

INSTITUTIONALIZING YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN GREEK CLIMATE POLICYMAKING

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Policy Brief

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Introduction

According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC, 2021), a child born in 2000 will likely live on a planet that, by 2050, is home to 8.4 to 11.3 billion people, will be 0.8 to 2.6°C warmer, and faces sea-level rise of 5 to 32 cm compared to 1990 levels. The data highlight the necessity of including youth in shaping climate policies that will have a direct impact on their lives.

Young people in Greece are highly affected by the consequences of climate change. The U-Report poll, conducted by UNICEF, underscores that most Greek youth fear that their future is at risk. This anxiety is met with a strong sense of civic responsibility - that they can and should directly contribute to improving national climate policy (UNICEF, 2025; Dikaios et al., 2024).

Greece, as an EU member state, is committed to meeting the European Green Deal's targets regarding the green transition and zero emissions and has developed its National Energy and Climate Plan (Doussis, 2024). However, the challenges Greece faces are numerous and seem to hinder its performance. As evidenced by the Climate Change Performance Index, the country stands in the 30th place - a significant eight-position drop from the previous year. This decline is primarily due to a continued dependence on fossil gas, combined with the absence of a national plan for phasing it out in a just manner (Weinreich, 2026).

While Greece has adopted important legislation on environmental protection and the tackling of climate change, there is no effective imple–mentation of it. This paper argues that youth participation can possibly bear fruit in the endeavors in the fight against climate change but, currently, informal climate governance remains fragmented, consultative at best, and largely symbolic. The paper is structured as follows: In the next section,



there is a brief discussion of the mandate for including youth at the international and national political levels; then the existing legislative framework on youth participation in Greece is described. The last section presents proposals on the improvement of youth participation in climate decision-making in Greece.

The Mandate for Youth Inclusion and its importance

According to Article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989), which was ratified by more than 100 states worldwide, children who are capable of forming their own views have the right to express those views freely in all matters that concern them, and their opinions must be given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity. This provision establishes more than a moral expectation. It creates a binding responsibility for states not only to hear children and young people, but also to meaningfully integrate their perspectives into public decision-making.

This duty becomes particularly urgent in relation to climate change and environmental degradation. The Paris Agreement marked a shift from the Kyoto Protocol's top-down approach with specific, binding, and quantitative targets for the developed countries, to a bottom-up "pledge and review" process, creating space for non-state actors, including youth to influence domestic climate policy (Narisitousi and Backstränd, 2018).

In the same year the Paris Agreement was signed, the UN Security Council unanimously adopted Resolution 2250, formally recognizing young people as essential partners in peacebuilding (UNSCR, 2250). A commitment that was recently reaffirmed with the unanimous adoption of UNSCR 2807,



marking the tenth anniversary of the Youth, Peace and Security Agenda, yet serving as a reminder that the exclusion of youth from active civic engagement is still prominent (UNSCR, 2807).

In 2024, the Council of Europe adopted Recommendation CM/Rec (2024)6, demonstrating the significance of youth involvement in climate-related decision-making procedures, ensuring their rights are secured in the face of environmental challenges (Council of Europe, 2024).

Climate change has profound and long-term consequences for younger generations. Its impacts on health, livelihoods, safety, and future opportunities directly and disproportionately affect children and youth. Therefore, there can be little doubt that climate policy constitutes a matter that fundamentally concerns them.

As it will be analyzed below, youth participation in Greece is symbolic rather than substantive, as well as highly selective. According to UNICEF (2022), "in 2022 11 percent [of young people in Greece participated] in a leisure club or youth organization (EU average 15 percent) [...], 41 percent of young people reported that they have not participated in any of the eight activities linked with social and civic participation during the past 12 months […], 8 percent of Greek youth interviewed had participated in a political organization or political party (similar to EU average), and 11 percent in a youth organization, club or NGO (EU average at 8 percent)". Beyond being disconnected from core legislative processes, these efforts also lack national or European institutional funding for youth action, leaving youth-led initiatives without the resources necessary to evolve. This disconnection undermines the implementation of sustainable and just climate action. Institutionalizing youth participation can strengthen democratic legitimacy, improve policy design with future-oriented perspectives, and align national practice with European and international norms on youth inclusiveness (UNDP, 2021).



Existing Legislative Framework on Youth Participation in Greece

Local Youth Councils Law (Law 3443/2006)

Local youth participation was established in Greece in 2006. Law 3443/2006 introduced Local Youth Councils in every municipality. Their purpose was to advise municipal authorities on youth issues and encourage civic engagement. Despite the high expectations that surrounded this initiative, its implementation was unsuccessful. The lack of funding, weak institutional support, absence of integration into municipal planning, and lack of binding consultative obligations led the councils to become inactive.

After being inactive for almost 20 years, the idea of local youth councils was revived in 2025. According to the new Code of Local Government, "Youth Councils" become obligatory in all municipalities across the country with a population exceeding 2,000 inhabitants, granting young people aged 17 to 28 an active role in decision-making at the local level. These councils will serve a 30-month term, with the possibility of renewal through elections. All young people registered in the municipality's electoral rolls are entitled to vote, while those who have reached the age of 18 are eligible to stand as candidates. Several councils have already been established; however, obligation does not translate into influence, since there is no strong connection between their actions and environmental (or other) policies in high-level decision-making procedures.

National Youth Structures

Apart from the local youth councils, Greece has had a national body called the "National Youth Council" since 1998. Similarly to the local councils, the national one became inactive during the decade of the financial crisis. In 2025, it restarted its



operations, though without dedicated goals for youth participation in climate change decision-making.

What is also worth mentioning is that Greece had a General Secretariat for Youth, which existed for decades. Nevertheless, in 2019 it was integrated into the General Secretariat for Vocational Education, Training, and Lifelong Learning of the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs, as Youth Directorate. This integration limits its capacity to influence, with the Ministry ostensibly treating youth as students and learners rather than active citizens. A move that can be seen both as a downplay or an upgrade is the transfer of the Youth Directorate in 2023 to the Ministry of Social Cohesion and Family Affairs, under the General Secretariat for Demography and Housing Policy. The trajectory of the formal presence of youth affairs in the upper echelons of the Greek government showcases, in the last couple of years, a downward trend, rather than a strengthening one - although the needs and interests of the youth are regularly highlighted and utilized in the public sphere.

While youth policy and youth participation are not unfamiliar concepts in Greek politics, the formal/governmental institutional structures that have been and are established have a symbolic presence without meaningful consultative or participatory cooperation with official decision-making bodies. At the same time, as shown above, they are not specifically embedded in climate governance and do not have statutory consultation rights over environmental legislation, which would have been expected, as both climate and environment are topics close to their interests and their challenges will have to be dealt with, both now and in the future.

"Fridays for Future"

An example of massive youth mobilization that did



not translate into institutional influence is the Fridays for Future Movement, initiated by Greta Thunberg, in 2018 (Fridays for Future, 2023). In Greece, Fridays for Future was active primarily through youth-organized rallies, climate strikes, and public mobilization efforts during 2019. A national group known as Fridays for Future Greece was formed, organizing demonstrations and awareness activities primarily through social media and local coordination. The Greek movement was largely youth-driven and self-organized, with many participants being high school and university students. From September to November, thousands of young people were mobilized in central squares around the country, demanding climate action. This was one of the most significant surges in Greek youth climate activism, proving that wherever there are no institutionalized pathways to participate, mobilization often falls into apathy (Cammarts et al., 2014).

Turning Youth Participation into Reality

Structural, Societal, Financial and Political Obstacles

It is necessary to first understand and address the challenges faced by youth-led climate initiatives globally, in order to create a policy framework that can serve as a best-practice example of effective youth involvement. These initiatives often encounter organizational limitations, socio-economic inequalities, and political exclusion (Ensor, 2021).

The framing of climate change itself is an issue of great significance. As it's often described as a catastrophic and unmanageable crisis, it discourages young people from taking action by fostering a sense of hopelessness (O'brien, Selboe and Hayward, 2018). When youth feel their individual or collective action is insignificant compared to the size of the problem, they might



disengage entirely. Yet, research has shown that positive narratives trigger greater participation. Youth are more likely to engage when the message demonstrates achievable goals, collective progress, and the power of local action (Busch et al., 2019).

Misconceptions of climate change and its human causes persist among both teachers and students, creating a psychological barrier and hindering motivation for swift action. While knowledge alone isn't a sufficient action driver, it is tightly linked with greater engagement. Investing in science education at all educational levels can serve as a basis for more effective youth mobilization (Busch et al., 2019).

While improving literacy is crucial, socio-economic circumstances -especially in a country that has faced a prolonged period of recovery from the financial crisis- also influence the degree of youth participation. In societies characterized by unequal access to education, employment insecurity, and high-level living costs, environmental activism is perceived as a luxury (O' Brien et al., 2018).

Additionally, youth face political and institutional barriers. Many feel their involvement is more symbolic than substantive by being excluded from meaningful decision-making processes. This perception of tokenism can lead to frustration and withdrawal (Zimba, Simbeye and Chirwa, 2021). It comes as no surprise that some youth might also avoid participating as a form of resistance against political systems they view as indifferent or illegitimate. Thus, youth-led efforts struggle to gain legitimacy and achieve recognition due to the lack of platforms providing the space for meaningful engagement and participation in decision-making.

Enhancing Existing Structures

The importance of local youth councils is high in ensuring the impactful participation of young people in decision-making procedures. Therefore,



respective councils need not only to be established in every municipality but also to be given greater responsibilities within local communities, as well as funding and participation opportunities.

The "National Youth Council" needs to set specific goals for youth participation in climate change decision-making and ensure the participation of young people in the official representation of the state at the annual Conference of the Parties of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, following the example of many other European and non-European states that appoint youth delegates to their national missions.

The Youth Directorate also needs to turn into a separate General Secretariat for Youth under the Ministry of Social Cohesion and Family Affairs, in order to strengthen its strategic weight, focusing on promoting more policies that support young people through upskilling, and to advocate for the inclusion of youth in central government decision-making.

Adopting Existing Good Practices

To address the structural gaps in youth participation in climate governance, Greece should move from fragmented and project-based engagement toward a coherent institutional framework. In addition, it needs to enhance school and university curricula by including environmental and climate topics to combat the lack of relevant literacy.

Participation is effective only when young people possess the knowledge and procedural literacy to engage meaningfully (Napathorn, 2021). Greece should therefore introduce climate governance and civic participation modules into upper secondary and university curricula, with emphasis on policy processes, legislative drafting, and institutional competencies.

In addition, ministries should develop more paid internships and fellowship programs enabling young



people to work directly within climate policy units. Such experiential learning mirrors European approaches that combine participation with capacity building, ensuring that youth engagement is not only expressive but also technically informed.

Inspired by Denmark's Youth Climate Council, Greece should establish a National Youth Climate Council as a permanent advisory body to the Ministry of Environment and Energy.* This Council should be created by statute and mandated to review draft climate legislation, national energy and climate plans, adaptation strategies, and sectoral transition roadmaps, ensuring the traceability of youth input in this process. Members should be selected through a transparent process combining open applications and stratified selection criteria to ensure gender balance, regional representation (including islands and rural areas) and socio-economic diversity, aged 18-35. The National Youth Climate Council should have a formal right to submit written opinions that must receive an official governmental response within a specified timeframe. Its recommendations should be annexed to legislative drafts submitted to Parliament, ensuring traceability and accountability. That way, the Council will ensure the participation of young people in official national delegations on climate change.

At the European Union level, the European Commission and European Parliament run structured youth engagement initiatives that, while not strictly climate-specific, provide policy influence channels. For example, the EU Youth Dialogue collects systematic input from young people across member states on thematic priorities, ensuring that youth perspectives feed into EU policy debates. Similarly, the European Parliament's Youth Hub and events like the European Youth Event (EYE) allow young people to engage with decision-makers, present ideas, and influence agendas on climate and democratization more broadly.



Greece should integrate climate governance into its national contribution to EU youth participation mechanisms. Building on structured dialogue approaches used by EU institutions, Greece could establish an Annual National Youth Climate Dialogue, coordinated between the Ministries of Environment, Education, and Interior along with the National Youth Climate Council. This dialogue would gather input from local youth councils, student unions, NGOs, and informal youth movements, addressing the lack of coordination among youth-led networks. The outputs should directly inform Greece's positions in European climate negotiations and Council deliberations. Additionally, Greece should institutionalize youth representation within its official delegations to UN climate summits, ensuring that youth delegates are selected through transparent procedures and integrated into policy briefings, rather than confined to parallel events.

Inspired by European regional youth networks, Greece should support Regional Youth Climate Platforms aligned with the country's administrative regions. These platforms would collaborate with regional authorities on adaptation planning, wildfire management strategies, and local sustainability plans. Given Greece's geographic vulnerabilities, particularly its islands and fire-prone regions, localized youth participation is essential. Regional platforms could also feed into the National Youth Climate Council, creating a multi-level governance structure that reflects European best practices in vertically integrating youth participation at the national level. This will also result in the inclusion of all youth voices, resulting in a decentralized, holistic and meaningful youth participation.

Facing the challenges

Despite the potential benefits of institutionalizing youth participation in climate governance, several implementation challenges may arise.



First, strong political commitment from government institutions is required to ensure that the national youth participation mechanisms and tools will be meaningful and not symbolic. Without clear legal obligations to consider youth recommendations, advisory bodies such as the National Youth Climate Council risk becoming consultative forums with limited influence on final policy decisions, supporting a potential governmental "youthwashing".

Second, newly created structures, particularly at the municipal and regional levels, local youth councils often lack resources and institutional support, limiting their administrative capacity and thus their effective functioning.

Third, achieving inclusive representation may prove difficult, as youth participation initiatives tend to attract individuals from urban, highly educated, or already politically engaged backgrounds, potentially excluding young people from rural areas, islands, or disadvantaged socio-economic groups.

Finally, coordination between multiple actors, including ministries, municipalities, educational institutions, and youth organizations, may create bureaucratic complexity and slow decision-making processes. Addressing these challenges will require transparent procedures, adequate funding, continuous evaluation mechanisms, and a long-term governmental commitment to embedding youth participation within Greece's climate governance architecture.

Conclusion

Youth participation in climate governance in Greece stands at a critical crossroads. While legislative frameworks and youth structures formally exist, their impact remains limited due to weak



institutional integration, insufficient resources, and the absence of binding consultative rights in environmental/climate policymaking. The lack of a culture of youth participation in various aspects of society also plays a critical role. At the same time, Greece faces mounting climate challenges and underperformance in key transition indicators, making inclusive and forward-looking governance more necessary than ever.

Transforming youth participation from symbolic presence to meaningful influence requires structural reform. Strengthening local and national youth bodies, embedding statutory consultation rights in climate legislation, investing in climate literacy and policy capacity, and adopting proven European practices such as a national youth climate council and structured national dialogues can collectively create a coherent participation ecosystem.

Institutionalizing youth engagement is not merely a democratic formality. It is a strategic necessity for ensuring long-term policy legitimacy, intergenerational equity, and societal support for Greece's green transition. By empowering young people as active contributors rather than passive stakeholders, Greece can enhance both the effectiveness and the democratic quality of its climate action.



* In Greece, there are two ministries relevant to climate change. The first is the Ministry of Environment and Energy and the second is the Ministry of Climate Crisis and Civil Protection. The Ministry of Environment and Energy has a strategic and coordinating role and designs and promotes, among other things, the management and protection of natural resources, biodiversity, and the aquatic environment, as well as the formulation and monitoring of the implementation of the national energy and climinstitutionalizeate policy. Moreover, it is responsible for the national representation at the UNFCCC events and conferences of the parties. On the other hand, the Ministry of Climate Crisis and Civil Protection focuses on the prevention, preparedness, and immediate response to crises arising, among others, as consequences of climate change.

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