



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

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FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW REPORT

CROATIA



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FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW OBJECTIVES

The data collection and content development processes for ECOUNTRY 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:
 - o A better understanding of the expectations of stakeholders in relation to universities' collaborations with local actors.
 - o Insight into the motivations and barriers to university local actor collaborations in environmental protection and sustainability activities, and the potential strategies for increasing cooperation.
 - o 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.

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.



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):*
 - o *smart cities*
 - o *sustainable finance*
 - o *green economy*
 - o *green agriculture*
 - o *healthy cities*
 - o *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?*

DATA ANALYSIS & FINDINGS

FGI Process and the Data Collected

FGI with Local Actors

FGI Date: **18/2/2025**

Venue: **13 and 14.30**

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

Number of Participants: **9+9**

Type of Organisation: **Environmental Association** () City Council () Municipality () **Local Public Administrations** () Chamber of commerce and industry **Other** ()

If you marked other, please specify: **tourist board, enterprises, civil society associations**

Findings:

1. Organisations' experience in working with universities?

Many NGOs serve as professional practice bases, hosting students primarily from faculties of philosophy, economics, health studies, tourism, and informatics. These internships are valuable for students and offer NGOs much-needed support in project work (e.g., Žmergo, Technical Culture Center, DIP, Parasports Associations).

Several NGOs have cooperated on European projects (Erasmus+, Horizon, CEF, Social Fund), and involved universities as partners or advisors. Examples include sustainability workshops, symposiums, and initiatives like the Green Network or eco-committees (Žmergo, Eko Kvarner, Kvarner Tourist Board, Association NADA). Some university faculty members have participated in NGO-organized events or given expert lectures, while NGO representatives have lectured at faculties (e.g., Kvarner Tourist Board, Žmergo, Eko Kvarner).

A few organizations have involved academic partners in developing action plans, legal analyses, or environmental assessments, e.g. for regional green development or tourism strategies.

2. Identified benefits and added value from this collaboration

Collaboration gives NGOs access to high-level academic knowledge and specialists they couldn't afford otherwise. Professors and researchers often assist pro bono, lending credibility to the NGOs' work (e.g., Eko Kvarner working with highly cited researchers and STEM faculty).

Universities are often involved in EU-funded projects (e.g., Erasmus+, Horizon), providing NGOs with structured support, legal knowledge, and research capacity to enhance project proposals and delivery (e.g., Žmergo, Kvarner Tourist Board).

Being involved with academic institutions helps NGOs expand their audience, gain media coverage, and engage with new demographics (e.g., students, researchers, and policy influencers).

Students gain valuable practical experience through internships, volunteering, and real-life projects with NGOs. This includes working on environmental campaigns, organizing events, and engaging with the local community.

Collaboration with NGOs helps students develop a sense of purpose and responsibility by contributing to real-world change — such as ecological initiatives, health awareness campaigns, and green transition projects.

Students are often exposed to alternative career paths and motivated to stay engaged locally, as seen in examples from the Kvarner Tourist Board and others.

Joint actions (e.g., symposiums, public events, awareness campaigns) lead to greater community inclusion and awareness, especially in areas like sustainability, health, and youth empowerment.

Communities benefit from the academic-NGO knowledge exchange, particularly when NGOs use university research and data to inform local strategies and action plans (e.g., Eko Kvarner, NADA, Žmergo).

3. Barriers identified

Many collaborations are based on personal relationships rather than institutional agreements. This makes them fragile and inconsistent over time. For example, one NGO highlighted that students were legally prohibited from travelling abroad to participate in international activities, which limited mobility and engagement (DIP).

Faculty members often don't have time or incentives to get involved with NGOs due to their heavy administrative and teaching duties.

NGOs tend to be practical and field-oriented, while universities can be theory-driven and slow-moving. This difference in pace and expectations sometimes creates friction.

Several NGOs felt that universities sometimes approach cooperation instrumentally, using NGOs for research without real partnership or feedback. One participant described it as “extractive collaboration.”

Some organizations mentioned that universities are not aware of the scope and impact of NGO work, and vice versa.

While some EU projects enable collaboration, there are few national or local funding schemes that explicitly support NGO–university cooperation.

Many NGOs are small, underfunded, and lack staff capacity to initiate or sustain academic partnerships, despite being open to them.

While internships are helpful, students often don't stay engaged after fulfilling their course requirements, making continuity difficult. Some students approach internships passively, not fully engaging with the organization's mission or work rhythm.

4. Desired future directions on cooperation with University

Participants expressed a strong willingness to deepen and formalize collaboration with universities. Their ideas for the future include strategic, structured, and mutually beneficial partnerships that go beyond current ad hoc cooperation. NGOs emphasized the need for systemic cooperation models — including memoranda of understanding, annual plans, or official partnership frameworks with faculties and departments.

Creating coordinated entry points at the university (e.g. a liaison office for NGO collaboration) was suggested to simplify communication. NGOs want more continuity in student involvement, suggesting multi-semester internships, service-learning models, and mentoring systems.

They also proposed joint project teams of students and NGO mentors working on real-world challenges (e.g. sustainability, health, culture).

Several NGOs mentioned the desire for more student involvement in EU-funded projects, including international mobility where possible.

Participants wish to shift from one-sided “data extraction” to true co-creation of knowledge and practice. NGOs would like to co-design courses, curricula, or elective modules with universities on themes such as environmental activism, civic engagement, or social innovation.

NGOs proposed greater participation in applied research projects that benefit local communities — e.g. needs assessments, policy analysis, impact evaluations.

They expressed openness to becoming living labs for academic research in real-world settings.

Both sides could jointly contribute to green transition strategies, local sustainability plans, and participatory policymaking.

NGOs see universities as key partners in tackling regional challenges and fostering socially responsible innovation.

Confidential Annexes (Uploaded to the Archive Folder)

- 1- Participant List
- 2- Presentation/s
- 3- If possible, video records
- 4- Screenshots (showing the number of participants)
- 5- Efficient practices that the participants offered
- 6- Transcription records (in English)