

Youth-Led Action on Climate Change:

Lessons from UNICEF Serbia



Context

Serbia is increasingly experiencing the impacts of climate change, with rising temperatures, changing precipitation patterns, and more frequent extreme weather events. These environmental changes pose significant risks to the country's agricultural productivity, water resources, and public health. Despite these challenges, youth participation in climate action and environmental advocacy remains limited due to a lack of awareness and opportunities.

Children are particularly vulnerable to these changes. Their developing bodies are more susceptible to illnesses and environmental hazards, and they rely on others for their well-being, making it difficult for them to cope with financial and emotional stressors. Climate change impacts, such as extreme weather events and pollution, can lead to increased injuries, diseases, and psychological stress among children. In Serbia, vulnerable groups, including children living in poverty and those in Roma settlements, face even greater risks due to existing social inequalities.

In various towns and cities across Serbia, including Požarevac, Čačak, Vranje, and Novi Sad, youth have been mobilizing to address climate issues. This case study highlights the collective efforts and achievements of young climate leaders supported by UNICEF Serbia in raising awareness, advocating for policy change, and strengthening youth-led movements.

Programme Approach

UNICEF's Youth Leadership Initiative for Climate Change supports young leaders in influencing national and local policies related to climate change. These leaders are responsible for coordinating among youth organizations and individuals active in climate advocacy along a four-step journey of awareness rais-

ing, advocacy, policy negotiation, and strengthening of youth-led movements. This case study describes the results achieved by the initiative in Serbia.

Four amazing youth participated in this programme in Serbia: Kristina Miloradovic, Milica Susic, Elena Perunicic and Bogdan Dimic.



Awareness Raising

The lack of awareness about climate change and its impact among the youth in Serbia is a significant barrier. However, with the visible impacts resulting from climate change, young people in Serbia are becoming increasingly interested in this topic. This is confirmed by the results of the U-Report survey, where

87% of respondents believe that climate change will be a significant problem on the planet during their lifetime, and 91% agree that governments are not working hard enough to involve young people in the climate change decision-making process. According to them, youth should be educated within their schools and through non formal education workshops, seminars and advertising. To overcome this, young advocates engaged in various activities to educate their peers and communities:

- Workshops were conducted in multiple high schools, engaging hundreds of students and providing them with knowledge about climate issues.
- Many were connected to online communities to access further information and opportunities for engagement. This started locally in 4 cities but later expanded to include young people with similar interests from over 40 cities.
- Innovative approaches such as podcasts (“Eco Monitors”) were produced to discuss climate change in youth-friendly language, reaching a broader audience through platforms like Spotify and Patreon.

These efforts successfully rose awareness of over 600 young people about climate issues, empowering them to act in their communities.



Strengthening of Youth-Led Movements

Building sustainable youth-led movements is crucial for long-term impact. The youth leadership initiative facilitated the creation, in different regions of Serbia, of “Eco Monitors”: groups of highly motivated individuals (50 members or more) who are organizing initiatives for environmental protection at local level. The “Eco Monitors” support their members through sharing of information and updates on local climate change activities initiatives, providing resources and guidance to implement volunteer activities and connecting young advocates with the academic and business community to share additional knowledge and resources.

These activities aim at establishing a stable foundation for youth-led environmental movements, empowering young people to lead and sustain initiatives independently.

For example, young advocates in various regions of Serbia have engaged hundreds of peers through educational workshops, community initiatives, and policy dialogues, effectively raising awareness and driving local climate action. These efforts, such as improving waste management in Vranje and advocating for better air quality in Požarevac, demonstrate the significant impact and sustainability of youth-led environmental movements.

Advocacy and Negotiation

Advocacy efforts focused on mapping stakeholders and negotiating with various entities, including associations, libraries, businesses, government bodies, and NGOs. Key activities included:

- Participating in national and international climate advocacy platforms, such as Serbia's first Local Conference of Youth (LCOY) and contributing recommendations to COP28 youth declaration.
- Advocating with the ministry of environment for the inclusion of youth-friendly language in information related to climate change and air quality and for providing awards to motivate youth involvement in environmental issues.
- Partnering with local governments through organization of regular meetings with mayors, and joining municipal working groups for environmental protection, climate change and air quality policy development.
- Collaborating with local organizations through the organization of educational activities for awareness raising and advocacy.

These advocacy efforts resulted in productive dialogues with policymakers, leading to tangible support for youth-led climate initiatives. At the local level, for instance, a communication channel between the municipality and citizens was established in some municipalities with the aim to increase level of dialogue and participation of citizen in decision making processes. At the national level, UNICEF opened doors for young people to the Ministry of Environment which is now engaging in a dialogue to hear and take in consideration their voice with regards to environmental issues in the country.

Key Lessons

1 Providing a Platform for Interaction

It is essential to offer young people a platform to interact with decision-makers and policymakers. This helps them share the key challenges they face and gain a better understanding of the policymaking context.

2 Skill Development

Effective youth advocacy requires skills beyond formal education, including negotiation, leadership, and communication. It is essential to provide training and mentorship to enhance these competencies, ensuring young advocates are well-equipped to drive meaningful change.

3 Local Action is Crucial

While global advocacy is important, impactful action occurs at the local level. The ideal scenario involves young leaders engaged at both levels. When they advocate globally, they amplify their community's voice; when they work locally, they contribute to fulfilling global commitments.

4 Unlocking Youth Potential

When provided with the right support and opportunities, young people can exceed expectations. Encouraging their participation in decision-making processes can lead to significant and meaningful change.

Plans for the Future

The young advocates will continue their efforts by:

- ▮ Advocating for the inclusion of youth in the process of developing local and national level climate change policies.
- ▮ Developing youth-friendly versions of policy documents to clearly present and communicate with youth about how these documents will impact their lives.
- ▮ Establishing sustainable youth-led movements and maintaining strong connections within their groups for long-term impact through the development of a clear structure and participation dynamics within the movement. The main goal is to develop a model that will ensure the movement functions and remains sustainable across future generation.
- ▮ In collaboration with the Ministry of Environment, participate in the development and implementation of the National Adaptation Plan (NAP).



Implemented by:

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