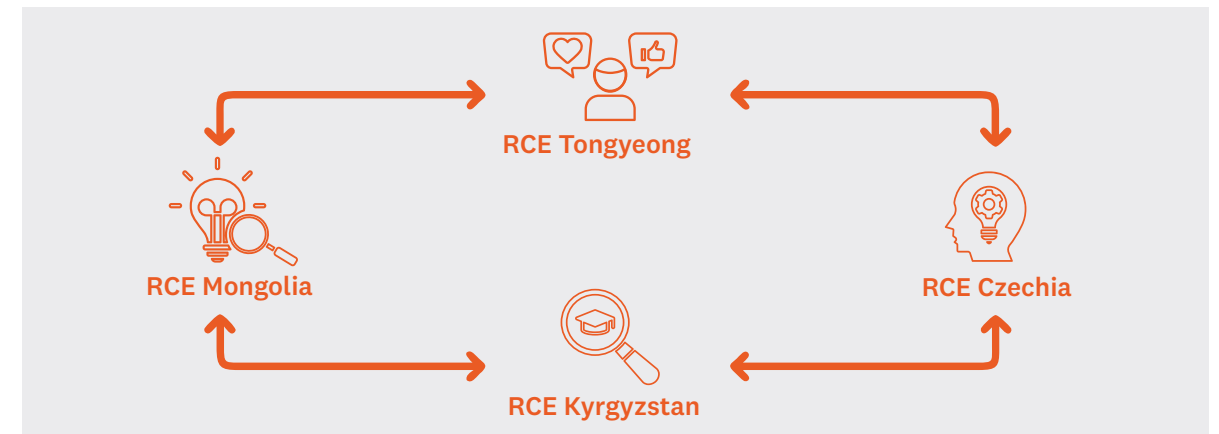


Figure 23. Youth-led inquiry goes global through cross-RCE learning exchanges (Source: RCE Tongyeong).

observed. Pre- and post-surveys conducted in 2023 and 2024 indicate consistent positive changes in ESD-related capacities, including systems thinking, creative problem-solving, community engagement and future-oriented attitudes. The 2023 cohort demonstrated statistically significant gains across all measured domains ($p < .001$) (Lee, 2024), while the 2024 cohort showed continued positive directional shifts, with significant improvements in community engagement and local identity (RCE Tongyeong, 2024).

The impact is also reflected in sustained participation. Of the 1,014 participants, 46

youth (4.5 per cent) rejoined the programme for at least a second cycle, and 9 (0.9 per cent) participated three or more times. This continuity illustrates a transition from one-time participation to long-term civic engagement. Through EverBridge, alumni continue as mentors, collaborators and local changemakers demonstrating that youth engagement can evolve into sustained community leadership.

Qualitative reflections further reveal shifts in mindset. One participant called it “one of the most special memories of my school years — a rare experience that I would love to return to.” Another wrote: “Eight months of the fastest

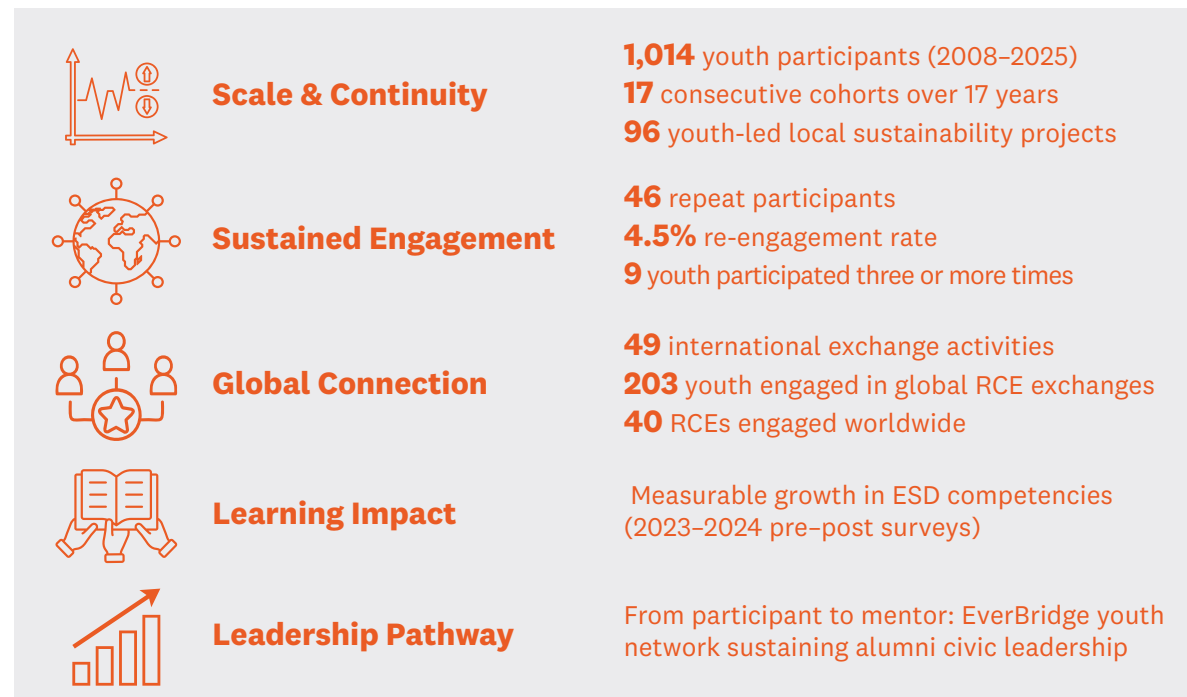


Figure 22. Bridge to the World & EverBridge, by the numbers (Source: RCE Tongyeong).

Participants presenting project outcomes to local citizens and stakeholders at the 16th final forum.



growth I have ever experienced.” A third reflected on a different kind of change: “I used to think of myself as just a Korean. After the exchange, I began to see myself as a citizen of the world.” These voices go beyond programme participation and reflect a deeper personal transformation.

What We Have Learned

Meaningful youth engagement requires more than symbolic participation; it requires real decision-making power. In Bridge to the World, giving youth ownership of question setting became the strongest driver of motivation and responsibility. Educators and facilitators learned that their role is not to provide answers, but to create safe structures for inquiry: time for field exploration, access to community stakeholders and space for youth to test and revise ideas. This was not an abstract principle, but a consistent practice visible in every session.

During the 17th cohort, a team called I’mpossible chose to address the disappearance of Tongyeong’s local dialect. No facilitator assigned this topic; the team identified it themselves through community observation. They designed and distributed

an “instatoon”, a web comic blending local language and place names — a solution no adult had proposed. The role of mentors was to provide structured feedback sessions, connect the team to community experts, and hold space for iteration without taking over the direction.

The same shift can be observed at the individual level. A participant from an earlier cohort, now an EverBridge mentor, states: “Exploring the problems facing our community and the world was a real shock to me. I realized the situation was far more serious than I had imagined, and I didn’t just want to write about it anymore. I wanted to actually do something about it” (Hansan News, 2026). That shift from wanting to write about an issue to needing to act on it is what the programme enables.

Sustaining this engagement requires structural conditions. Long-term implementation has been possible because the programme had a stable operational base and cooperation from local schools, municipal partners and community experts. The combination of these factors meant youth proposals could be heard in formal settings rather than remaining as classroom outputs. At the same time, challenges remain: academic pressure and limited funding constrain participation, and



EverBridge youth facilitating sustainability education at a local elementary school.

proposals do not automatically translate into policy. The key lesson is clear: youth agency grows when autonomy is paired with structural support and intergenerational partnership.

For RCEs considering similar approaches, three elements proved foundational: letting youth set their own questions from the start, building an alumni mentoring network into the programme design from the outset, and holding final presentations as public events where the local government and community members are present so that youth proposals enter formal channels rather than remaining inside the classroom (See Figure 24).

Scaling up also requires stronger institutional alignment. We seek deeper collaboration with schools and municipal partners so that youth proposals can inform city-level discussions and policies. Beyond the local level, we hope to formalize more sustained exchanges among RCEs, transforming one-time visits into longer-term thematic partnerships.

At the same time, expanding youth leadership demands supportive conditions. Stable funding, recognition within school systems and adult allies who can bridge youth ideas with policy processes are essential. Ultimately, our vision is not simply to grow the programme in size, but to cultivate a culture where youth participation becomes part of community decision-making locally and globally.

What Needs to Change

To sustain and scale the impact of Bridge to the World, our next priority is building a structured knowledge archive of past youth projects. By documenting questions, processes and outcomes, we aim to strengthen inter-cohort continuity and enable alumni to serve as effective mentors through EverBridge. This will create a virtuous cycle in which unresolved challenges from one cohort inspire new solutions from the next.

Our Message

Our journey shows that when a small local inquiry meets young people’s passion, it does not just change individuals, it redefines the future of a city.

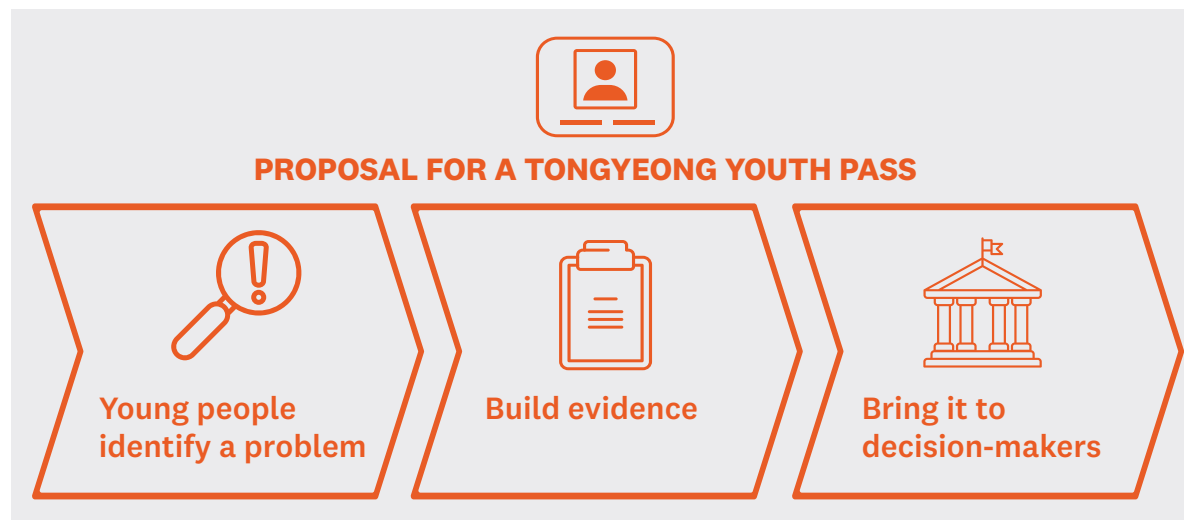


Figure 24. A proposal on the Tongyeong Youth Pass — a tourism and culture access card for local adolescents — emerged from a youth-led process (Source: RCE Tongyeong).



RCE Kitakyushu



Region:
Asia-Pacific



Country:
Japan



SDG(s):



Target audience(s):
Primary school children and young adults (aged 7–45); Local community members



ESD for 2030 Priority Action:



Language(s) of the project:
Japanese



Duration of project:
2022–ongoing



Photo by RCE Kitakyushu

Primary school learners play the ESD Shooting game, throwing balls at targets representing behaviours that are either climate-friendly or harmful.

Future Creation Committee and the Edutainment Programme

RCE Kitakyushu

Future Creation Committee – Kitakyushu ESD Council



What We Face

“I knew climate change is happening around the world and education for sustainable development (ESD) is an important tool to solve it, but it never felt like something I could apply to my daily life.” This reflection from a young participant from RCE Kitakyushu captures a common starting point for youth engagement with sustainability in Kitakyushu City. Although Kitakyushu City is internationally recognized for its experience of severe industrial pollution due to rapid industrial development in 1970s, many young people still perceive the SDGs and ESD as something distant – something discussed in textbooks, rather than what they can apply or contribute to.

Kitakyushu today faces complex and interconnected challenges. Located in Fukuoka Prefecture, the south-western part of Japan, the city is facing increasingly frequent and severe heavy rainfall caused by climate change, making disaster preparedness increasingly urgent. At the same time, the city is experiencing rapid population ageing, alongside the outmigration of young people, leading to a decline in regional vitality (Kitakyushu City Office, n.d.), weakened intergenerational ties and community continuity.

For many young people, these issues are visible but not yet personally meaningful. We observe them but rarely feel ownership and responsibility over responding to these issues. This raised a critical question among members of RCE Kitakyushu: “How can young people move from awareness to action?”

How We Respond

In 2022, the general assembly of the Kitakyushu ESD Council (RCE Kitakyushu) established the Future Creation Committee (未来創造委員会, or Mirai Sōzō linkai), a youth-initiated, youth-led ESD committee under the ESD Council. The initiative was established to promote youth ownership of ESD (See Figure 25). Young people,

mainly high school to university students, proactively lead the design, facilitation and continuous improvement of the committee’s programmes, with senior stakeholders providing support as appropriate.

The Future Creation Committee aims to build a future in which the younger generation takes ownership and plays an active role in shaping their communities. That is, instead of simply promoting sustainability awareness among young people in the region, the committee aims to raise the next generation of leaders who actively practice and drive ESD forward in Kitakyushu City. Its core principle is to grow the number of people who practice ESD, not the number of people who are taught ESD. Its experiential, edutainment-based learning approach also mirrors the spirit of UNESCO’s recommended whole-institution approach, which advocates for learning that is hands-on, contextualized, and embedded in real institutions and communities.

One of the Committee’s key initiatives is the Edutainment Programme, a series of activities that teach about disaster preparedness and prevention through play. The programme name combines the words “education” and “entertainment”, reflecting its key approach.

Participants play the Visual Impairment Experience game, using modified paper cups to simulate limited vision and better understand the challenges of navigating life with visual impairment.



Photo by RCE Kitakyushu

It aims to create spaces where young people can test ideas through creativity and play, engage with their communities and experience what it means to actively contribute to sustainability. Without such opportunities, sustainability remains an abstract and vague concept, and communities miss the chance to harness young people's creativity and energy to drive action and address pressing local challenges. Therefore, it is important to shift from learning about the future to shaping the future — this was the approach of youth from RCE Kitakyushu when we started the programme.

The Edutainment Programme consists of several games. One of them is ESD Shooting, a game where participants throw balls at targets that represent climate-friendly and climate-harmful behaviours. The activity reflects real local challenges faced by Kitakyushu City, including extreme rainfall and flooding, while it is transitioning from a heavy-industry centre into a low-carbon SDGs model city.

Another activity is Match Play for Resources and Products, which uses playing cards and asks participants to connect products with their raw materials. Through this activity, participants learn how everyday items are linked to resource extraction, waste and global supply chains, promoting awareness about recycling, waste production and circular economy. The committee has also developed Visual Impairment Experience where participants use modified paper cups to visualize the conditions and embody the challenges of navigating daily life with vision impairment. Lastly, Rhythm Play for Life-Saving introduces cardiac first aid through rhythm and movement, which builds participants' emergency response skills through play.

What We Have Achieved

Since its launch, the Future Creation Committee has reached approximately 900 families through community-based programmes, where youth



A young learner plays the Match Play for Resources and Products game, connecting products and its raw materials through playing cards.



ENVIRONMENTAL BASIC PLAN

Develop the next generation of environmental leaders, raise environmental awareness across diverse generations and stakeholders and foster a society in which individuals recognize environmental issues as their own and take initiative in various environmental activities.



LIFELONG LEARNING PROMOTION PLAN

Provide learning opportunities that address local challenges such as health, childcare, the environment, disaster prevention and human rights, while identifying and nurturing individuals who will contribute to community development.



CHILD-CENTERED EDUCATION PLAN

Foster a sense of local attachment and develop individuals who proactively engage with and contribute to solving community issues, by opening schools to the community and society, promoting participation in school management and leveraging diverse human resources to create opportunities for varied learning and experiences.

Figure 25. Formal integration of the Future Creation Committee into municipal plans (Source: RCE Kitakyushu).

facilitators engage local residents on practical issues related to sustainability, disaster resilience and well-being.

Through the Edutainment Programme, members of the Future Creation Committee transition from learners to facilitators. They develop confidence in speaking, designing activities and engaging with diverse audiences. More importantly, they begin to see their connection to the community in a new way — not as observers, but as active contributors and co-creators.

RCE Kitakyushu supports them by engaging external professional consultants to provide guidance on the planning, content development and implementation of the Edutainment Programme. The Future Creation Committee holds regular meetings monthly — ideas for the Edutainment Programme are developed collaboratively. Rather than emerging fully formed, the programmes evolve gradually from

small ideas and casual conversations among members into interactive and experimental programmes.

Moreover, professors and professionals from the private sector provide feedback and guidance on their ideas from time to time. The Future Creation Committee also conducts reflection sessions after the event and projects, where members discuss what worked well, what challenges they faced and what kinds of conversations they needed when engaging participants. External ESD consultants support the Future Creation Committee in improving projects and supporting the growth of youth members. Through these continuous engagements and dialogues among diverse stakeholders, learning and reflections are connected to future action.

Through their continued involvement, Future Creation Committee members have developed a stronger sense of ownership and responsibility

toward environmental and community issues. Those who initially joined simply to help out have gradually come to see these issues as personally relevant and have become more proactive as ESD practitioners.

The programme has also fostered the understanding that sustainability challenges are not only issues for experts to discuss. Members increasingly recognize themselves not only as learners, but also as active contributors who can work together with local communities to create practical solutions. They have also expressed changes in their awareness, perspectives and daily actions through their commitment to the programme.

For participants in the Edutainment Programme, particularly children and families, local sustainability issues become tangible and relatable. Rather than remaining an abstract concept, community members in Kitakyushu City engage with it through play, conversation

and shared activities, creating opportunities for intergenerational dialogue.

The initiative has also reshaped relationships between youth and adults. In a city facing rapid ageing, these interactions are particularly meaningful. Young people take on visible roles in public spaces, where older generations engage with them not only as learners but as active partners.

These efforts are increasingly recognized at the institutional level as well. The integration of ESD activities into Kitakyushu City's municipal plans demonstrates that youth-led initiatives can influence broader environmental and educational policy.

What We Have Learned

As one of the youth participants noted: “If someone had simply explained some issue to me, I might not have remembered this

information. But because I engaged with it directly as a facilitator, I gained a much deeper understanding of the issue.” This demonstrates the importance of our core principle: we believe youth ownership changes everything. When young people are given the opportunity and responsibility to design and lead educational programmes, their engagement becomes deeper and more sustained. They are no longer passive recipients of knowledge — they are creators, and as we at RCE Kitakyushu call them, producers of learning experiences.

Another key lesson from conducting edutainment activities is the importance of designing for familiarity. By combining familiar community spaces with engaging content, the programme fosters more active participation. People do not need prior knowledge to join — they simply need curiosity.

The step-by-step approach is also important in designing the Edutainment Programme. Starting small allows children and youth to experiment without fear of failure. As they gain confidence, they expand the scope of their activities and widen their connections. This gradual progression supports long-term engagement.

At the same time, challenges remain. Sustaining motivation, securing resources and balancing creativity with structure requires continuous effort. It is important to emphasize that youth leadership does not mean the absence of support — we believe youth require thoughtful guidance and mentorship by older generations and collaborators.

We also believe this experience shows that youth engagement is not a single activity, but a process of growth — one that unfolds through action, reflection and connection.

What Needs to Change

Many young people who are currently working as part of the Future Creation Committee have expressed their desire to stay involved in the Edutainment Programme beyond individual

activities. Creating a more structured system for alumni engagement and mentorship could strengthen the continuity of these activities and allow experienced members to guide new participants.

There is also an opportunity to expand collaboration with schools and other ESD institutions in the region and beyond. By embedding these approaches into formal and informal education systems, youth-led learning can reach wider audiences and have a more sustained impact.

At the same time, documenting and sharing these practices will be important. The edutainment approach developed in Kitakyushu has the potential to inspire other communities facing similar challenges in other regions.

As RCE Kitakyushu approaches its 20th anniversary, the vision is to create a community where youth participation is not exceptional, but expected, and where young people naturally take part in shaping the future of their city.

Our Message

With the support of community experts and members, we started as young people who were curious, but very uncertain about sustainability issues, and sometimes unsure of our role in addressing them within our small community of Kitakyushu City. Through collaboration with a variety of stakeholders and the process of creating, trying and sharing, we began to realize that even small actions can change how people think, connect and contribute to shaping a more sustainable future. We hope to expand the Edutainment Programme globally to address sustainability challenges in diverse communities across the world. If young people are trusted to take the lead, sustainability is no longer something we simply learn about — it becomes something we contribute to together.

Participants play the Rhythm for Life-Saving game, learning about the cardiac first aid and building emergency response skills.



Photo by RCE Kitakyushu



Photo by Ron Lach 9543730 | pexels

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Students from different years in vertical garden tutorials (peer-to-peer tutoring between older and younger students) carrying out weekly recycling around the school.

Photo by Iñigo Azcárate / Colegio Santísima Trinidad.

Global Roots, Local Seeds

RCE Basque Country-Navarre

Iñigo Azcárate Uriarte



What We Face

Our project takes place at the school, Colegio Santísima Trinidad in Algorta, Getxo. Despite being located in a high-income municipality, the school is one of the few educational establishments (less than 10 per cent of the total) in the Basque Country designated as a high educational complexity center due to a high proportion of students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds and linguistic diversity. Over 90 per cent of our students come from humble, immigrant backgrounds, with over 80 per cent classified as socioeconomically vulnerable (Basque Government, 2025). This creates a unique social reality where diversity is our greatest asset, yet inclusion remains a daily challenge.

According to the latest reports from the Basque Government, our school serves a population with significant social vulnerability, and addressing this is important for maintaining inclusion, equity and a strong community (Basque Government, 2025). In Getxo, where the segregation index has recently improved from 0.58 to 0.47, our centre stands out by managing a highly complex educational environment.

The ongoing transformation of our school's physical environment aligns with global benchmarks such as UNESCO's The Green School Quality Standard (2024), which advocates for schools to be living laboratories where curriculum, architecture and the natural environment are all interconnected. By replacing

concrete with biodiverse learning environments, we transition from a grey school —characterized by predominantly paved, impermeable surfaces and a lack of natural elements — to a green learning ecosystem, addressing what Richard Louv (2005) termed “nature deficit disorder,” a reality that disproportionately affects students in urban, high-complexity centers.

In the national and local context, this initiative fits into the Spanish LOMLOE Educational Law (Ley Orgánica de Modificación de la Ley Orgánica de Educación — Organic Law for the Modification of the Organic Law on Education) and the Basque Government's Eskola Bikaina Denontzat (Excellent School for All) strategy. These frameworks emphasize that schools in vulnerable areas must not only provide academic knowledge but also high-quality environments that foster equity. Our project proves that sustainability is a fundamental right, ensuring that even students in a high educational complexity setting have access to the same green standards as any other international institution.



Project GROW & Greening Spaces

Students lead renaturalization efforts.



Technological Innovation

Air quality monitoring and energy efficiency, utilizing student-led data collection and drone technology.



Circular Economy

Implementation of school-wide organic waste composting and “Healthy Fruit Tuesdays-Thursdays” campaign.



Service-learning

Students acting as youth representatives in local municipal forums.



Global Alliances

Establishment of network of networks (Ibero-American Network for Educational Innovation, Erasmus+, GROW project, RCE Basque Country-Navarre) for sharing best practices.

Figure 26. Key activities of Global Roots, Local Seeds (Source: RCE Basque Country-Navarre).

RCE Basque Country-Navarre



Region:
Europe



Country:
Spain



SDG(s):



Target audience(s):
Kindergarten, Primary and Secondary School Students, Families, Teachers, Broader Educational Community



ESD for 2030 Priority Action:



Language(s) of the project:
Basque, Spanish



Stakeholders:
Primary and secondary schools; Non-Governmental Organizations; Local Government; Local Enterprises; Santísima Trinidad School (Getxo)



Duration of project:
September 2020–ongoing

How We Respond

In 2020, we transitioned from a traditional environmental programme to a transversal Agenda 2030 framework, integrating all 17 SDGs and Inner Development Goals (IDGs, 2021) into our school culture. The IDGs are an international non-profit framework that identifies the essential inner skills and qualities — such as being, thinking and collaborating — required to effectively achieve the SDGs. This shift, inspired by the Basque Government's restructured Agenda 2030, was designed to move beyond teacher-led activities toward a model that empowers youth as leaders.

Our initiative, Global Roots, Local Seeds, empowers students from aged 3–16 to lead transformation in their local environments (See Figure 26). The project is strictly youth-led through a Student Sustainability Council, where representatives from different year groups drive the decision-making process, mentored by the school's Agenda 2030 young coordinator and teacher who guides and facilitates the journey. This is operationalized through vertical

mentoring, whereby secondary school students mentor primary school students, ensuring that the design and implementation of solutions are conceptualized and executed entirely by the young people themselves.

In addition, we foster youth leadership by providing students with access to cutting edge technologies (digital sensors for monitoring air quality, mobile applications for identifying local biodiversity, a drone and programming robots) and mentoring from the project coordinator and the Getxo Environmental Education Centre. Students also act as youth representatives at municipal forums, where they receive direct feedback from the Getxo authorities on their proposals.

We also identify partner families who act as a driving force amongst the parent groups in different classrooms. These partner families and the Parents' Association play an important role in raising the visibility and outreach of our project and its impact. An ongoing challenge is that the most vulnerable families struggle



A student takes part in the Global Roots, Local Seeds project by watering plants in a vertical garden.

to recognize the value of education for their children; ensuring that these families can prioritize their children's education is of utmost importance.

With teachers, the task is simpler: teacher engagement is ensured through designated focal points at each educational stage, as well as open calls for active participation.

What We Have Achieved

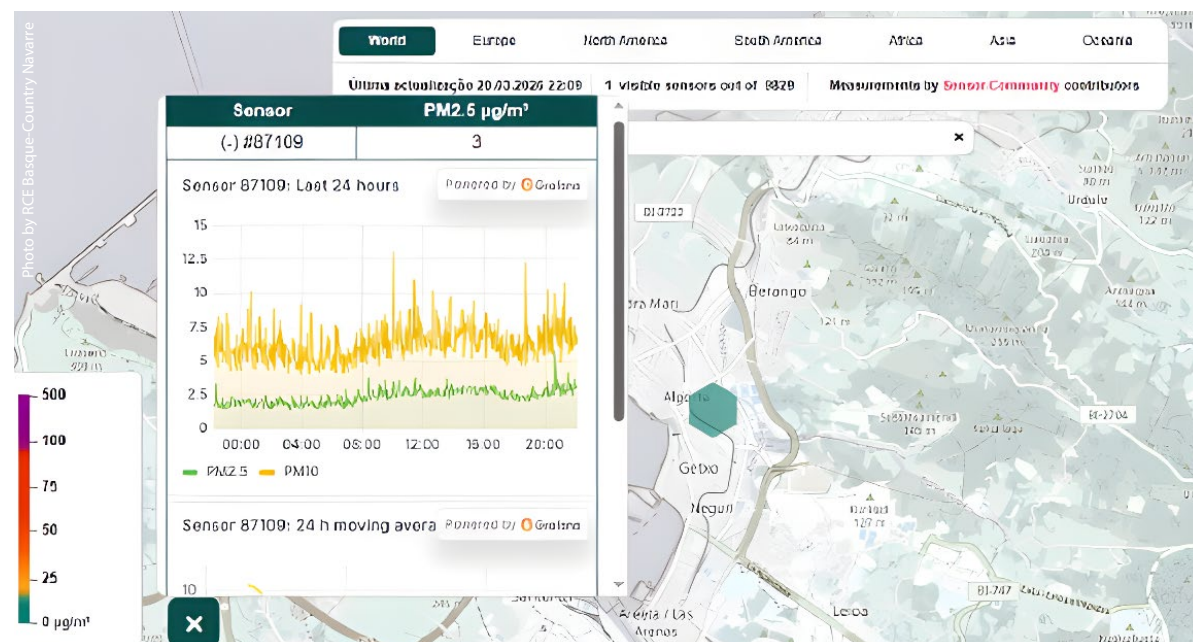
We have successfully transformed our playground from a concrete space into a living laboratory with active composting, vertical greenery and increased biodiversity. The project has fostered active participation across the entire educational community, including students, teachers and families, creating meaningful engagement opportunities for vulnerable student populations.

We achieved strong visibility, with over 300 documented and published student-led sustainability initiatives featured on our Agenda 2030 project blog (See Figure 27). It has also

received significant institutional recognition through several awards.

Furthermore, we have conducted surveys that show high levels of participant satisfaction, with students reporting increased agency (the ability to take initiative and lead their own learning) and inner development, aligned with the IDGs framework. Feedback from both teachers and students is regularly collected through Google Forms.

Finally, our students now represent youth voices in the Local Agenda 2030 Forum of the Getxo City Council, where they directly contribute to municipal sustainability discussions. Each year, two student representatives from each school attend a meeting with the mayor and the councilor for the environment. They present their work, the commitments they have decided to adopt as citizens and students of Getxo and share their proposals for school improvement. The following year, the Council responds to their proposals, explaining whether they have been implemented and to what extent the measures have been carried out.



A screenshot of a 24-hour live map showing real time air quality readings, tracking microscopic atmospheric particulate matter (PM) 2.5 and 2.10 — key indicators of air pollution.

What We Have Learned

Small steps turn out to be big steps. We have discovered that leadership does not require a large budget — it requires perseverance and the ability to see what others do not see.

One of the key enabling factors was policy integration. Aligning the project with the LOMLOE educational framework provided strong institutional support needed to make ESD transversal. The LOMLOE establishes sustainability as a core systemic axis, aligning the curriculum with the 2030 Agenda and an eco-social awareness approach. Its main innovation lies in its transversal nature, requiring both learning scenarios and school management (efficiency, waste and biodiversity) to serve as active models for ecological transition and social justice.

Strategic alliances also played an important role, as participation in the Global RCE Network and other international networks such as OEI and Erasmus+ strengthened mentorship opportunities and increased global visibility.

At the same time, the project faced several barriers. Socioeconomic and linguistic diversity

within the high-complexity school context required unconventional communication strategies centered on accessibility and empowerment. Instead of relying solely on traditional written channels, we have transformed the SDG imagery into a universal visual language through installations and a dedicated project space within the school. We also democratized access to advanced technology, using drones and air quality sensors to support citizen science initiatives that turn abstract data into a shared cause for the community.

Information was disseminated through multiple communication channels, including digital platforms, printed materials, social media and direct verbal communication with families. Limited initial funding and lack of space also posed challenges, which were addressed through external grants and the creative use of recycled local resources. Ultimately, the project demonstrates that even within complex and under-resourced environments, youth-led action can cultivate meaningful and sustainable change.



Students varnishing the insect hotel to protect it from the rain.

What Needs to Change

To sustain and scale our impact, we plan to further institutionalize ESD practices by fully embedding them into our long-term curriculum development and teacher training strategies. We are moving toward creating a local ESD observatory involving families and community partners to continuously assess our impact and identify areas for improvement.

A major goal is to expand our successful greening spaces and air quality models to neighbouring schools in Getxo and throughout the RCE network. We aim to deepen our collaboration with local authorities to ensure that youth-led data, such as air quality measurements, is used in municipal urban planning.

Furthermore, we hope to expand our Ibero-American partnerships, moving beyond virtual podcasts toward in-person exchange opportunities for our students from vulnerable backgrounds. Looking ahead, increased green funding targeted at high-complexity schools will be essential to ensure that ecological transition efforts remain inclusive, equitable and accessible to all learners.

Our Message

It is important to remember that there are no magic wands in education, nor can best practices from elsewhere be blindly replicated in different environments. That is why we firmly believe in drawing inspiration from others and adapting this knowledge to our own context.

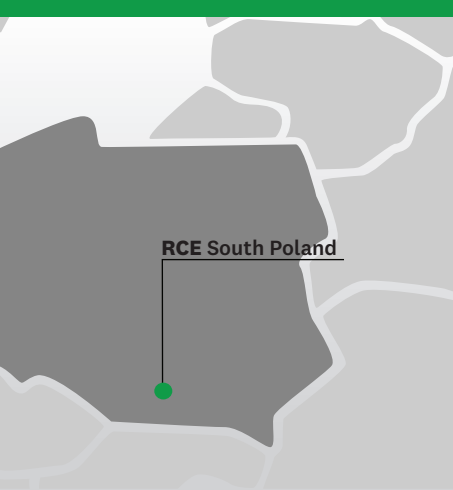
As youth leaders from a diverse and complex school, we have learned that our backgrounds do not define our potential to change the world. We have transformed concrete into green learning spaces and silence into a collective voice for the planet. Our message to peers everywhere is simple: do not wait for the “perfect” conditions to take action. Start where you are, use what you have and plant your local seeds with a global vision.

More Information:

- [Project Blog \(Spanish\)](#)
- [Social media account \(Instagram\)](#)
- [Social media account \(Facebook\)](#)
- [School website](#)
- [Air quality reading live map](#)



Figure 27. Global Roots, Local Seeds, by the numbers (Source: RCE Basque Country-Navarre).



RCE South Poland



Region:
Europe



Country:
Poland



SDG(s):



Target audience(s):

University students; Adult learners; Municipality and residents of Athens



ESD for 2030 Priority Action:



Language(s) of the project:

English



Stakeholders:

Municipality of Athens (cross-border project)



Duration of project:

October 2024–September 2025



Photo by Natalia Jończyk

Discussing each other's projects after individual work, exchanging ideas, receiving feedback from professors, and identifying the best solutions to the challenges.

Urban Regeneration: A Holistic Approach to Architectural & Urban Design — The Case of Athens, Greece

 **RCE South Poland**

Aidar Abilkhasov, Natalia Jończyk, Laura Mazur, Jan Oronowicz and Dagmara Robak



What We Face

Our workshop project confronts the challenges of unsustainable urban conditions by focusing on several issues, including the persistence of underused, degraded and environmentally inefficient urban spaces. Through this initiative, we aimed to explore how overlooked urban spaces can be transformed into opportunities for sustainable change.

Adopting Athens as a case study, we closely examined the challenges faced in the post-industrial district of Eleonas and the *polykatoikia* apartment blocks. Eleonas remains physically isolated from the rest of the city. Despite having vast areas of underused land with great potential for renewal, the area has been stuck in a state of neglect. Its recent use as the site of a refugee camp further highlighted its role as a space for temporary responses to complex social challenges. The *polykatoikia* — multistorey apartment blocks developed rapidly throughout Greece after World War II — illustrate the long-term consequences of policy-driven urban growth carried out without comprehensive planning.

These areas are characterized by extreme urban density (approximately 17,000 people per km²) and a severe shortage of green spaces (5.8 m² per person) (World Population Review, 2024). In comparison, urban density in other European

cities like Cracow is approximately 6,000–12,000 people per km², with an average of 10 m² of green spaces per person (based on GUS urban morphology studies of Kraków, Official Spatial Statistics, and EU/WHO standards). Such spatial configurations contribute to environmental stress, including the intensification of the urban heat island (UHI) effect, where built materials accumulate heat and negatively impact urban well-being (Mat Santamouris et al., 2020).

In this context, the current climatic crisis further exposes the vulnerability of urban environments, particularly in historic districts where infrastructure was never fully adapted to meet contemporary demands (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), 2023). Addressing these challenges aligns with SDG 11 (sustainable cities and communities) and the EU Green Deal, emphasizing the urgent need for sustainable urban transformation.

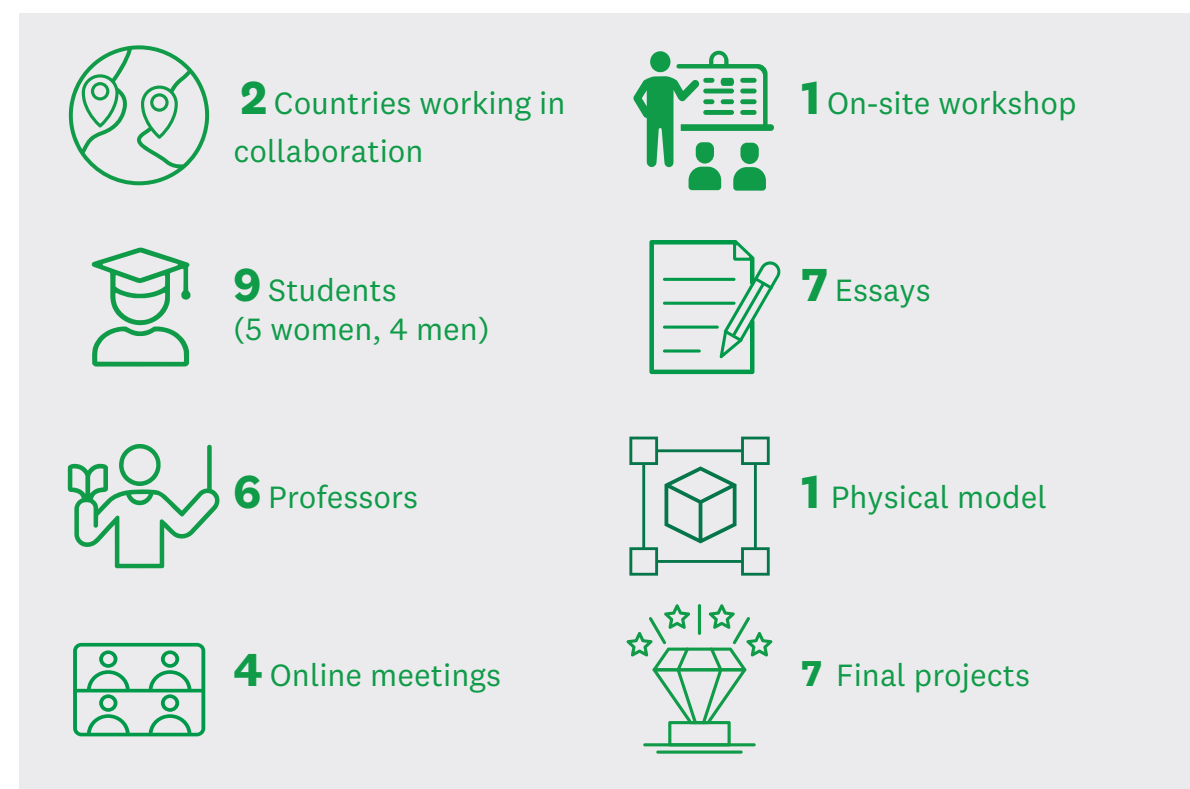


Figure 28. Urban Regeneration, by the numbers (Source: RCE South Poland).

How We Respond

To respond to these urban challenges, RCE South Poland Youth representatives, known as RCE Youth FLOW, developed a year-long project that focused on youth-led urban regeneration (See Figure 28). The project aimed to promote a sustainability-driven approach to urban transformation, positioning the city as a healthier, more integrated ecosystem. It also strived to empower young urban designers to develop more inclusive, resilient and sustainable urban solutions. Our approach shifts the focus from problem identification to actionable strategies that address spatial fragmentation, environmental stress and the untapped potential of underused urban areas.

The project was structured around periodic online meetings and an intensive on-site workshop in Athens and was led by architecture students from the Urban Green Student Club at Cracow University of Technology. The project unfolded through several stages: from identifying key challenges and collectively defining priorities, to conducting spatial analyses and developing sustainability-driven design strategies.

Youth decision-making was enabled through the six-step ESD methodology (Compare, Quantify, Conceptualize, Contextualize, Shape

and Sustain), which structured the entire design process. Within this framework, students independently selected research directions, defined design approaches and made key project decisions, ensuring genuine ownership over both process and outcomes.

To support sustained engagement, participants received continuous academic mentoring and access to professional tools, including simulations — a holistic 3D modelling software — and geographic information system (GIS) data. This combination of guidance and autonomy enabled students to translate theoretical knowledge into applied, context-sensitive solutions, strengthening both their technical and critical thinking skills.

The transition from digital research to the on-site workshop marked a critical phase of evaluation, as students got an opportunity to test their analyses against the real spatial and social conditions. Students' work was further improved through a final seminar with local academic partners, creating a feedback loop in which proposals were reviewed, refined and assessed for feasibility and relevance. Through this structured yet flexible process, the project ensured that youth contributions were not only conceptual, but grounded, evaluated and responsive to real urban challenges.



QUALITY OF LIFE RANKING

Athens ranks near the bottom in the 2023 European Quality of Life survey, with only around 65% of residents satisfied with living in their city — one of the lowest satisfaction scores among 83 European cities.



POLYKATOIKIAS IN THE URBAN FABRIC

80% of Athens' urban fabric consists of *polykatoikias*. High-density multifamily apartment buildings dominate the city's built environment.



GREEN SPACES IN THE CITY CENTRE

Only 2.8–3% of land in central Athens is green. The historic core is one of the most vegetation-deficient areas among European capitals.

Figure 29. Rethinking urban living: challenges facing Athens today (Source: RCE South Poland).



Presenting the *polykatoikia* problem to young people to raise awareness and encourage thoughtful responses.

What We Have Achieved

The workshop series addressed broader systemic urban challenges — particularly the sustainable regeneration of post-industrial areas and the environmental inefficiency of high-density housing — using Athens as a case study (See Figure 29). This resulted in seven research essays and seven design projects developed by a cohort of nine architecture students (five women, four men).

Beyond tangible outputs, one of the most significant outcomes was the shift in participants' approach to design. Working on real world challenges fostered a strong sense of agency and responsibility, allowing students to engage directly with sustainability as both a design principle and a social obligation. Collaboration within a focused academic group increased motivation, fostered critical thinking and facilitated the exchange of perspectives,

strengthening participants' ability to respond to complex urban conditions.

Students developed a modular system for upgrading existing housing and proposed interventions such as market halls, community spaces and green infrastructure (See Figure 31). These strategies addressed issues of spatial fragmentation, lack of greenery and unsustainable urban concentration, while also responding to overtourism by redistributing activity beyond the historic city center.

Local engagement played an important role in grounding the proposals. Feedback from local students and professors informed the refinement of design strategies and strengthened their contextual relevance. This research-by-design approach enabled the translation of site-specific challenges into transferable, sustainability-driven strategies offering a replicable framework for addressing similar urban conditions in other contexts in Europe and beyond.

What We Have Learned

The primary lesson learned was the irreplaceable value of on-site engagement in shaping sustainable design responses. While digital tools supported initial analysis, in-person visits and direct interaction with areas such as Eleonas and the *polykatoikia*-dominated districts enabled a full understanding of spatial scale, environmental conditions and everyday urban dynamics. This revealed how post-industrial underuse and high-density housing patterns directly impact the quality and sustainability of urban life (See Figure 30).

The second key insight was the importance of the human-centered and context-sensitive approach. Addressing the untapped potential of Eleonas and the environmental inefficiency of *polykatoikia* structures required moving beyond abstract concepts and responding to real spatial and social conditions. Students gained a strong sense of agency by working on these real-world issues, understanding sustainability as both an environmental and social responsibility.

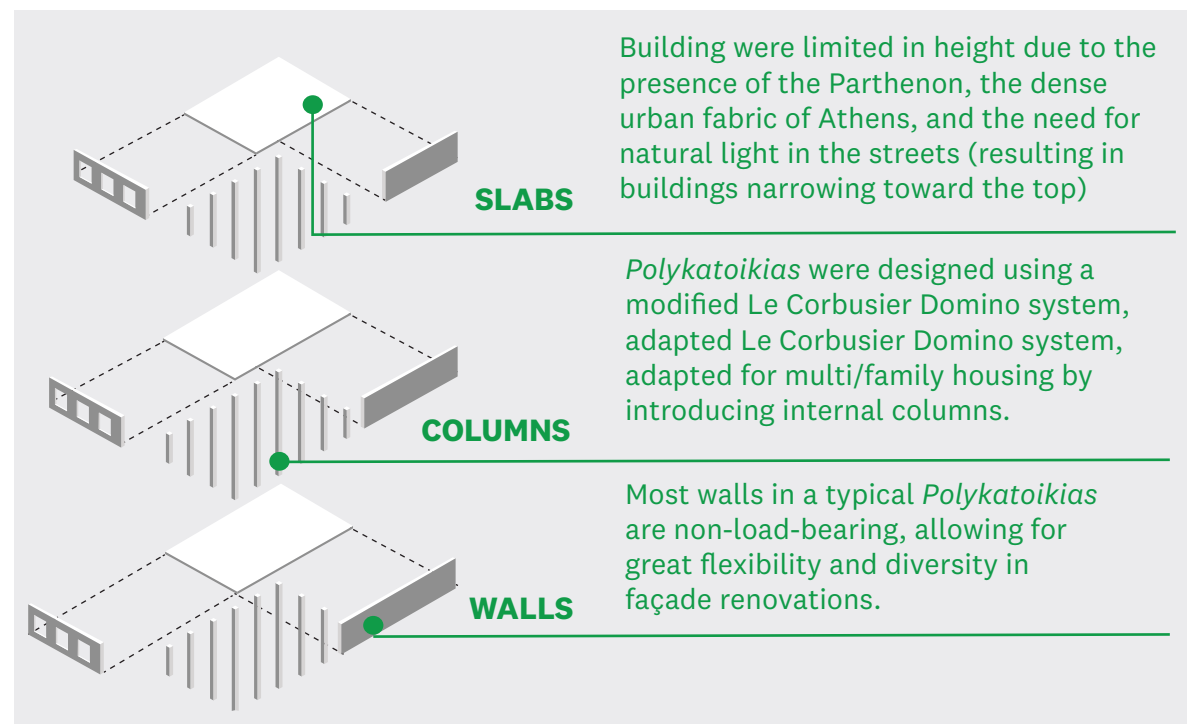


Figure 30. Inside the *polykatoikia*: the structural principles behind Athen's urban housing (Source: RCE South Poland).



Figure 31. Transforming the *polykatoikia*: design strategies for a more sustainable urban future (Source: RCE South Poland).

Collaboration and exchange of perspectives further strengthened the design process. Feedback from local academic partners helped refine proposals and ensure their relevance within the existing urban and cultural context.

Ultimately, the project demonstrated that sustainable urban transformation must integrate site-specific challenges with broader systemic thinking. By working on Eleonas and *polykatoikia* as case studies, participants developed transferable strategies addressing issues such as urban fragmentation, lack of greenery and concentrated urban pressure. These insights highlight the value of immersive, research-by-design methodologies that can be adapted to similar contexts.

What Needs to Change

Looking ahead, we are motivated to scale up our impact and turn conceptual ideas into real change. Raising awareness is key, especially among municipalities, and should include discussions on how to keep urban fabric organized, bringing back the greenery, cooling heat islands and building a brighter future through smart design. While Athens served as a testing ground for our project, the lessons extend far beyond Greece.

As a next step, we would like to publish our essays, projects and models online and

disseminate our findings through various events. We hope to share our stories to spark conversations and gather further feedback to refine our ideas.

Scaling up partnerships is our dream — we would love to team up with more professors, municipalities, NGOs and passionate students around the world. Together, we can form a strong, united group to push past barriers, secure funding and pilot projects. We truly believe our ideas can become reality, healing urban fabric and creating inclusive spaces for all.

Our Message

As young designers, we believe that it is possible to rethink cities that face several challenges, including climate change, social inequality and spatial fragmentation, through youth-led action. By working across borders and generations, our project demonstrates how youth responses to local challenges in Athens can generate transferable knowledge and relevant solutions in other cities. We invite fellow young people, educators and decision-makers to recognize and empower youth as equal and responsible partners and leaders in shaping resilient and inclusive urban futures.

Next Steps

Dr. Gio Lugo Miolo

JSPS-UNU Postdoctoral Research Fellow

The University of Tokyo and UNU-IAS

Our world is built on a dynamic system where people of different generations continuously learn from and shape one another, yet many societies still associate leadership, expertise and credibility with age alone. While we have come to realize the importance of empowering youth from being beneficiaries to leaders, this has yet to be fully reflected in institutional practices and opportunities. Thus, the shift from recognizing youth potential to genuinely empowering them remains an ongoing challenge.

In navigating this challenge, I invite people of all generations to rethink our perceptions of youth, especially in recognizing their capacity to take charge and lead meaningful change. Young people bring bright, remarkable ideas that can address real-world problems with real-world solutions. Thus, these ideas deserve to be welcomed with openness, trust and support. This book, *Youth in Charge: RCE Leaders Shaping Sustainable Societies*, is a living proof that echoes

the youth are never too young to take charge and create meaningful action, and, as the title suggests, to be leaders in shaping societies for sustainable development.

It is also a collection of case studies that feature youth's innovative initiatives and capacities to drive change, foster collaboration and promote sustainable development in schools,

universities, communities and society at large. Most importantly, the book is created, designed and written by youth themselves. Indeed, youth are the hope of our societies — and the history makers of the present.

Lessons Learned

To rethink our perceptions of youth, we refer to the lessons learned across the diverse experiences from our RCE authors. Here, I outline three shared lessons from this book: Meaningful partnerships, participatory co-creation and up-scaled impact.

1. Meaningful Partnerships

The book features partnerships with multi-level stakeholders. At the school level, this is evident in RCE Abu Dhabi's SSI and RCE Basque Country-Navarre's greening school initiatives. At the university level, cases include RCE Detroit Windsor's *Zero Waste Athletic Events* initiative, RCE Tasmania's circular creative workshops, RCE Davao's Indigenous women empowerment programme and RCE South Poland's urban regeneration project. We have also seen the importance of partnerships with local governments in fostering ESD such as RCE Tongyeong's *Bridge to the World* and RCE Kitakyushu's Edutainment programmes, where city governments position the youth as leaders and play proactive roles in facilitating hands-on activities for them. There are also collaborations with NGOs as depicted in RCE KwaZulu Natal's citizen science initiative for water quality monitoring and RCE Greater Nairobi's WeLove assistive technology partnering with disability inclusion organizations. Lastly, grassroots communities, as shown by RCE Rio and RCE East Arunachal Pradesh, demonstrated how



Photo by Edmond Dantes 8556559 | pexels

direct outreach to community members through volunteers was consistently identified as essential in fostering inclusive education while expanding youth impact and sustaining the programmes they initiated.

Apart from multi-level stakeholders, partnerships also raise the importance of intergenerational collaboration. While older generations hold the fortress — that is, traditions and institutional knowledge — younger generations forge new paths as forward thinkers and drivers of change. With this, it creates an enabling environment where youth are no longer acting as assistants to event coordination or facilitating projects, but as leaders and decision makers throughout all stages in project implementation. For young people to take charge in shaping sustainable societies, it is necessary to push beyond the barriers hindering youth participation and proactively carve out spaces that support and facilitate leadership, agency and initiatives of young people.

2. Participatory Co-creation

Co-creation is a way to remove hierarchical barriers of knowledge through mutual understanding and the recognition of diverse perspectives and expertise. Through this, it plays an instrumental role in strengthening innovation, promotes ownership and agency of the youth while still being guided by experts and older generations.

RCE KwaZulu-Natal co-developed an app that detects aquatic macroinvertebrates in real time to monitor water quality contamination. We learned that innovation is not done by a single expert of technology alone but through a collaboration of diverse stakeholders from clean water advocacy, governance and research institutions. One of RCE Greater Nairobi's lessons learned in developing assistive technology tools for children with developmental disabilities is to include end users, such as people with disabilities and

disability inclusion organizations, throughout the entire process as this gives more nuanced and strengthened outputs that better ensure inclusivity on top of maintaining quality and innovation. RCE Davao calls for the co-creation of governance systems to ensure more gender-based, inclusive and accountable societies in the future. Furthermore, RCE Tongyeong emphasizes PBL in co-creating responses by establishing spaces where youth can confidently ask questions and share ideas.

Overall, co-creation fosters equal opportunities for diverse perspectives to be heard and enables mutual understanding, shared ownership and viewpoints that strengthen inclusivity, dialogue and collaboration. On top of promoting innovation, it also reinforces the norm that everyone can take part in contributing ideas and expertise regardless of their age or background.

3. Up-scaled Impact

Across the case studies, we learned that meaningful change does not stop at creating innovative ideas. It also comes with sustained support in transforming these ideas into impactful, tangible outcomes for communities and society at large.

RCE Tasmania calls for scaling up their initiatives by documenting their workshops and teaming up with the local communities so that their impact can reach more audiences beyond the university campus. Similarly, RCE Tongyeong learned to scale the impact of their Bridge to the World through documentation and developed a knowledge archive for wider audiences. RCE Basque Country-Navarre recognized the importance of scaling the impact of their greening school project by embedding ESD practices into long-term curriculum and teacher training strategies. RCE South Poland emphasized the need to further scale up partnerships in their future implementation by reaching out to wider stakeholders such as academic, policy and NGO circles as well as like-minded students around the world.

Photo by Newpowa 5D_e12dGxY4 | unsplash



Overall, to scale up impact and ideas, supportive systems, meaningful partnerships, and enabling participatory co-creation are needed to allow youth-led initiatives to move beyond drafts of ideas, grow beyond localized efforts, and create broader societal change. It is high time to create spaces where youth can voice out, think and ask questions confidently, and to genuinely listen to them. We also have to allow them to freely express their ideas and experiment while receiving sufficient guidance and training from experts and older generations. Resources and accountability are truly what drive the scaling up of impact and ideas.

Looking Ahead

Now that we have come to realize the need to further rethink and deepen our recognition of youth's potential and action, we turn to the way forward through the lessons shared in the case studies in this book.

One major recommendation is to follow the framework that promotes meaningful youth participation mechanisms. Earlier in 2026, the UN Youth Office introduced guiding principles for [Meaningful Youth Participation](#). This serves as the overarching strategy, proposing approaches that (i) enable youth to become leaders and decision-makers; (ii) provide resources that support youth's leadership and initiatives; and (iii) strengthen accountability and feedback mechanisms. These principles aim to empower youth as active representatives, leaders and decision-makers in driving social transformation and sustainability, which are vital in addressing real-world human and climate challenges.

Another recommendation is validating ideas of young people as equally important as those of older generations. While it is encouraging to see the youth as partners in initiatives, this alone is not enough when they remain assistants without being involved in decision-making processes or having their voices genuinely heard. Fostering dialogue that is equal, open and non-hostile towards the youth is essential in building

inclusive and participatory spaces. With this, it not just empowers the youth but also benefits many generations across society. Imagine how projects could become even more meaningful and innovative when youth are deliberately included throughout the entire process!

I hope that this book serves as an invitation not only to the youth, but also to people across generations, to further strengthen intergenerational collaboration, co-creation and recognition of their ideas as valuable and important.

We are eternally grateful to the RCE authors who continue to demonstrate and reaffirm that youth are indeed capable of taking charge to drive meaningful change and deserve the recognition and support they have long needed.

Looking back, it has truly been an honor to lead the editorial work of this publication. I thank my team at UNU-IAS for trusting and encouraging me to lead this project for the youth, by the youth. I learned that we are, indeed, never too young to succeed, to innovate, to lead, to scale up and to make decisions that contribute to sustainable development. My hope is that young people will no longer be questioned about their capabilities simply because they are young, but instead be recognized for the energy they bring, the endless possibilities they carry and the unique perspectives they offer — all because they are young. So, to my fellow young people, always remember that change can also start with YOUTH.

Voices from RCE Regional Youth Coordinators



Fayola M. Waithe
RCE Regional Youth Coordinator (Americas)

“Environmental justice is the foundation of meaningful climate action and education. By empowering youth through service, collaboration, and civic engagement, we cultivate future leaders who can address challenges equitably. Environmental education also embraces the respect for diverse cultural perspectives, ensuring that solutions are inclusive and sustainable for generations to come.”

Woojin Lee
RCE Regional Youth Coordinator (Asia-Pacific)

“The future begins when young people are trusted not only to participate, but also to question, act, and lead. Failure and mistakes are our greatest assets. Let us create spaces where everyday concerns become collective action, and where that courage is carried forward from one generation to the next.”

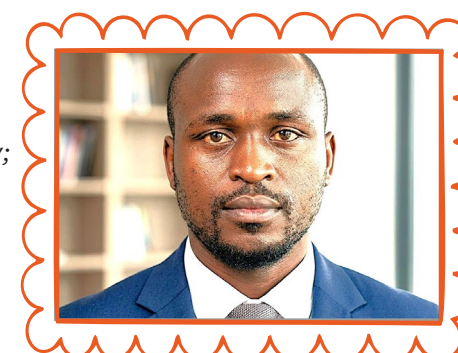


Alyson Mackay
RCE Regional Youth Coordinator (Europe)

“The climate crisis is not a future issue; it's happening now. We need every generation to work together to create a just and sustainable world. Not just for future generations but for ourselves, here and now, a better world is possible. We must work collectively to make it so.”

Evance Ouya
RCE Regional Youth Coordinator (Africa & Middle East)

“Africa's youth are not merely beneficiaries of sustainability; we are its architects. From biodiversity conservation to climate resilience and indigenous knowledge, I believe Africa holds solutions the world needs. Our responsibility is to lead boldly, innovate inclusively, and ensure sustainable development leaves no community behind.”



List of Abbreviations

ADEK	Abu Dhabi’s Department of Education and Knowledge
ADG	Abu Dhabi Guideline for Green Schools
ASD	Autism spectrum disorder
ASR	Automatic speech recognition
BPA	Bachelor of Public Administration
CBWQM	Community-based water quality management
CP	Cerebral palsy
DESD	United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development
DSSC	Davao Del Sur State College
EAD	Environment Agency – Abu Dhabi
ESD	Education for sustainable development
FPIC	Free and Prior Informed Consent
GEEP	Global Environment Education Partnership
GIS	Geographic information system
ICCs	Indigenous Cultural Communities
IPCC	Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change
IPRA	Indigenous Peoples Right Act
IWMI	International Water Management Institute
KBTA	Kilimanjaro Blind Trust Africa
KZN	KwaZulu-Natal
LGU	Local Government Unit
LOMLOE	Ley Orgánica de Modificación de la Ley Orgánica de Educación
LYLN	Lohit Youth Library Network
miniSASS	Mini-Stream Assessment Scoring System
MOU	Memorandum of Understanding
NCIP	National Commission on Indigenous Peoples
NGO	Non-governmental organization
PBL	Problem-based learning
RCE	Regional Centre of Expertise on Education for Sustainable Development
RYCs	Regional Youth Coordinators
SADC	Southern African Development Community
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SLUGS	Student Living University Gardening Society
SSI	Sustainable Schools Initiative
SSO	Single Sign-on
UHI	Urban heat island
UN	United Nations
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNFCCC	United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change
UNU	United Nations University
UNU-IAS	United Nations University Institute for the Advanced Study of Sustainability
UTAS	University of Tasmania
WHO	World Health Organization
WSU	Wayne State University

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