

Youth Participation in the Development of National Restoration Plans - Analysis and Recommendations

Written by Alexandros Kassapis, Laura Glez Martin

Supported by Ashton Melfor, Ngozi Edum, Lizzie van Megem

With the September 2026 deadline looming for EU Member States (MS) to submit their national restoration plans, the former have started performing their legal obligation to involve the public in the creation process. More specifically, per **Article 14(20)**:

“Member States shall ensure that the preparation of the restoration plan is open, transparent, inclusive and effective and that the public, including all relevant stakeholders, is given early and effective opportunities to participate in its preparation. Consultations shall comply with the requirements set out in Directive 2001/42/EC.”

Preamble 83 states that the Plan should be open and follow a cross-society approach, to involve the public in all phases of preparation and to foster dialogue and information sharing. MS then, per Article 15(3(w)) will need to incorporate a summary of the public participation process and how the needs of local communities and stakeholders have been considered.

The Uniform Format for National Restoration Plans (NRPs)

On 19 May 2025, the European Commission published the [uniform format](#) for NRPs. That means that there is a structure that each MS has to follow when preparing their NRP. Under Section 2.1.1 (Public Participation), Member States are required to report on:

1. The preparation process,
2. The outcomes of public participation, and
3. How stakeholders were engaged.

This is not the first environmental plan that explicitly obliges MS to engage the public in the preparation of environmental plans. Using similar language, the EU has also explicitly mandated public participation for the creation of [National Energy and Climate Plans](#) (NECPs) (Article 10) and [Social Climate Plans](#) (SCPs) (Article 5). *Interestingly, Article 5.1 explicitly recognises youth organisations as a stakeholder to collaborate with in the creation of the SCP.* Nevertheless, due to the [Aarhus Convention](#) on environmental democracy, public participation does not need to be explicitly mandated to be binding in the creation process of an *environmental* plan. The result of this obligation? Minimal (if any) participation tactics, and very low (if any) youth participation.

As Youth and Environment Europe, Biodiversity Action Europe, Generation Climate Europe and the Global Youth Biodiversity Network Europe, we vehemently advocate

for inclusive and meaningful public participation processes that effectively harness youth input and translate it into actionable policy recommendations; adhering to the requirements of the Aarhus Convention Article 7. We strongly believe that public participation constitutes a significant pillar of a democratic society. A single public consultation is never enough.

Analyses of public participation processes in Member States

Let's examine what participation mechanisms MS have undergone so far, before we proceed to recommendations, by diving into the only 4 examples of MS for which information was accessible online:

1. France

France has initiated a [dedicated platform](#) aiming to involve the public in its NRP. It contains separate sections that aim to either “inform” or have people “participate” in the process. It also offers to the public the option to choose the depth in which they want to participate, as well as the specific category of nature restoration.

The simplest way of participating is a 10 minute quiz option, asking basic questions such as "Is nature near you in good or bad condition?" and "Are there specific places in need of restoration?". Then, you can choose to click on different categories, covering thematic areas of the NRL: urban areas, agricultural areas, forest ecosystems, marine ecosystems... Citing the urban restoration category, questions asked include:

1. What do you think would be the benefits of more nature in cities?
2. And what do you think would be the disadvantages of more nature in the city?
3. Which other stakeholders in your area (communities, businesses, associations, etc.) do you think should contribute to preserving and restoring nature in the city? How could they be supported?

Nevertheless, there is no explanation as to how the data collected will be processed and used for the upcoming NRP. Clarity in the procedural aspects is of paramount importance for meaningful youth engagement to be achieved.

2. Ireland

Ireland's approach to public engagement is centered on its platform [RestoreNature.ie](#), which provides information on the development of the Irish NRP and offers clear entry points for public participation. Two main engagement tools are used: Community Conversations and Leaders' Forums.

[Community Conversations](#) are locally organised, facilitated discussions across the country (both in-person and online) inviting people to share how they perceive nature

in their area, what restoration should look like, and what challenges or opportunities they see (similar to France but more deliberative). Meanwhile, the Leaders' Forums gather senior stakeholders from government, business, academia, and civil society to provide strategic input.

An Independent Advisory Committee and several technical working groups bring together public feedback and scientific expertise, ensuring that the final plan is both evidence-based and socially informed. However, as in other countries, there is still limited clarity on exactly how the diverse inputs collected will be translated into the final NRP, which is essential for meaningful engagement.

3. Finland

Finland organised [three deliberative citizens' panels](#), in which a group of ordinary people selected by random sampling meet to learn about and discuss questions important for society and to give recommendations concerning these to support decision-making. The meetings of those selected to the citizens' panel included a virtual information event in May 2025, followed by three virtual meetings in June 2025.

The discussions will be conducted in English, and no previous knowledge on the topic is required. The participants will receive information about the topics as the work of the panel proceeds.

Citizens' panel on improving the state of nature will help to identify what the citizens consider as important in improving the state of nature. will provide the people's view concerning the implementation of the Nature Restoration Regulation in Finland in a way that is acceptable and just.

4. Slovenia

When it comes to Slovenia, it highlights with big letters on its [website](#) that “[Interministerial and] Civil Society cooperation is of key importance”. However, details are offered only when it comes to the interministerial cooperation, including only public bodies. The only reference to civil society is found below, in small letters:

“Other stakeholders will also be involved according to a pre-defined timeline, and consultations with the wider general and professional public and NGOs will be organised.”

Recommendations on youth participation:

We recognise that youth involvement can occur on numerous levels. [Hart's ladder of participation](#) includes 8 different levels of youth participation, ranging from manipulation and decoration, to young people managing projects and joint decision making. It is of critical importance to keep this in mind when advocating for youth participation, ensuring that it is

on the higher steps of the ladder. When it comes to public participation tailored to young people, we recommend:

1. Identifying and reaching out to environmental youth groups

Map and engage in a dialogue with youth-led organisations, youth councils, students unions, and grassroots movements. Ensure that a wide range of perspectives, concerns, and priorities are recognised within the youth groups identified and that they are all brought into the public debate around restoration. Involve official youth advisory councils (or create, if none is established) to provide a formal platform for young people to contribute to policy discussions and decision-making processes. These councils serve as a bridge between young citizens and policymakers, ensuring that youth perspectives are considered in national restoration plans.

2. Involvement of Students, Young Experts and Early-Career Professionals

Beyond general participation, ministries should actively involve students, young experts and early-career professionals in relevant fields (e.g. ecology, biodiversity, environmental law, spatial planning, agriculture, and forestry). Ministries can include young experts in any participation process they adopt (technical working groups, advisory panels, consultation processes, etc...) in cooperation with universities, research institutions, and professional networks. Transparent selection procedures and appropriate recognition or remuneration are essential to ensure substantive contributions and avoid tokenistic involvement.

3. Providing access to all relevant information

Knowledge-sharing is the foundation of meaningful and informed participation. There are plenty of youth organisations that are already active in content design and promotion. Governments and public institutions can partner with youth organisations and groups to:

- Organise workshops, webinars and outreach events aimed at young audiences.
- Host restoration-focused seminars and events. A good practice is noted in Greece, where they will organise an informative event on the NRP.
- Launch social media campaigns to raise awareness about the importance of restoration.
- Translate abstract policies into tangible and easy-to-understand examples, such as using EU restoration case studies and share content on social media.
- Incorporating environmental education into school curricula can empower young people with the knowledge and skills needed to engage in restoration efforts. This approach not only educates but also inspires youth to participate actively in environmental sustainability initiatives.
- Provide all the information in a time that is adequate for early, informed and meaningful participation of youth in the NRP consultation process.

4. Use E-participation Tools

Introduce or adapt online platforms for state-level consultations and dialogue. These may include surveys, public forums, or idea submission tools. France for example has initiated this platform of

Nature Restoration where it collects citizens' inputs and includes educational content - its input must be meaningfully incorporated in the NRP. More good practices already exist across Europe: [Demokratia.fi](#) in Finland opens the gates for public participation, while the [European Commission's Youth Wiki](#) includes a list of participatory processes in more countries. Meanwhile, in the Netherlands, you can opt-in for notifications concerning participation opportunities in thematic areas, such as biodiversity.

5. Enable Local and Regional Youth Participation in Governance Bodies

Restoration needs and governance structures vary across regions, making it essential to involve young people at multiple levels - from local to regional and national - in decision-making processes. For participation to be truly effective, youth should be integrated into **local decision-making fora** where they can address specific **local restoration challenges**. It is important to consider that [the role of youth in fora must be as co-creators rather than simply participants to ensure the fundamental cultural shift necessary to address the triple planetary crisis](#). This involvement should then be connected to, and amplified within, higher levels of governance. Local NGOs and other relevant stakeholders can play an important role in supporting this multi-level engagement by facilitating and empowering youth participation.

6. Beyond Planning: Continuous Youth Involvement

NRPs are long-term instruments: youth participation should not end with the drafting and approval phase. Continued engagement can be supported through:

- Non-formal education projects and activities under funding opportunities such as the Erasmus+ Programme, focused on restoration and biodiversity conservation.
- Citizen science projects at the local level where young people can contribute to data collection and monitoring, for instance through school or high schools programmes.
- Providing funding and resources for youth-led projects can encourage innovation and creativity in addressing environmental challenges. Young people can then implement their ideas and contribute to national restoration efforts in a tangible way. Here it is important to cite as a good practice the [European Fund for Youth Action on Pollinators](#), which offers funding for youth actions concerning pollinator conservation, led by youth or organisations actively working with young people.
- Ensuring that the monitoring system is based on an iterative process, to keep both youth and governmental institutions accountable and to effectively determine impact of youth-led actions.

Overall, these activities and projects can deepen youth involvement in the process by giving them a sense of ownership and shared responsibility, while also helping to identify and shape future restoration priorities when the NRPs are updated.

Reiterating the call from the [recent publication](#) by the European Environmental Bureau, for general recommendations on public participation directed to the EU, we call for:

1. **Set EU-wide minimum standards:** *Embed best-practice public participation standards - covering both citizens and stakeholders - into*

the Better Regulation framework and updates to the Governance Regulation and/or European Climate Law.

2. **Scale up deliberative democracy:** *Require and fund high-quality national and local deliberative processes (citizens' assemblies, mini-publics, focus groups). Dedicated EU and national financing is essential to sustain participation beyond election cycles.*
3. **Empower civil society:** *Guarantee balanced civil-society representation across all EU participation mechanisms by providing sufficient, accessible resources - especially for public-interest and marginalised groups.*
4. **Mainstream participation in climate and environmental governance:** *Define clear best-practice standards, aligned with the Aarhus Convention, and apply them to NECPs, Long-Term Strategies, Multilevel Dialogues, and Nature Restoration Plans.*
5. **Upgrade existing EU mechanisms:** *Improve transparency, prevent corporate capture, ensure diverse participation, and integrate outcomes into decision-making. Shift from one-way consultations to real discussion and deliberation.*
6. **Boost visibility:** *Adopt a dedicated EU communication and education strategy on participation opportunities.*
7. **Differentiate participation types:** *Clearly distinguish stakeholder engagement from citizen participation.*