



CALL TO ACTION:



SUPPORTING YOUTH
FOR LOCAL ENVIRONMENTAL
ACTION AND EMPLOYABILITY

A Policy Brief for Empowering Youth-Led
Environmental Projects Across Europe



LOCALY: LOcal Capacity and Awareness of Life for Youth

The EU-funded project LOCALY aimed to empower young people (13 to 17 years old) to mitigate environmental problems within their local communities. It aspired to do so through the development of an innovative toolkit containing learning materials specifically adapted to the needs of youth organizations, which served to lead young people through a process of exploration and reflection, problem identification, solution development, community-based implementation, evaluation and presentation.

The LOCALY project was implemented by: Goethe-Institut Athen (Greece), Ecogenia (Greece), Asociación Biodiversa (Spain), Consorzio Materahub (Italy), Naturfreundejugend Deutschlands (Germany). The Policy Brief at hand has been developed in the context of Work Package 4: Youth Project Implementation that was led by Ecogenia, and was drafted with the expert support of DOTANK Plus. It is also in alignment with the European Climate Pact objectives, and Ecogenia's action as a Pact Partner Organization.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This Call to Action is addressed to local and European policy-makers with the objective of securing increased and long-term support for youth organizations engaged in environmental action. Drawing on evidence from the LOCALY project, including survey data and evaluation insights from the community-based environmental pilots, implemented at diverse localities by youngsters under the guidance of youth workers, this Call to Action demonstrates that youth-led environmental projects are a cost-effective, high-impact strategy for tackling urgent ecological challenges while equipping young people with valuable skills that enhance their employability. At a time when youth unemployment in Europe remains a persistent challenge and climate vulnerability is growing, empowering youth to take environmental action at the local level provides a dual return on investment. The findings presented here highlight the readiness of local ecosystems, the expressed needs of civil society, and the opportunities available through national and EU frameworks. We call on policy-makers to urgently act on this momentum by funding, formalizing, and scaling youth-led environmental initiatives.

INTRODUCTION: A CALL ROOTED IN PRACTICE

This Call to Action emerges from the practical experience and learning generated through the LOCALY project. At its core is a shared conviction: that young people are not only ready but uniquely positioned to drive meaningful environmental change in their communities. However, they cannot do it alone. Recognition, structure, and sustained support are essential. To ground this vision in practical realities, LOCALY partners implemented two independent yet complementary processes. The first one involved evaluation reports, collected after completing the project's implementation stage. In this stage, youth workers designed and delivered pilot initiatives across several localities in Spain, Italy, Germany, and Greece, utilizing the environmental education Toolkit developed by the Consortium. The accompanying Evaluation Report captures the impact of these pilots: how youth gained confidence, teamwork skills, and civic agency, and how their projects raised local awareness, inspired participation, and fostered new community partnerships.

In parallel, a multi-country survey was conducted across the countries represented in the consortium. The survey aims to understand how local organizations are engaging youth in environmental action, what barriers they face, and what support they need to do more. Together, the survey and the evaluation offer a compelling picture of what is possible, and what is needed.

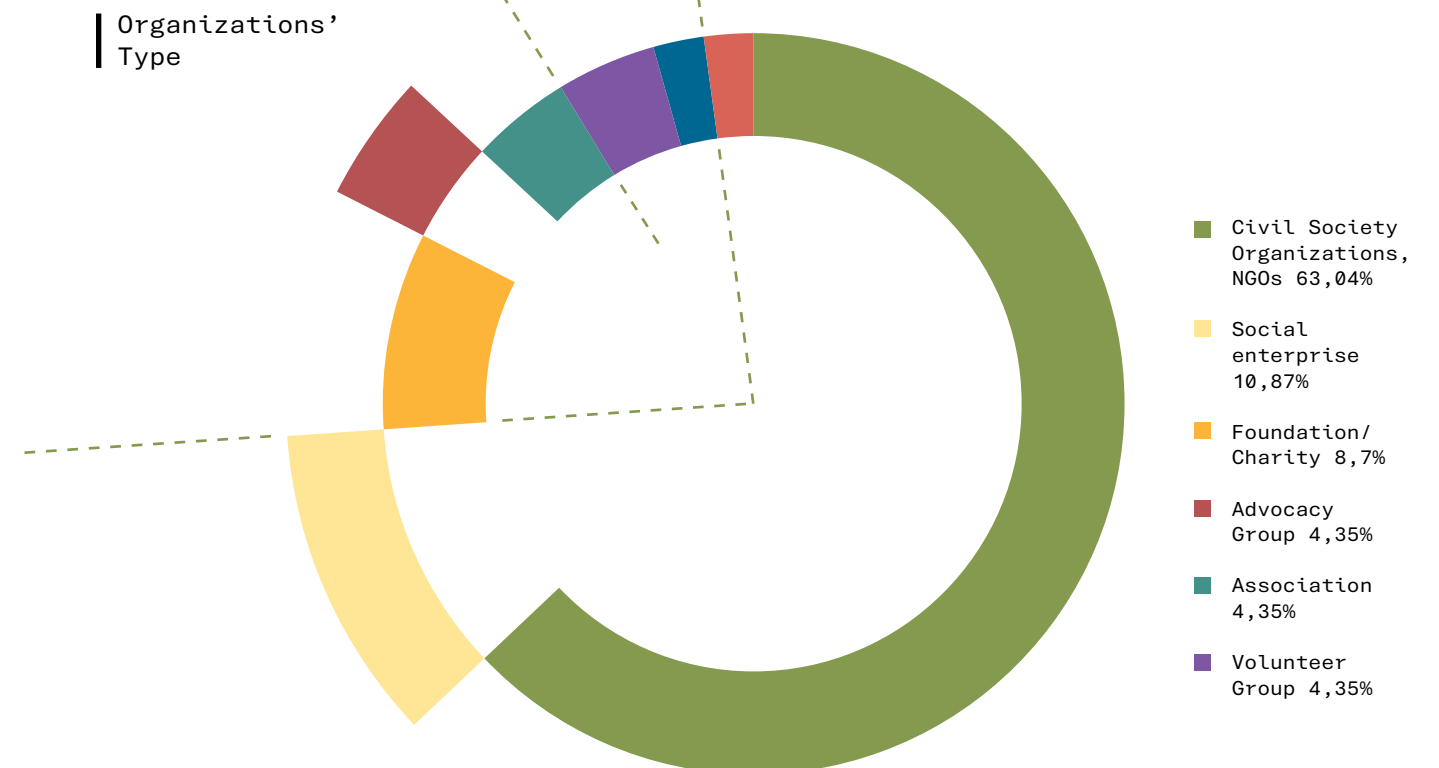
This Call to Action is built on those insights. It aims to translate lived experience into actionable recommendations, calling on policy-makers to scale and sustain youth-led environmental work as a cost-effective strategy for local resilience and youth employability.

MAPPING THE LOCAL ECOSYSTEM

This section outlines the types of organizations that participated in the LOCALY survey, their areas of focus, and the operational context in which they work.

Most participating organizations are Civil Society Organizations and NGOs (63.04%), followed by Social Enterprises (10.87%) and Foundations/Charities (8.7%). Other represented entities include Advocacy Groups, Associations, Volunteer Groups, Cooperatives, and Grassroots Organizations, each accounting for smaller shares.

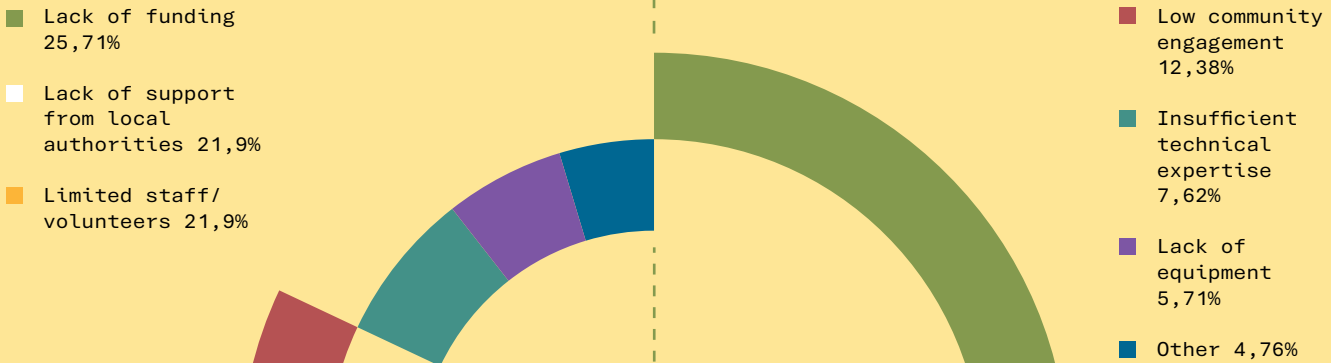
The primary focus areas of participating organizations include Environmental Education (21.58%), Education & Culture (14.39%), Youth Development (14.39%), and Environmental Conservation (11.51%).



Although only a portion of participating organizations list environmental work as their primary focus area, all reported some level of engagement with environmental issues. Among them, the most common activities include educational programs (30.25%), community engagement events (21.01%), and awareness-raising campaigns (20.17%). Others focus on advocacy and policy work (15.13%) or contribute through research and data collection (10.08%).

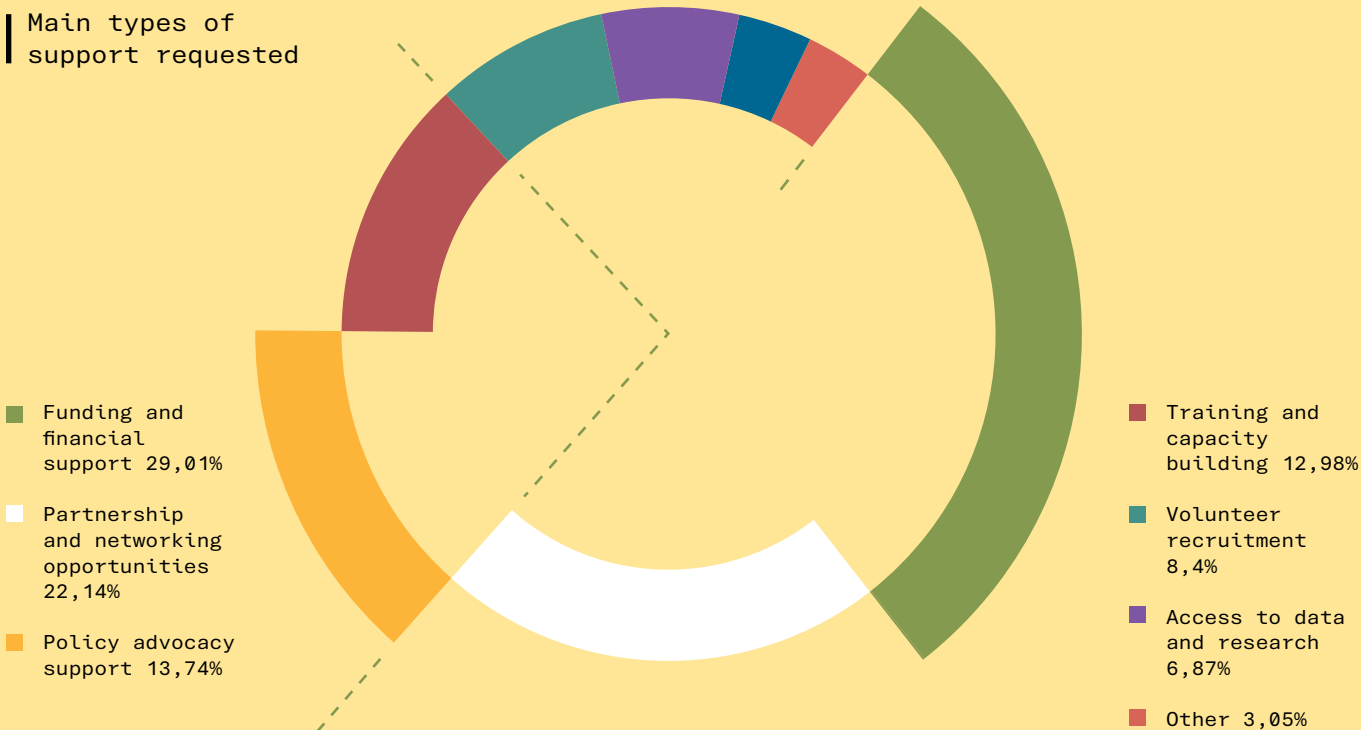
Despite active engagement, organizations face significant barriers in addressing priority issues. The most reported challenges include lack of funding (25.71%), insufficient support from local authorities (21.9%), and limited staff or volunteers (21.9%). Additional obstacles include low community engagement and insufficient technical capacity. Crucially, 63.05% of respondents rated access to funding as ‘very difficult’ or ‘difficult’, underscoring the urgent need for more accessible and sustained financial support. Respondents identified their most urgent support needs as funding and financial support (29.01%), partnerships and networking opportunities (22.14%), and policy advocacy support (13.74%). These priorities reflect a need for improved funding access, increased visibility, and stronger policy alignment.

Organizations’ Main Focus Areas



Main challenges in addressing priority issues

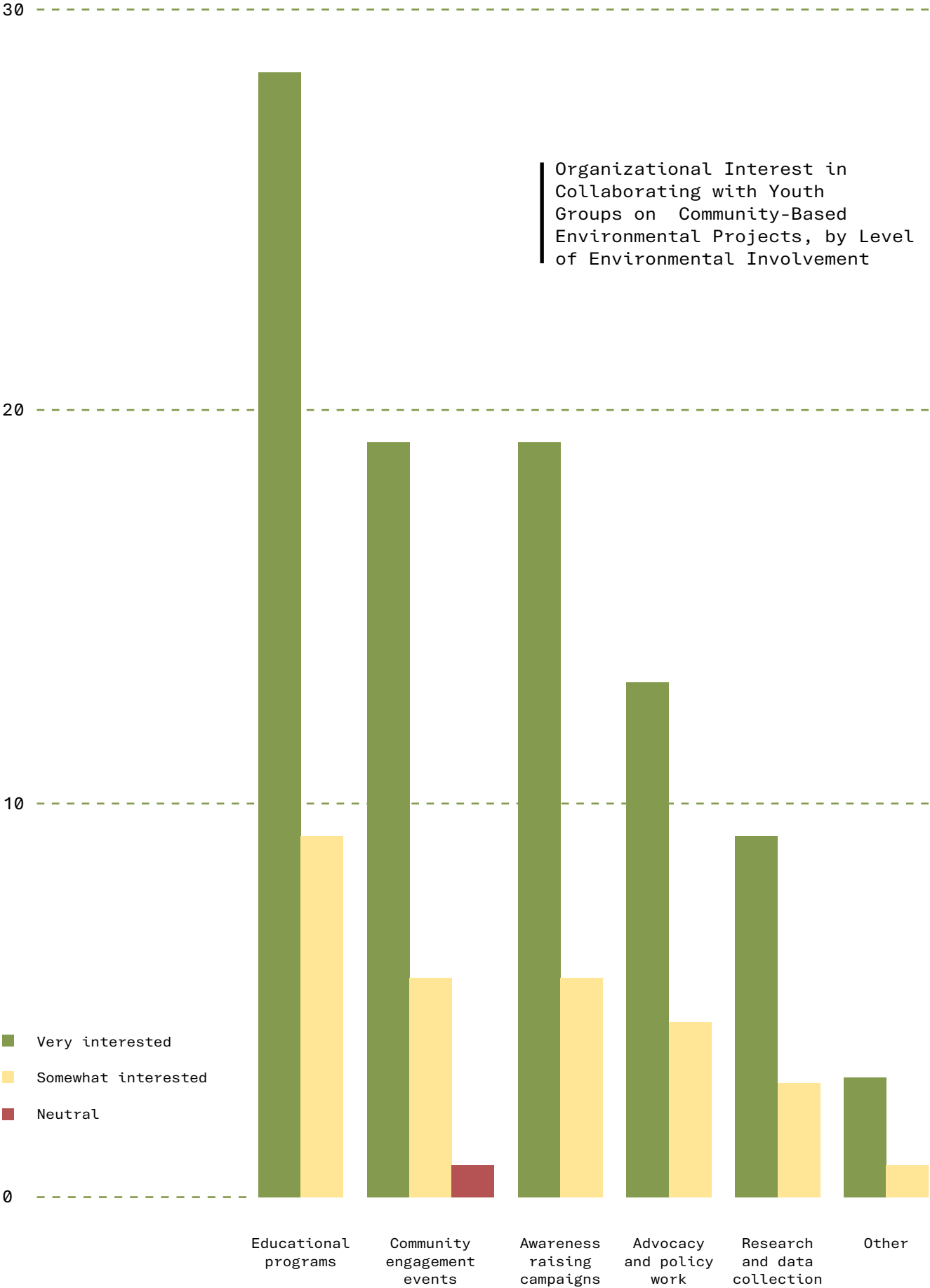
Main types of support requested

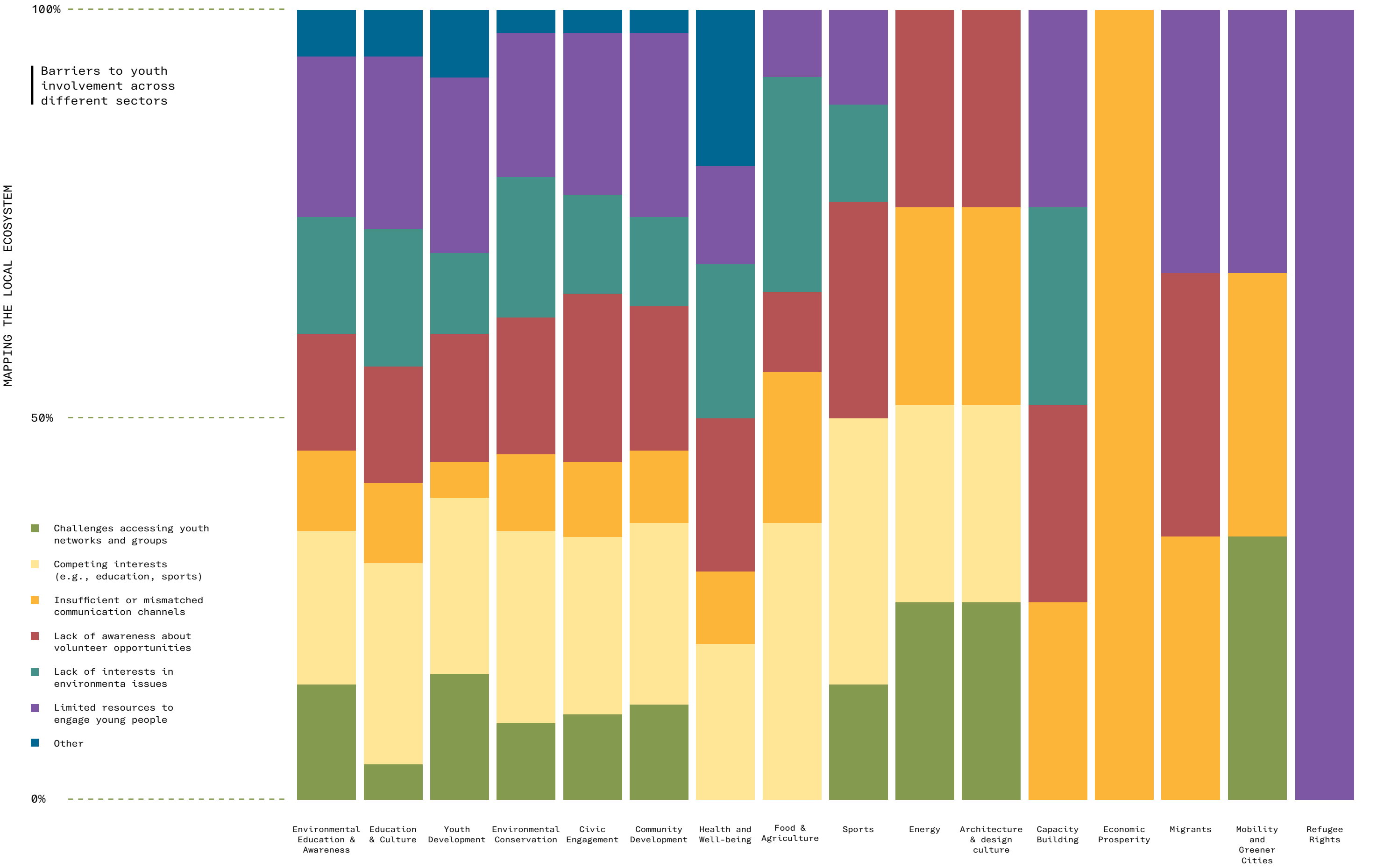


Additional support needs include training and capacity building, volunteer recruitment, and access to data and research.

At the same time, there is a strong willingness to engage and mentor young people, with 65.22% of organizations indicating readiness to support or collaborate with youth groups. The survey results indicate that in organizations with high levels of youth engagement, young people are particularly active in educational programs, followed by participation in community engagement events and awareness-raising campaigns, indicating the mutual reinforcement between youth involvement and impact.

Despite overall willingness to engage youth, significant barriers to participation persist, varying in type and intensity across sectors. The most consistently reported challenges include limited resources to engage young people and difficulties accessing youth networks and platforms. In contrast, competing interests (such as education and sports) and lack of awareness about volunteer opportunities are particularly prominent in sectors like Sports, Civic Engagement, and Community Development. Finally, a lack of awareness of available policy tools continues to restrict engagement, with nearly 30% of surveyed organizations indicating they are unaware of key EU and national mechanisms.





Lessons from Project
Implementation

The LOCALY Evaluation Report underscores key qualitative insights gained through youth project implementation. Youth workers and project staff shared a number of critical lessons. They stressed the importance of clear guidelines and strong cooperation with local NGOs and schools, emphasizing that building a reliable network of diverse organizations advancing environmental education significantly improves project outcomes. They noted that similar projects can manifest quite differently depending on the local context, highlighting the need for adaptable approaches. A safe and inclusive environment where participants feel free to express themselves emerged as a core requirement for successful collaboration.

Confidence building, patience, and time management were also highlighted. Youth workers acknowledged the need to better estimate timelines and to approach project planning with flexibility. Creativity and art were cited as vital tools across age groups, pointing to the value of cultural elements in fostering participation. As a key takeaway, participants accepted that impactful work with young people is often a slow process, but one that yields deep, long-lasting benefits.

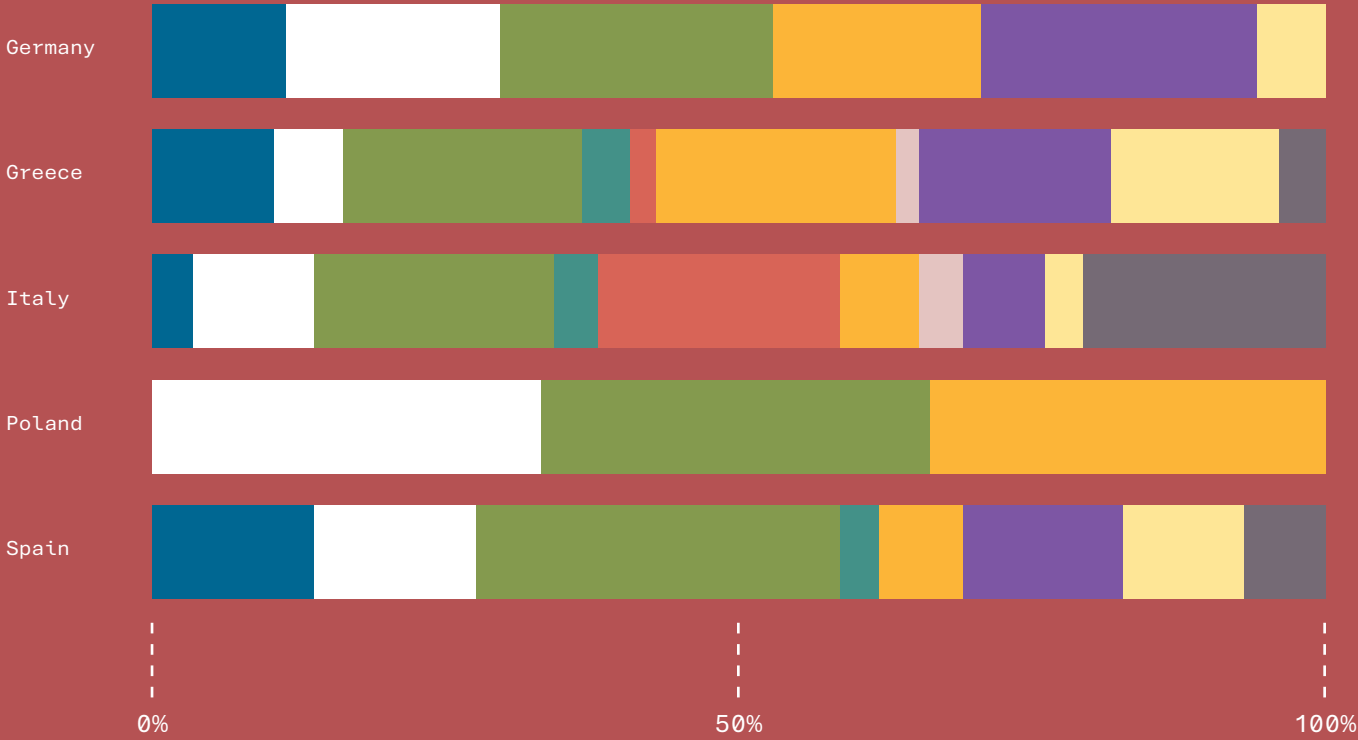
Lessons from Survey
Insights

Top environmental
issues by country

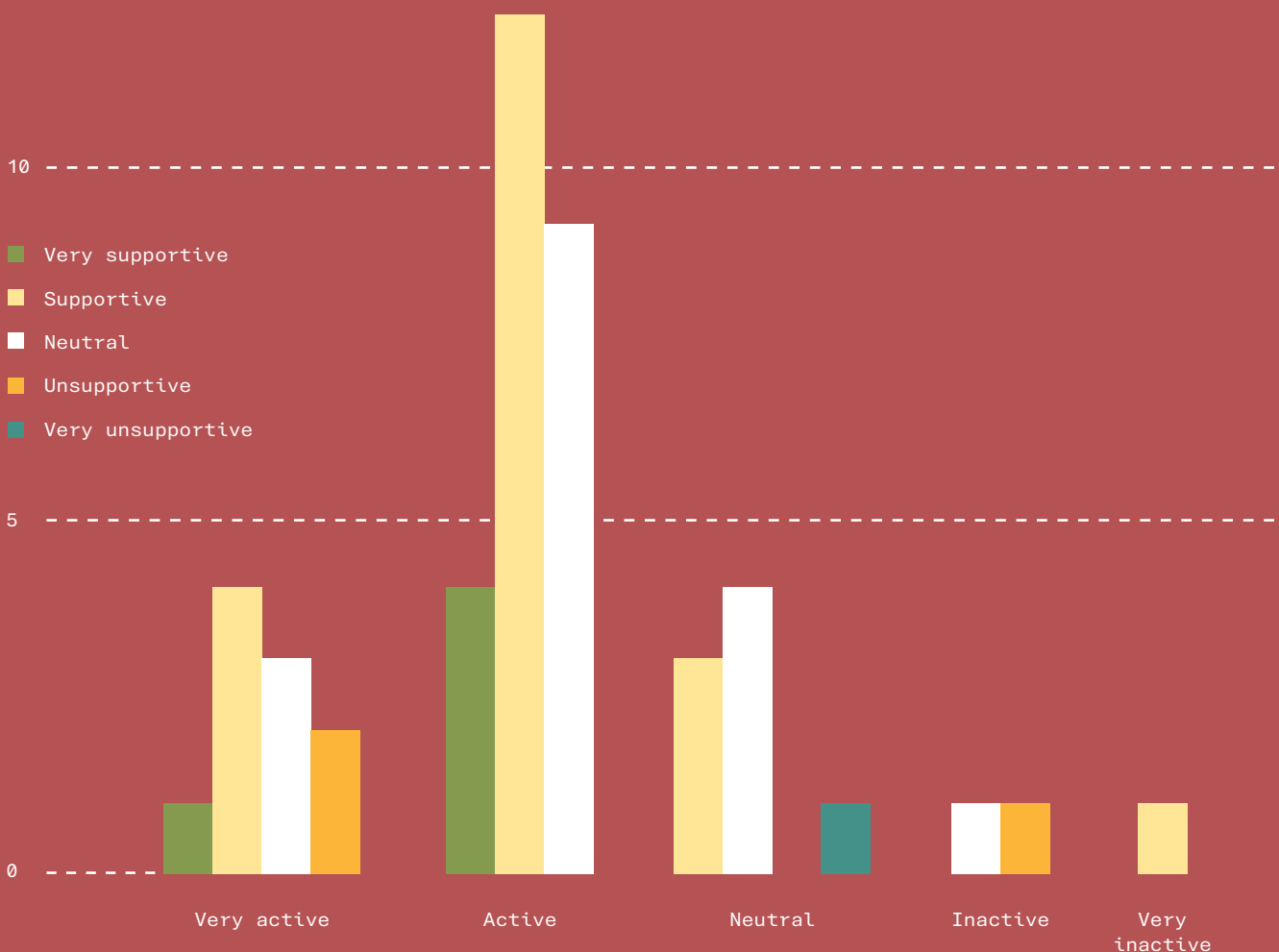
- Air pollution
- Biodiversity loss
- Climate change
- Deforestation
- Land pollution
- Natural disasters
- Other
- Over-consumption
- Waste management
- Water pollution

Design Project Ideas from the Ground

Drawing on survey data gathered through LOCALY, several project types have been identified as particularly beneficial for both community impact and youth development. These include environmental education and awareness initiatives, climate action projects, and sustainable city efforts such as greening interventions and community gardens. Mapping environmental needs geographically reveals distinct regional patterns and opportunities for tailored interventions. From a broader geographical perspective, Mediterranean countries appear to face common challenges related to water pollution, waste management, and air pollution. At the same time, climate change and biodiversity loss emerge as cross-cutting environmental issues affecting nearly all surveyed regions, underscoring the importance of localized policy responses and tailored environmental initiatives.



Perceived Community Support Based on Level of Youth Engagement Within Organization

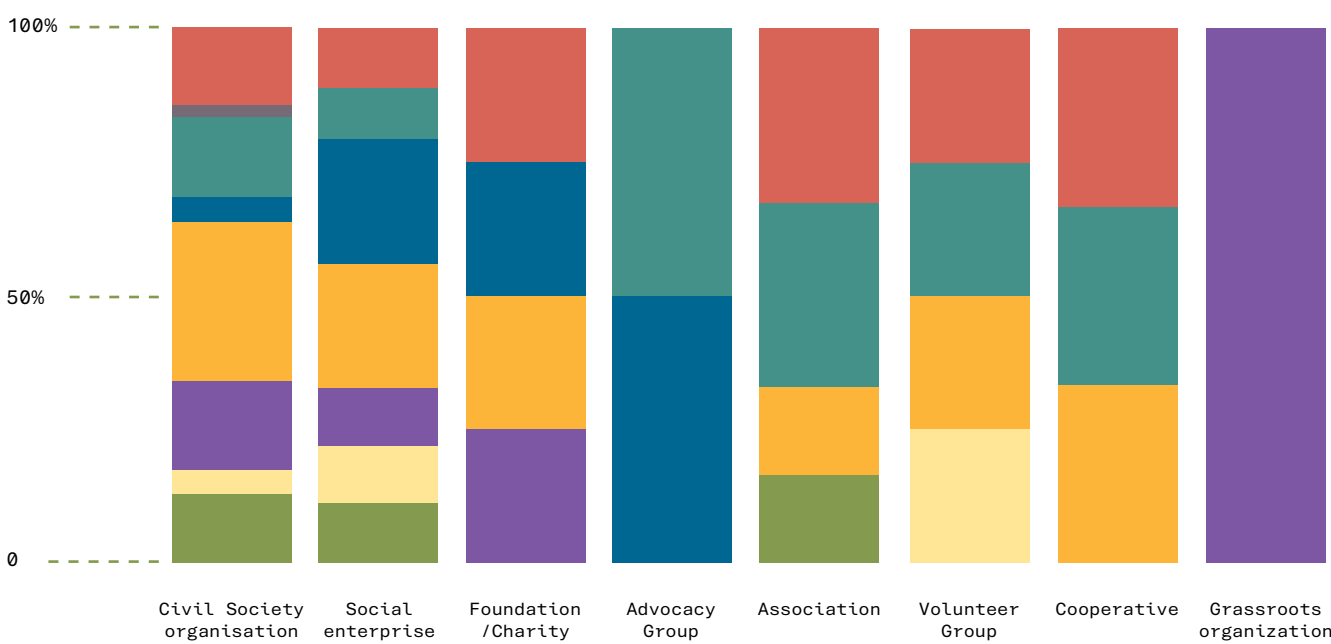


Additional qualitative input reinforces the relevance of these project themes by highlighting pressing local issues and showcasing innovative community-based solutions. Frequently mentioned topics include climate change, pollution, environmental degradation, waste, water management, and natural resource protection, underscoring both the urgency of these challenges and the growing awareness among communities of the need for targeted, youth-driven environmental action.

Support for these initiatives is already present. According to the survey, most organizations involved in environmental work are willing to collaborate with youth groups. This is particularly true for those engaged in educational programs, community engagement events, and awareness-raising campaigns. Moreover, the data indicate a clear correlation between high levels of youth engagement and strong community support, strengthening the case for scaling up such efforts through structured, youth-led interventions.

Funding Sources by Type of Organization

- Corporate sponsorships
- Crowdfunding
- EU Programmes
- Government grants
- Income-generating activities
- Membership fees
- Other
- Private donations

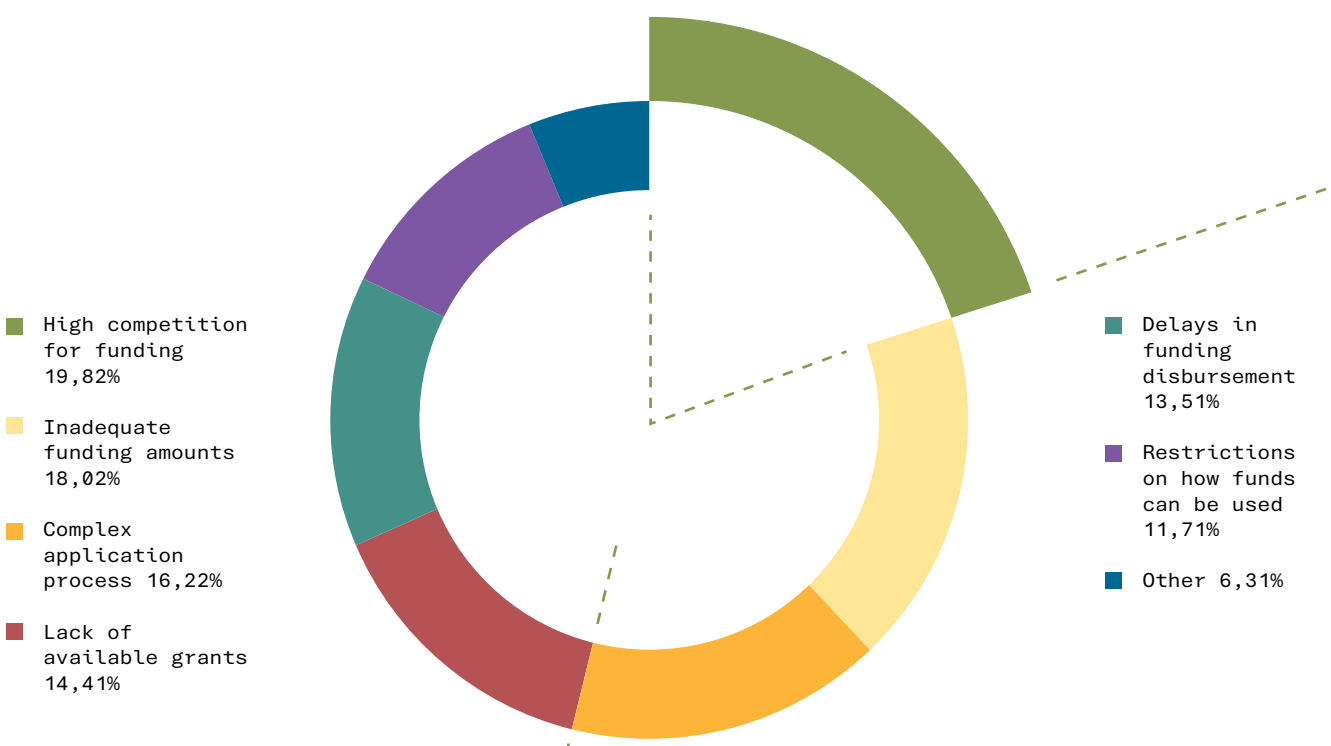


Strengthen Support Structures for Youth-Led Action
Funding is the most frequently cited need among surveyed organizations. Many participants expressed a similar view: “To mobilize young people for short-term social and environmental projects, organizations require stable financial resources. Without these, scaling or sustaining youth involvement remains a significant challenge.”

The graph illustrates the diversity and limitations of current funding sources across organizational types. Civil Society Organizations and Social Enterprises demonstrate a relatively diverse funding mix, combining public, private, and self-generated income. In contrast, Advocacy Groups and Grassroots Organizations rely heavily on one or two funding sources, primarily private donations and EU Programmes, highlighting their financial vulnerability and limited access to diversified support.

Specific funding challenges

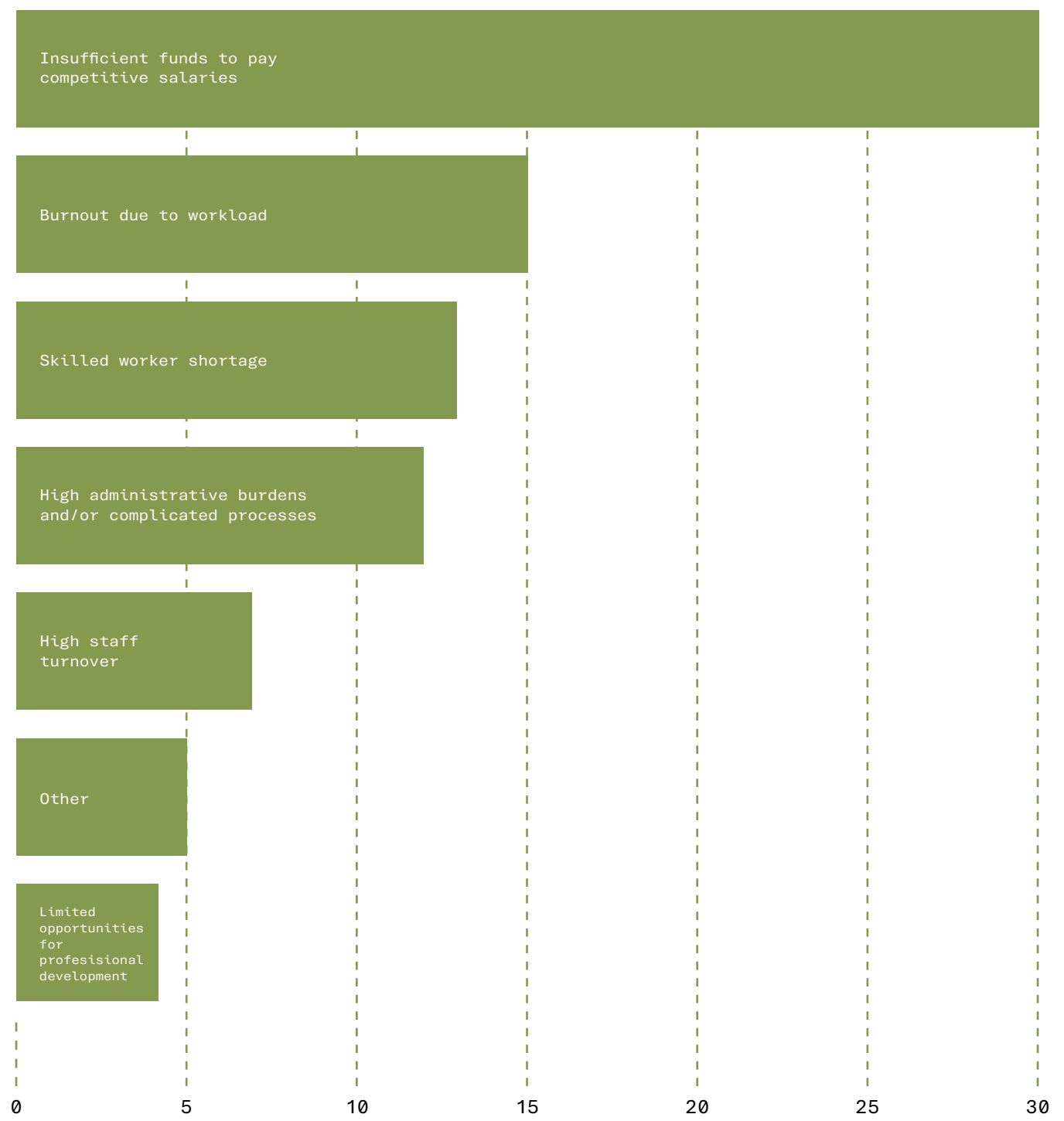
At the same time, widespread funding challenges suggest that local actors may be underutilizing available mechanisms, likely due to complexity, high competition, or limited funding allocations. To address this, policy-makers should streamline access to EU and national funds, support intermediary structures that can offer training and application support, and prioritize youth-led or youth-serving initiatives in local budgets and calls for proposals.



Mobilize Youth for Community Impact

Recruiting and retaining staff remains a major operational challenge for many organizations. Many participants expressed a similar view: “While attracting volunteers is often feasible, keeping them engaged long-term is difficult due to economic pressures, lack of incentives, and limited organizational capacity.” These limitations significantly impact the ability of organizations to scale or sustain youth engagement efforts. In this context, data from LOCALY indicate that more than 65% of organizations experiencing staffing shortages, administrative burdens, and workload-related burnout see strong value in mobilizing, training, and compensating young people to contribute to community-based social and environmental projects. These schemes are also seen as a viable solution by organizations struggling with limited funding and inability to offer competitive salaries, highlighting their potential to address structural capacity challenges while fostering youth engagement.

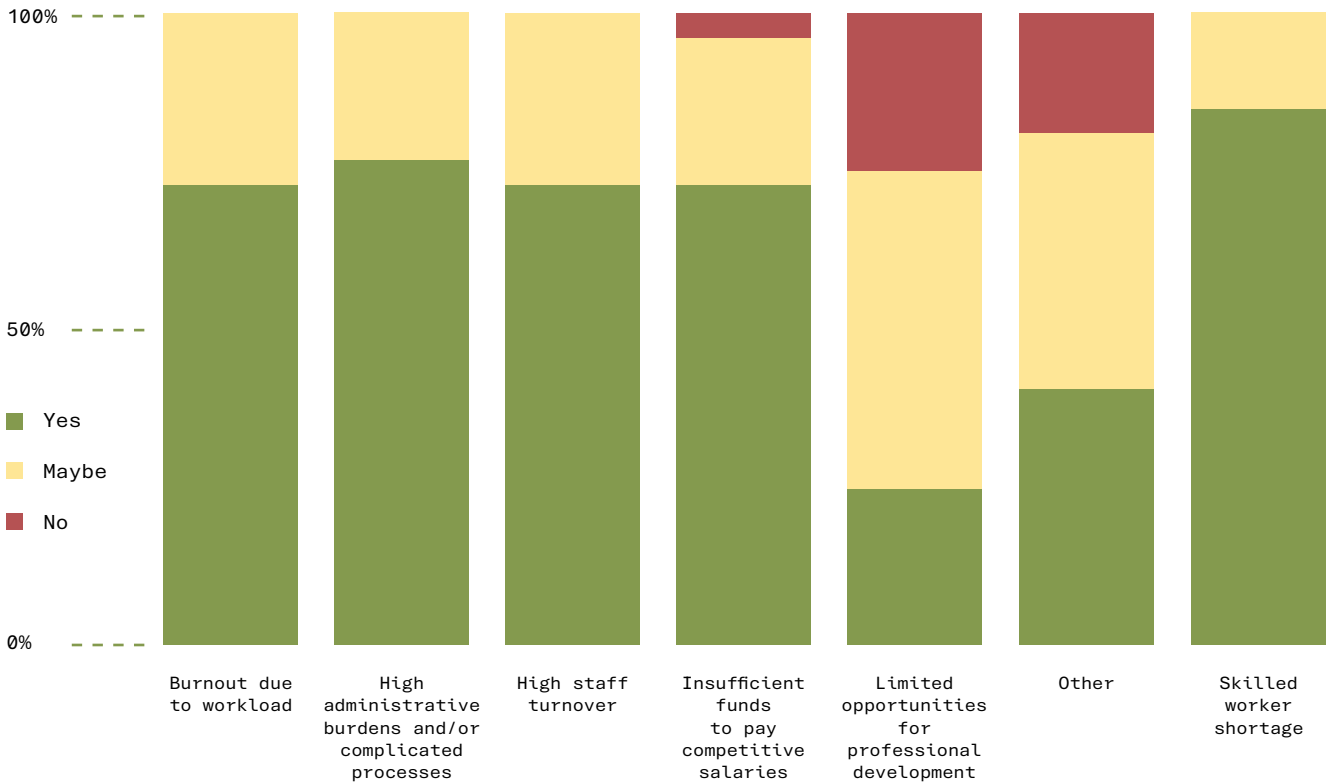
Main challenges in recruiting and retaining staff



This highlights a significant opportunity: with adequate resources, a majority of organizations are prepared to engage young people in meaningful community and environmental work.

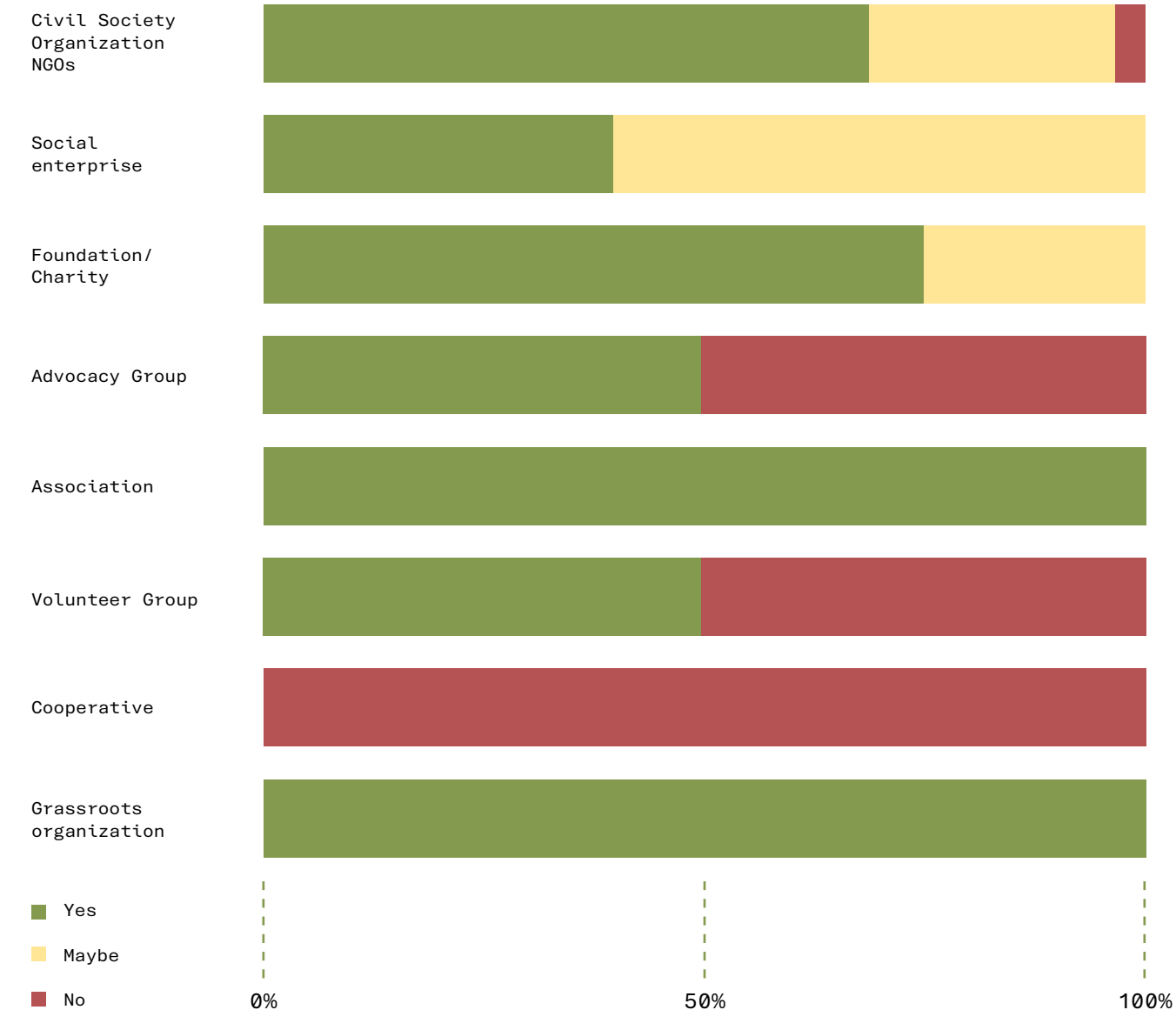
The resources identified as necessary include dedicated financial support, project funding, youth-specific resources, and materials tailored to environmental initiatives. Willingness to implement youth engagement models, such as civic service, is broad across sectors. The data show cross-sectoral support, reflecting a shared recognition of their value. Notably, many organizations facing staffing gaps view civic service as a practical solution to address operational challenges while promoting youth involvement.

Do Staff Challenges Affect Perceived Value in Mobilizing Youth?



Organizational Readiness to Mobilize and Pay Youth for Community Impact, by Type of Organization

Grassroots organizations, Associations, Foundations and Charities, and Civil Society Organizations are the primary groups expressing willingness to mobilize, train, and pay young people to address social and environmental needs in their communities through short-term projects. This broad-based readiness, combined with clearly defined resource needs, signals a timely opportunity for structural solutions that can bridge organizational capacity gaps while empowering youth. Among the approaches gaining traction, national civic service schemes stand out as a particularly promising long-term mechanism, offering a structured way to mobilize, train, and compensate young people for contributing to social and environmental goals, while equipping them with valuable skills for the future.



RELEVANT EU POLICY FRAMEWORKS & OPPORTUNITIES

The Call to Action aligns with several EU priorities and instruments. Notably, it supports the European Green Deal, which calls for community involvement in climate action, and the EU Youth Strategy (2019–2027), which highlights the importance of youth participation, inclusion, and empowerment. The European Solidarity Corps and Erasmus+ Programmes offer concrete funding mechanisms that could support many of the proposed youth projects. However, low levels of awareness and application capacity suggest a need for targeted information campaigns and capacity-building efforts.

Further alignment exists with the EU Climate Pact, encouraging grassroots engagement, and with the objectives of the European Year of Youth 2022, whose momentum can be carried forward by institutionalizing youth-led action at the local level.

OUR CALL TO ACTION

We call on local and European policy-makers to recognize and invest in youth-led environmental action as a powerful driver of sustainable development and social inclusion. Specifically, we urge:

- 1 Formal recognition of youth organizations as strategic partners in environmental education and climate action, including their integration into policy frameworks, funding programs, and decision-making processes.
- 2 Increased investment in local, youth-led environmental projects that deliver both positive ecological impact and employability outcomes, ensuring long-term support and scalability.
- 3 Simplified access to EU and national funding schemes, including streamlined procedures, entry-level grants, and dedicated capacity-building support for youth-serving organizations.
- 4 Employment and formal engagement of trained youth workers across local initiatives, ensuring consistent guidance, mentorship, and coordination of youth participation.
- 5 Establishment of civic service schemes that mobilize, train, and compensate young people to contribute to community-based environmental action and local development.

Youth-led action is not only possible — it is already underway. It is now the responsibility of policy-makers to ensure it is sustained, scaled, and recognized as an essential pillar of local development.

ANNEXES

- 1 [Survey Results Overview](#)
- 2 [Survey Participating Organizations](#)
- 3 [Evaluation Report](#)

