Ecology Awareness of Sustainable Green Development: Collaboration of Universities and Local Actors

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FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW REPORT

SLOVAKIA

Co-funded by the European Union

SUA Slovak University of Agriculture in Nitra

UNIRI

MELLIS KNOWLEDGE TO PRACTICE

UNIVERSITY OF LODZ

SOS/BirdLife SLOVENSKO

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FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW OBJECTIVES

The data collection and content development processes for ECOUNITY GUIDE AND ACTION PLAN include three focus group interviews and a comparative analysis based on the country-based legal practices regarding environmental protection and SGD.

The first leg of the data collection process comprises Focus Group Interviews with:

- University employees who work with external stakeholders (NGOs, local authorities) daily in researching and disseminating knowledge on environmental issues
- External stakeholders who cooperate with project team members
- Undergraduate students to identify areas where the cooperation between universities and external stakeholders, including NGOs and local authorities, can be improved and to determine the expectations from universities about the forms and content

Focusing on organising 3 focus group interviews with HEI employees, NGO and local authority representatives and students the data will be collected regarding the inquiry about what should universities do and how should they take action to contribute to more interactions with other local actors to ensure sustainable green development.

WORKSHOP PROGRAMME

Focus Group Interviews:

- Welcome and introductions: Focus Group Moderators briefly introduce the project, focus group interview objectives, and participants.
- Presentations: FGI moderators deliver brief presentations on relevant topics as follows:
    - A better understanding of the expectations of stakeholders in relation to universities' collaborations with local actors.
    - Insight into the motivations and barriers to university local actor collaborations in environmental protection and sustainability activities, and the potential strategies for increasing cooperation.
    - University student engagement in local actors' SGD activities.
- Brainstorming and group discussions: Participants encourage participants for focused discussions based on prepared questions.
- Data provision: Participants capture key insights and ideas from discussions using designated note-takers, voice recorders, or collaborative online tools.
- Wrap-up and feedback: Participants summarize key points and answer questions.

Post-FGI:

- Data analysis and report writing: Each partner institution uses the pre-defined templates to prepare a FGI report summarizing discussions, findings, and insights.
- Dissemination
- Share FGI reports internally and externally through project website, publications.

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EXPECTED FGI OUTCOMES

Process-Oriented Outcomes:

Focus on the workshop experience itself and how it facilitates interaction and learning:

- Facilitating the dynamics of discussions within groups
- Creating a safe space for open communication
- Highlighting successful initiatives and approaches already implemented by different stakeholders
- Revealing barriers to university local actor collaborations and students' engagement within the scope of SGD.

Results-Oriented Outcomes:

Focus on the tangible outputs and impacts of the workshop:

- Generating 3 detailed FGI reports containing data analysis, key findings, and actionable recommendations for university and local actors' collaborations in each partner country
- Fostering ongoing communication and exchange of best practices between stakeholder groups through networking platforms or joint projects
- Influencing local policies or university regulations to incorporate collaborations
- Encouraging broader community participation in sustainable green development efforts
- Contributing to the literature to provide scientific data and inspire further research.

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WORKSHOP QUESTIONS

Discussion threads with Local Actors (Including NGOs, municipalities, city councils, business communities)

1. What is your organisation's experience to date in working with universities?
   - *Do you cooperate with the university?*
   - *Since when has there been cooperation? Who initiated it?*
   - *What are the thematic areas of cooperation? Did it concern climate and environmental policy?*
   - *What were the forms of this cooperation?*
   - *Is cooperation formalised?*
2. Identified benefits and added value from this collaboration:
   - *Does such cooperation produce results / is it effective?*
   - *What are the key benefits of such cooperation?*
   - *Could these benefits be greater? How do you assess this?*
   - *What are the biggest costs (problems) of the cooperation undertaken?*
3. Barriers identified:
   - *What are the most important barriers to cooperation? What are these barriers (legal, organisational, administrative, mental)?*
   - *How do you manage to overcome these barriers?*
   - *Do the barriers motivate you to improve it, or to stop cooperation?*
   - *How do you avoid these barriers? Can you share your experiences in this regard?*
4. Desired future directions:
   - *If your cooperation with the university has not taken place so far, what are your expectations regarding the scope and forms of cooperation?*
   - *Which of the following areas of cooperation will be most important in the* future (ask participants to rank and justify their prioritisation):
     - *smart cities*
     - *sustainable finance*
     - *green economy*
     - *green agriculture*
     - *healthy cities*
     - *other*
5. Closing the discussion – *ask two questions to wrap up the discussion*:
   - *Are universities still needed for environmental protection? To what extent and in what area?*
   - *What knowledge and competences can modern universities teach?*

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DATA ANALYSIS & FINDINGS

FGI Process and the Data Collected

FGI with Local Actors

FGI Date: **15.05.2025**

Venue: **Nitra**

Online/Face to Face/Hybrid: **Online**

Number of Participants: **20**

On May 15, 2025, an online meeting was held bringing together representatives from academia, environmental NGOs, and public institutions to discuss future cooperation. The aim of the meeting was to identify shared priorities, explore synergies, and discuss concrete ways to improve collaboration on sustainability, biodiversity, and climate-related challenges in Slovak agriculture. The discussion focused on aligning academic research, policy development, and practical field experience.

The meeting was initiated by Ján Pokrivčák from the Slovak University of Agriculture in Nitra, who highlighted the role of international and environmental projects in shaping future agricultural policy. Participants included Marián Tóth (SPU), Adriana Hološková and Matej Repel (SOS/BirdLife), Richard Medal (Živica), Rusko (BROZ), Maďarič (Raptor Protection of Slovakia), Michaela Nemcová (EU Representation), Milan Janák, Martina Paulíková, Boris Chudý, and Katarína Bučková. The event served as a platform for deepening cooperation across sectors and sharing expertise to ensure that CAP reforms deliver benefits not only for farmers but also for consumers and the environment.

The online meeting brought together a range of organizations and participants working on agriculture, environment, and policy. From the academic sector, Ján Pokrivčák and Marián Tóth represented the Slovak University of Agriculture in Nitra, while Martina Paulíková and Boris Chudý were linked to environmental and water-related research. Key environmental NGOs included SOS/BirdLife Slovakia, represented by Matej Repel, Adriana Hološková, and Richard Medal; BROZ (Bratislava Regional Conservation Association), represented by Rusko; the Raptor Protection of

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Slovakia, represented by Maďarič; and Živica, represented by Richard Medal. Milan Janák from UNEP and Katarína Bučková were also present. The meeting included contributions from the EU Representation in Slovakia, notably Michaela Nemcová, and focused on enhancing cooperation in shaping and implementing the future Common Agricultural Policy with strong environmental and social objectives.

Findings:

1. **Organisations' experience in working with universities?**

Organizations had various forms of cooperation with universities in Slovakia, particularly in the field of agricultural and environmental policy. These collaborations have typically been initiated by our organization, especially in response to relevant calls or policy changes requiring expert input. Cooperation has been ongoing for several years, although it tends to be issue-specific rather than a long-term, institutionalized partnership. Thematic areas of cooperation have included biodiversity monitoring, protection of grassland habitats, eco-schemes under the Common Agricultural Policy, and preparation of teaching materials for university students. While these efforts have not always been explicitly framed as climate policy, they clearly align with broader environmental and sustainability goals.

The forms of cooperation have been diverse. They include joint preparation of policy documents and recommendations, field-based monitoring of biodiversity indicators such as biostrips and wetland habitats, as well as involvement in the design and evaluation of environmental measures under the CAP. In some cases, we have worked directly with university researchers on applied conservation projects or served as practical partners for student training. Some collaborations are semi-formalized through project-based agreements, while others are informal and based on mutual interest and expertise. Importantly, several of our experts have personal academic ties or past research experience with universities, which has helped facilitate more targeted cooperation.

Despite the clear benefits, there are also challenges. One key barrier is the limited capacity on both sides—universities sometimes lack specialized experts in certain areas (e.g. grassland ecology), while

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NGOs often face underfunding and staffing shortages that hinder sustained collaboration. Additionally, differences in funding structures and administrative procedures can complicate joint project development. Nonetheless, the added value of cooperation—such as stronger public legitimacy of joint statements and more comprehensive data for policymaking—is significant. Moving forward, deeper and more systemic cooperation, including joint grant applications and student involvement in practical fieldwork, could benefit both academic and non-profit sectors.

Common areas of cooperation include:

- apprenticeships and internships for students and PhD students,
- teaching activities,
- guest lectures and debates,
- co-organization and implementation of scientific and popular science events,
- providing source materials, information, reports and reports for the purposes of research and work carried out by students and academics,
- implementation of scientific and practice-oriented projects.

The forms of cooperation vary widely. We have engaged in joint projects, policy consultations, development of teaching materials for students, and field monitoring activities with university researchers. Some collaborations are project-based and formalized through agreements, while others are informal, relying on personal contacts and mutual interests. For example, we work with university experts on biodiversity monitoring and jointly develop practical conservation measures that can be implemented on farms. Our experts often contribute to university lectures or seminars, which helps integrate practical experience into academic teaching. This cooperation also includes supporting student involvement in real-world projects, providing valuable hands-on learning opportunities.

While cooperation has been beneficial, it is not always fully formalized or systematic. A main challenge lies in differences in funding sources and administrative procedures, which can complicate joint work. Another barrier is the limited capacity and specialization on both sides—universities sometimes lack experts in very specific areas, and NGOs face resource constraints that limit the scope of collaboration. Despite these challenges, cooperation adds significant value by strengthening the credibility of joint policy positions and expanding the practical impact of academic research. There is

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interest from both sides in expanding collaboration, including applying for joint grants and involving students more deeply in field projects, which could help overcome current barriers and build long-term partnerships.

2. Identified benefits and added value from this collaboration

Benefits of Cooperation Between NGOs and Universities/Students for:

1. **Access to Specialized Expertise and Research:** NGOs often lack sufficient expert knowledge and scientific background in many topics, especially compared to university researchers who provide advanced insights and methodologies. This partnership helps fill knowledge gaps and enhances the quality of NGO projects.
2. **Support for Capacity Building:** NGOs frequently struggle with limited resources and capacity, especially due to chronic underfunding, which affects their ability to develop systemic solutions. Collaboration with universities and students provides additional human resources and intellectual capacity, helping to advance long-term environmental and conservation goals.
3. **Joint Research and Monitoring Projects:** Universities contribute to monitoring biodiversity, ecosystems, and the effectiveness of conservation measures through research projects. NGOs benefit from this scientific data to evaluate and improve their interventions.
4. **Student Engagement and Practical Training:** Students can participate in internships, practical fieldwork, and voluntary projects within NGOs. This helps NGOs by adding motivated manpower and fresh perspectives, while students gain real-world experience.
5. **Educational Outreach and Raising Awareness:** Universities offer a neutral platform for organizing debates, lectures, and forums, which can educate students, farmers, and the public about environmental challenges and policies. This supports NGOs' goals of raising awareness and improving acceptance of conservation measures.
6. **Improved Communication and Conflict Resolution:** Cooperation fosters dialogue between various stakeholders, including farmers and conservationists, helping to reduce misunderstandings and conflicts. Universities can mediate by providing a neutral space for discussion.

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7. **Flexibility and Agility:** NGOs are often more flexible and operationally adaptable than universities bound by administrative constraints. This allows for quick adjustments in collaborative projects and practical work on the ground.
8. **Development of Sustainable, Long-term Partnerships:** Joint projects and consistent interaction with universities create sustainable collaboration, increasing the effectiveness and reach of environmental initiatives.
9. **Enhanced Funding and Project Opportunities:** Partnering with universities opens doors to international and large-scale research funding (e.g., Horizon projects), which NGOs might otherwise find difficult to access alone.
10. **Mutual Benefits and Knowledge Exchange:** NGOs share field data and practical insights, while universities provide theoretical and methodological expertise. This synergy strengthens both parties' work, improving conservation outcomes.

3. Barriers identified

There are challenges in expertise and collaboration. Czech experts often have stronger professional backgrounds on many topics, while Slovakia sometimes lacks specialists. At the same time, Slovakia faces chronic underfunding in nature protection, limiting capacities to implement and develop systemic solutions.

Cooperation between universities (especially Comenius University and Catholic University) and NGOs is ongoing and quite natural, as many researchers studied abroad and are involved in shared projects, including monitoring and research. However, science in Slovakia is generally underfunded, which restricts the ability to carry out extensive research or monitoring, particularly related to nature protection and environmental education.

There is a strong emphasis on educating future farmers about nature conservation, aiming to reduce conflicts by improving understanding. For example, students often lack clear explanations for agricultural environmental measures (like buffer strips), which leads to misunderstandings and

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resistance. Better education and direct involvement of students in practical work and monitoring could improve cooperation.

NGOs are valued for their flexibility and ability to engage volunteers in data collection and conservation activities across Slovakia. Universities can provide neutral ground for discussions and forums, which helps avoid the polarization often seen when events are organized solely by NGOs or other parties.

There is an expressed need for improved monitoring of the effectiveness of conservation measures, such as wetland restoration and groundwater recharge, which is currently lacking. Collaboration with foreign universities and participation in EU projects (like Horizon) are in progress but need strengthening.

Ongoing dialogue and joint projects involving farmers, NGOs, and universities are essential. These should focus on clear communication, shared goals, and building trust. Universities can help by offering lectures and workshops that combine ecological, economic, and practical perspectives.

Finally, there is broad recognition that cooperation between Slovakia and the Czech Republic enriches the quality of research and conservation efforts. Despite some conflicts between conservationists and farmers, the common goal is sustainable land use, and enhanced communication can turn conflicts into partnerships.

Summary of Barriers in Collaboration Between Slovak Universities and NGOs

Limited Funding and Resources: Both universities and NGOs in Slovakia face chronic underfunding, especially in nature protection and environmental research. This restricts their capacity to conduct comprehensive studies, monitoring, and educational activities, hindering effective collaboration.

Expertise Gaps and Uneven Professional Backgrounds: vCompared to the Czech Republic, Slovakia has fewer specialists with strong professional experience in some key areas of environmental science

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and agriculture. This disparity limits the depth of scientific collaboration and the implementation of advanced conservation measures.

Lack of Effective Monitoring and Evaluation: There is insufficient monitoring of the outcomes of conservation initiatives, such as wetland restoration or groundwater recharge. Without clear data on effectiveness, it is harder for universities and NGOs to jointly develop and promote evidence-based solutions.

Communication Challenges and Misunderstandings: Educational gaps among students and farmers, especially regarding agricultural environmental measures, lead to misunderstandings and resistance. NGOs and universities struggle to deliver consistent and clear messages, which affects trust and cooperation.

Polarization and Fragmented Stakeholder Engagement: Events and forums often become polarized when organized solely by either NGOs or universities. This division limits opportunities for neutral, inclusive discussions that could foster better cooperation.

Insufficient Involvement of Practical Stakeholders: Farmers and field practitioners are not always actively engaged in research and monitoring processes led by universities and NGOs, which reduces practical relevance and acceptance of conservation measures.

Dependence on External Collaboration: Slovak institutions rely heavily on cooperation with foreign universities and EU projects to access expertise and funding, which can create challenges in sustaining independent national research capacities.

4. Desired future directions on cooperation with university

Slovak universities and NGOs—especially where such cooperation has not yet occurred—should focus on building mutual trust, aligning goals, and creating structured, long-term engagement. NGOs expect partnerships that are not only research-based but also action-oriented, allowing universities and their students to participate in environmental monitoring, awareness-raising campaigns, and policy

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advocacy. Students should be actively involved through internships, field projects, and thesis work connected to real-world challenges. NGOs also anticipate that universities will help provide evidence-based data and technical support, while benefiting from NGOs' practical experience and local knowledge.

Among the potential areas for collaboration, **green agriculture** stands out as the top priority. This reflects Slovakia's strong agricultural base and the pressing need to align farming practices with climate resilience and biodiversity goals. NGOs emphasize the lack of monitoring and knowledge-sharing in agri-environmental measures, and they see student involvement in this area as crucial. Next in importance is the **green economy**, which combines environmental sustainability with economic transition—something that requires joint research, policy innovation, and public engagement. **Healthy cities** follows closely, especially as it relates to environmental justice, citizen well-being, and inclusive urban development. NGOs stress that these areas offer fertile ground for both academic research and grassroots interventions.

While **smart cities**, **sustainable finance**, and other innovative fields are important, they are viewed more as complementary areas rather than top priorities. In the Slovak context, where basic environmental governance, funding, and civic engagement remain challenges, NGOs believe collaboration should begin with practical, local-level initiatives before moving toward more complex, tech-driven or finance-heavy domains. Ultimately, the desired future direction is a two-way partnership that includes students and is rooted in solving real environmental and societal issues.

Confidential Annexes (Uploaded to the Archive Folder)

1- **Presentation/s**
2- A**udio record**, **Foto**
3- **Screenshots (showing the number of participants)**
4- **Transcription records (in English)**

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