

UNECE ESD Forum 2024 - Youth Statement

Youth participation in UNECE sustainability processes is critical to ensure that the next generation is included in decisions being made about their futures. At the end of the 9th Ministerial Conference for the Environment in 2022, young people in attendance wrote a statement asking to increase the participation of youth and also to deepen their engagement to be more meaningful. At that conference, young professionals made up approximately 8% of participants, and their input was mostly siloed from their mid/late-career colleagues. It is for this reason that the youth of the UNECE ESD Forum would like to sincerely thank the organisers for their genuine commitment to including youth throughout the event and other UNECE ESD processes, like the appointment of National Youth Delegates for the Meetings of the Steering Committee. Not only did young people make up 20-25% of attendees, but they were also included in many aspects of the event, such as keynote addresses, panels, and workshops. We acknowledge these substantial improvements, and express gratitude to the organisers for recognising the importance of meaningful youth engagement. We thoroughly enjoyed this Forum and the opportunity to meet such an ambitious and driven network of peers and actors working towards ESD.

To continue the conversation and to make events like this even more meaningful and accessible to youth, we have compiled four suggestions for future events including young professionals.

1. Refine Youth Participation

- The youth as part of this event are satisfied with the quantity of young people in attendance and would now like to focus on the quality of their participation.
- Young people should not only be invited to give input on youth-related topics, but all topics. Many young people are experts in different areas of ESD and can provide fresh perspectives and novel, cutting edge solutions that perhaps hadn't been considered previously. More understanding is needed across ESD practitioners, particularly within Ministries, about the benefits of intergenerational participation. There is still a feeling of a hierarchy of expertise for proposed ESD solutions, with youth at the bottom. We suggest adopting a horizontal approach where many different actors can learn from each other.
- The World Cafe Discussions were helpful in creating a space for intergenerational dialogue about the topics at hand. We suggest expanding the time devoted to more interactive two-way dialogue with youth in future conferences.

2. Institutionalising Youth Participation

- We suggest for youth to be given the option to support the planning of these conferences and forums. While some youth invited to speak felt they were given enough freedom in shaping their own sessions, other young people were asked to speak on panels or moderate sessions that were not their primary areas of expertise.
- It would have been more beneficial for both the panelists and the attendees if every youth speaker had the opportunity to co-create their session in line with their primary areas of engagement with ESD. Additionally we would suggest providing youth participants with sufficient support by firstly facilitating a meeting to coordinate before the conference and secondly by offering space outside of the official agenda for informal youth networking activities.

3. Respect and Support for Youth Expertise

- Some youth delegates reported that they felt like youth participation was not valued by all delegates in the room. For example, the room was often emptier during the youth-only panels compared to the intergenerational panels. The importance of intergenerational cooperation should be stressed at the opening of events, and attendees should be reminded of the benefits of collaborating with young people on ESD throughout.
- Some young people were not compensated for their participation (i.e. no flights or hotels were covered). This can create barriers, particularly for underrepresented and marginalised youth groups, whose perspectives are just as important as those included. With respect to greater inclusivity, perhaps mirrored sessions could be facilitated on the live stream for those who cannot attend in-person.

4. Walk the Talk of Sustainability

- Many of the options for meals were meat-based. It would have been more appropriate for emissions reduction in line with sustainability to have more vegetarian/vegan hot food options.
- While there were teacups available for teas and coffees, many of the hotel staff would automatically use single-use cups to offer hot drinks. Not having the option of single-use cups would be more sustainable.

Finally, we would like to be consulted on the next steps. Many suggestions, opinions, and lived experiences of young people were highlighted at this event. What will be done with these? How will they be used to further the progress of implementing ESD to 2030?

Once again, we would like to sincerely thank the organisers for their clear commitment to including young people throughout this event and other UNECE ESD processes. We hope these suggestions will assist in generating effective intergenerational partnerships for achieving the cross-platform implementation of ESD in the UNECE Region

Yours in solidarity,

2024 UNECE Forum on ESD Youth Collaborators:

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