

**Erasmus +** – “Walk the green talk, better methods to engage youth on greenwashing”

# From Awareness To Action:

Engaging Rural Youth on Fast Fashion, Greenwashing and Corporate Accountability Issues

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# Introduction

Today's youth are bombarded with messages encouraging them to buy cheap clothing. At the same time, the negative impacts of fast fashion - both environmental and social - are widely recognised. Despite these challenges, brands often exaggerate their limited sustainability efforts, making it even harder for consumers to distinguish between genuine progress and greenwashing. Navigating these issues is difficult, and finding meaningful ways to engage and drive change can be even more challenging. While several initiatives exist to support youth engagement in sustainable fashion, they are often designed for urban audiences, limiting their relevance and accessibility for rural youth.

To bridge this gap, this report aims to explore the attitudes and needs of rural youth to engage on issues in fast fashion, greenwashing and corporate accountability in four European countries; the Czech Republic, Finland, Poland, and Sweden. By combining desk research and focus group insights, this report seeks to provide a basis for how initiatives to engage youth on these issues may be adapted to better meet the expectations of rural youth in Europe.

This report is created as a part of the Erasmus+ project entitled "Walk the green talk - Better methods to engage youth on greenwashing". The project is implemented by four non-profit organisations; Fair Action (Sweden), Fundacja Kupuj Odpowiedzialnie (BRF) (Poland), NaZemi (Czech Republic), and Pro Ethical Trade Finland (Eetti) (Finland). It aims to empower young people, especially the ones in rural areas, to contribute to the fight against climate change through active civic engagement.

This report begins by outlining the methods used for data collection. It then presents key findings from existing literature on rural youth engagement across the four countries, followed by a joint summary. Next, insights from focus groups with the target population are examined, exploring their interests, attitudes and perspectives on greenwashing, fast fashion, and corporate accountability. Finally, the discussion section synthesises these findings and offers recommendations for practical applications.



# Methodology



The research and findings presented in this report are based on investigations conducted by four civil society organisations; Fair Action in Sweden, BRF in Poland, NaZemi in the Czech Republic, and Eetti in Finland. The study was done in the period from October 2024 to February 2025, using qualitative methods: desk research and focus groups.

The desk research aims to identify overarching trends in rural youth engagement in each of the four countries, as well as their attitudes toward environmental and climate issues. The process involved reviewing relevant literature, reports and studies on rural youth civic engagement, with a focus on interests and challenges. The findings were then compiled by each organisation into a brief summary.

Focus groups were then conducted in order to gain a better understanding of rural youths' attitudes and interests specifically regarding fast fashion, greenwashing and corporate accountability. These sessions were held in rural areas and outside major cities in the partner countries. An open-space method - a flexible approach that encourages participants to express their thoughts, perspectives and experiences freely - was used.

The four focus groups followed similar formats and the discussion points included the use of evocation questions, the ranking of various issues, and video screenings to spur discussions. However, the exact structure and activities were adapted to fit the local context and participants. Each organisation summarised their findings, which were then analysed to identify key trends, similarities, and differences in rural youth interests and attitudes in regard to the report's topics.

While this report offers insights into rural youth engagement and youth perspectives on the topics of fast fashion, greenwashing, and corporate accountability, the findings reflect the attitudes of a limited number of participants and therefore cannot be generalised. Instead, this report aims to provide a foundation for developing initiatives and materials to better engage rural youth on the aforementioned topics.

# Previous research from respective country

## Czech Republic

*Concern about the climate crisis and willingness to engage in solutions is on the rise among Czech youth nationwide (Krajhanzl et al., 2021). However, rural youth remain behind due to poorer access to educational material and less civic engagement options.*



### Interests and attitudes

The concern for environmental issues is particularly strong among Czech youth - 87% consider climate change an important factor in their decision-making (Friedrichová & Waldaufová, 2024). Moreover, they also recognise the extent of companies' effect on climate change as 86% identify corporations and industry as the primary actors responsible for the climate crisis (Friedrichová & Waldaufová, 2024).

### Rural youth engagement

Although Czech rural youth feel concerned about environmental issues, their engagement remains lower compared to their urban peers. One key factor is that civic actions such as signing petitions and arranging protests are less prevalent in rural areas, with only 20% of rural youth willing to actively participate in solving the climate crisis (Krajhanzl et al., 2021). In addition, migration to cities due to a lack of access to education and employment significantly reduces local activism in rural areas (Hlaváček et al., 2022).

However, when rural youth do engage, they tend to adopt eco-friendly daily behaviours, such as reducing their environmental footprint and supporting renewable energy initiatives (Friedrichová & Waldaufová, 2024). Czech youth often also engage actively in their local communities by organising festivities and volunteering in associations and clubs (Slach, 2021). Studies suggest that messages centered on egalitarian values resonate more strongly with young people than simply environmental appeals (Krajhanzl et al., 2021). Therefore, to increase engagement, communication should focus on tangible solutions and highlight positive local changes.

*“[M]essages centered on egalitarian values resonate more strongly with [Czech youth] than simply environmental appeals”*

## Barriers and challenges

Educational reproduction remains a problem in the Czech Republic, where young people with school-educated parents are more likely to attend university (Vodičková, 2013). In rural areas, the percentage of youth owning high school diplomas or university degrees is lower than the national average (Vodičková, 2013). A 2024 survey found that rural populations are perceived by youth as the most excluded group in terms of access to jobs, education, housing, healthcare, and social-legal support (Andresová, 2024). Additionally, rural elementary and high schools are frequently over capacity, limiting educational opportunities. A lack of services, leisure activities, transport infrastructure, and high-speed internet further limits youth's engagement with environmental topics (Ministry of Environment, 2021).

## Finland

*Climate change, greenwashing and overconsumption are major concerns for Finnish youth, but they struggle to understand how to take action. Moreover, young people's level and ways of engagement in the project topics and NGOs varies between urban and rural areas. While Finnish youth consider voting and purchasing decisions effective tools, green consumption is still not widespread, particularly in rural areas.*

### Attitudes and interests

Global issues such as climate change are a growing concern for rural youth, where external problems such as climate change correlate to increased worry among 13-16-year-olds (UTU, 2024). While Finnish youth consider climate change, inequality and biodiversity as interesting, serious and worrying issues, most also believe in a positive future and finding solutions (VNN, 2018, 2021, 2022). In the 2021 survey, voting and buying decisions were seen as the most effective solutions and most have made some green choices, such as buying less and recycling. However, while Finnish youth consider the project topics as important, for a majority, green consumption is not common and most wish to have green solutions easily and cheaply (Autio & Paju, 2005).

### Rural youth engagement

The Youth Leisure Survey (VNN, 2022) shows that half of the 10-19 years old are involved in Finnish associations, though most engagement is focused on sports and cultural activities with only a few percent being involved in environmental or human rights NGOs. Youth Barometers (VNN, 2018, 2021, 2022) show that while 15-29 year-olds value ecological choices and volunteering in NGOs, many do not have enough knowledge or resources to drive change.



*“[...] Finnish youth believe in a positive future and finding solutions”*

In addition, rural youth make about a third fewer green choices due to differences in infrastructure, values and education. To improve overall environmental engagement, municipalities and NGOs are offering accessible, interactive digital resources to empower young people to engage in environmental action (Kumpulainen & Husu, 2020). In recent years, skills and networking online have improved by using more digital ways of participating and making an impact, such as social media campaigns, remote volunteer meetings and free online youth work materials by NGOs. Initiatives from local networks have played a key role in mobilising Finnish youth in campaigns on the textile industry, corporate responsibility, and overconsumption, helping to democratise these topics for populations less familiar with them.

### **Barriers and challenges**

Rural youth have less opportunities to engage in environmental activism due to practical and socio-economic barriers, as well as limited access to diverse activities (AVI, 2021; Julkunen, 2024). A national survey found that nearly half of 10-17-year-olds feel that adults do not take their opinions seriously, discouraging them from participating in civic movements (LSKL, 2024). Lastly, although virtual communities are growing, many rural young people still feel isolated.

## **Poland**

*In Poland, awareness of climate change among young people is growing, but rural youth still face unique challenges in engaging in environmental questions. The main issue is limited access to education and informational resources in small towns compared to cities. Educational initiatives aim to bridge this gap, but environmental education still requires greater emphasis on the local context and practical actions.*

### **Attitudes and interests**

According to the UN Global Compact Network Poland report (2022), rural youth show an interest in issues such as recycling, responsible consumption, and local concerns like agriculture and pollution. A survey from the Rural Voices project (Buy Responsibly Foundation, 2024, unpublished) reveals that half of the 40 respondents aged 16-26 from small towns and rural areas rate their knowledge of sustainability as high or rather high, while 38% assess it as average. Yet, understanding of sustainable production and greenwashing is limited: nearly half of the participants described their knowledge in these areas as low or rather low, with only 30% having a good understanding.



In addition, a national report by the Institute of Public Affairs (2021) highlights that rural youth and women recognise the negative impacts of climate change, such as droughts or extreme rainfall, as they affect agriculture and local life.

## Rural youth engagement

Rural youth are often involved in volunteering, particularly when activities are interactive and involve their peers. Popular forms of engagement include outdoor games, festivals promoting eco-friendly approaches, and projects that allow them to co-design initiatives (BRF, 2024). Support in terms of education and infrastructure could strengthen their participation in ecological transformation and help to create a better informed and more active community.

## Barriers and challenges

Young Poles find it difficult to access large-scale civic initiatives and quality environmental education. This is mainly caused by limited knowledge of ecological issues: even though they show great concern for the environment and a willingness to engage in pro-ecological activities (such as recycling or garden maintenance), they often lack a more global understanding. What's more, they often stick to local civic engagement, making it harder to access broader opportunities or environmental movements. Transport exclusion further hinders participation in these events, making it more difficult for rural youth to take part in discussions on climate change and responsible consumption (BRF, 2024). Rural youth therefore have fewer opportunities for environmental education than their urban peers. Workshops initiatives are spreading, but the access to good learning remains limited (The Tree and Tomorrow Foundation, 2022).



## Sweden

*In Sweden, youth generally demonstrate a relatively high level of awareness of environmental issues. However, significant differences exist in the level and forms of engagement depending on geographical location (MUCF, 2021). These variations are likely due to limited access to education, transportations and forums of engagement, but also their connection to local concerns.*

## Interests and engagement

While environmental issues remain among the most important concerns for Swedish youth, and for rural youth in particular, recent studies indicate a decline in interest over the past couple of years (KFUM, 2023; Ungdomsbarometern, 2023). In fact, the number of young people who are not interested in climate and environmental issues at all is on the rise (Rystedt, 2024). When it comes to fashion, a study of high school and university students found that only 5% of the Swedish youth consider climate impact their primary concern when purchasing clothes, with price being the most influential factor (Mecenat & Demoskop, 2024). This lack of prioritisation may also stem from skepticism, as research by Gwozdz et al. (2013) suggest that many young Swedish consumers doubt whether environmental certifications on products really indicate sustainability.

## Rural youth engagement

Rural youth in Sweden tend to be less engaged in social and political issues than their urban counterparts and show lower interest in global events (MUCF, 2021). Many feel disconnected from the democratic process, believing their opinions are undervalued by adults due to their age and rural location (Youth 2030, 2024). This is reflected in political participation rates, with 67% of rural youth having taken political action compared to 76% of urban youth (MUCF, 2021). Although rural youth manifest lower engagement levels than their urban peers, there are certain actions that they are more likely to do, such as writing letters to editors (MUCF, 2021).

## Barriers and challenges

The gap in civic engagement between rural and urban youth may stem from several challenges, including unequal access to education, transportation, and engagement opportunities, as well as limited representation in policy-making and media. Education plays a key role, with post-secondary enrollment being lower in rural areas (27%) than in metropolitan regions (50%) (Youth 2030, 2024). This disparity matters, as parental education levels strongly correlate with youth civic engagement (MUCF, 2021). Additionally, rural youth often face social isolation, worsened by limited transportation, which restricts access to education, jobs, leisure, and civic participation (Youth 2030, 2024). Political discussions also tend to overlook rural issues, leaving young people feeling unheard and less motivated to engage.

**67%** of Swedish rural youth have done a political action in the past year

# Summary

Several trends and themes can be found when analysing rural youth engagement across the four countries. The review highlighted several challenges for rural youth engagement including insufficient access to higher education, poor public services, lack of gathering places, disconnection from political and social life, and limited engagement beyond small-scale actions. Despite these challenges, rural youth were found to both be aware of the environmental challenges and wanting to contribute to solutions. There was a shared growing skepticism toward corporate actions across the four countries, particularly regarding greenwashing practices. Regarding favored forms of engagement, political actions and signing petitions appear somewhat less widespread among rural youth across the countries. Instead individual sustainable behaviour was more common, such as buying sustainable products, reducing consumption overall, and recycling. However, rural youth also participate in community events and engage in different forms of volunteerism, illustrating a commitment to their local community. Rural youth therefore appear eager to contribute to environmental projects if they are given relevant tools and knowledge.



# Insights and central topics from focus groups

*To better understand youth engagement outside major cities and in sparsely populated areas, and particularly their attitudes toward fast fashion, greenwashing, and corporate accountability, focus groups were conducted in each country between November 2024 and January 2025. A total of 52 young people participated, following a structured format designed to encourage discussion on climate change, greenwashing, social justice, and the shared responsibility of consumers and companies in addressing these issues. The key findings from these focus groups are presented below.*

## Environmental and social issues

There was generally a good awareness of the issues of climate change and pollution among the participants. There was a large consensus that humans are responsible for climate change and that companies should make greater efforts to mitigate their contribution to it. For some, global warming and environmental disasters were strongly associated with anxiety while others joked about it saying it is “not my problem” (Swedish youth). In many of the focus group discussions the issues of climate change seemed quite abstract and distant as it does not directly affect the participants’ daily lives. Similarly, some participants struggled to connect their own actions and consumption with climate change and pollution.

While most agreed that unnecessary consumption was an issue, some did not link overconsumption and production directly to climate change. Still, there was an acknowledgement that waste is harmful to both people and the environment and many were shocked by the amount of waste produced, especially by the textile industry.



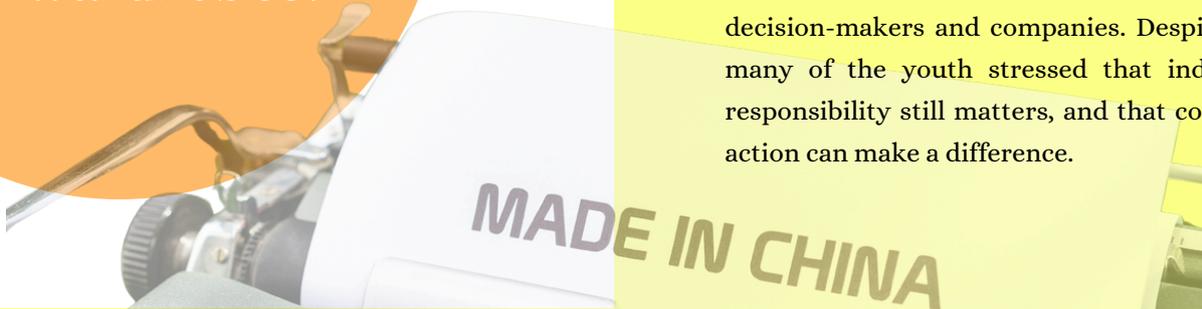
On the other hand, social and human rights issues were found especially important during the focus groups. The discussions were centered around labour conditions, the right to education and equal opportunities, stressing that basic rights should be protected and guaranteed, but are often not. The display of videos regarding the working conditions in the garment industry led many to express concern for the people making their clothes. Some participants attributed the poor working conditions to the workers themselves, viewing them as uneducated or unaware of their rights. In contrast, others pointed out barriers that privileged or Western communities cannot imagine, such as a lack of opportunities or family debts. For some participants, the reality of labour exploitation was shocking, illustrated by the question “How is that that slave labour exists in the 21st Century?” (Polish youth). By imagining the experiences of these workers, participants were able to reflect on their own lives, acknowledge their relative privilege and responsibility, and for some to develop a willingness to contribute to positive change. Many also identified fast fashion itself as exaggerating the problem as told by a Finnish youth “The fast fashion industry is not a sustainable business. It is a social problem, [...] people want new things easily and quickly all the time”.

## Consumer vs. corporate responsibility

Most participants agreed that consumers buy too many low-quality products and therefore share some responsibility for the current situation. However, they pointed out that this behaviour is strongly encouraged by cheap prices, excessive marketing, and the influence of social media. Quick-changing trends and societal pressure push young people to constantly renew their wardrobes, and their limited economic resources hinder more sustainable purchases. Participants also wondered what makes a product responsible and sustainable, recognising the ethical and ecological problems with various materials. Moreover, to those familiar with greenwashing there was a large scepticism toward corporate sustainability claims and marketing strategies, rendering it even more difficult to make sustainable choices. While the concept of greenwashing was not familiar to all, many agreed that untrue advertisements are an issue. Overall, even for those who wanted to consume in a more sustainable way, they found it difficult to do so.

Perhaps that is part of the reason as to why most regarded companies to have more power and a greater responsibility to mitigate both negative environmental and social impacts. The companies' prioritisation of profit above environmental and social concerns was a recurring topic and a large frustration to many. And so, while they blamed companies for using unsustainable materials, overproducing, and exploiting workers, they were not sure that much would change, even with better legislation. Moreover, many found it difficult to know how to influence both decision-makers and companies. Despite this, many of the youth stressed that individual responsibility still matters, and that collective action can make a difference.

*"Societal pressure pushes young people to constantly renew their wardrobes."*



## Local action to global problems?

A recurring theme in the focus groups was the youths' struggle to see potential solutions to the issues in the garment industry and how they can personally influence the situation globally. On an individual level, several actions were proposed by the youth and some even adopted them in their daily lives, for example shopping second hand, recycling and taking better care of their garments. However, many doubted the effectiveness of these actions on a broader scale. For perhaps that reason, some said they would continue buying fast fashion, despite them being informed of the issues with such business models. Wanting to contribute to broader changes, some grappled with questions such as "How can we pressure those in power to act?"; "How can we raise awareness and capture public attention?" (Czech youth).

Some solutions at a local level could potentially be the answer; for example it was suggested that they could participate in civic activities, join civil society organisations, and try to raise awareness of the issues to influence their local communities. However, they still struggled with how to do that. Others mentioned the need for concrete solutions at a more systemic level, such as stronger regulations against greenwashing for big corporations, introducing an international oversight organisation or using sanctions to create a disadvantage for companies using unsustainable practices.

Overall, despite some appearing somewhat indifferent to the issues, many expressed an interest in taking action, wanting to reflect on their own consumption, join local organisations, and raise awareness of the issues. Yet, they did not always know how to take the next step. And while some solutions were brought up in the focus groups, there was a general pessimism regarding their effectiveness or whether they were realistic.



# The way forward

To tackle some of today's most pressing issues, there is a need to more effectively engage all youth, regardless of them living in urban or rural areas. This report identified that rural youth in four European countries share many similarities in challenges and interests to effectively participate in various forms of civic engagement. Challenges include unequal access to relevant forums, education, (public) transport, and feelings of underrepresentation. Despite the challenges, rural youth are aware of environmental issues, adopt sustainable consumption behaviours and often engage in community events although not necessarily activities focused on environmental and climate-related issues. Still these issues are important to youth, with an increase in interest over time, Sweden being the exception.



The focus groups revealed that issues in fast fashion, greenwashing, corporate accountability are of concern to rural youth although it was oftentimes difficult to connect them with their everyday lives and actions. Most participants recognised both consumer responsibility and corporations' role in minimising negative impacts to people and the planet. The social aspects were of particular interest; there was a common concern for the working conditions of garment workers. However, many still struggled to identify solutions to the problems and ways that they could help, at times leading to indifference and at others inspiring a search for concrete tools and forums to engage with the issues.

To harness the power of this group in the fight against unsustainable business practices in the garment industry, it is important to develop and adapt initiatives and tools to the specific needs of rural youth. To bridge the disconnect between their everyday lives and the sometimes more abstract global issues, it is essential that initiatives are locally-based and adapted to their experiences, concerns and opportunities for local engagement. Moreover, materials should take into account the varying degrees of previous knowledge and interest in the issues.



# Key needs

While there are several challenges and needs for rural youth engagement on a societal level, including a need for better access to education and transportation, there is much that can be done to promote rural youth engagement by working within the given context. This includes:

**1**

Providing engaging, easy-to-access materials for both collective and individual use;

**2**

Offering clear guidance on local actions to bridge the gap between global challenges and tangible change;

**3**

Focusing on solutions and positive actions rather than solely discussing problems;

**4**

Involving local youth workers and ensuring materials are flexible and adaptable to different contexts.

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