Environmental Sustainability: Protecting Our Planet, Restoring Our Future

Learning Guide: Ages 14+

Purpose: Environmental sustainability is at the heart of our shared future. Without healthy ecosystems, stable climates, and equitable access to natural resources, societies cannot thrive and global challenges cannot be solved. **This module invites learners to explore the urgent challenge of protecting and restoring our planet, understand the root causes of environmental degradation, and identify their role in building sustainable, just, and resilient communities**. It includes a three-part learning journey with relevant background information, video-based contents, interactive visuals, guided research, and systems thinking activities designed to inspire reflection and action.

Learners will

- Understand key concepts of environmental sustainability, including biodiversity, circular economy, climate action, and environmental justice.
- Explore systems, institutions, and stakeholders that drive and address environmental degradation.
- Reflect on global and local drivers of unsustainability, including overconsumption and inequality.
- Develop ideas for youth-led action that strengthen environmental stewardship and community resilience.

"The Thinker's Burden" sculpture by activist and artist Benjamin Wong Von is installed outside the UN Geneva. In August of 2025, Wong Von placed piles of trash on to the sculpture as nations began negotiations for a global accord to end plastic pollution. The plastic represents the growing cost of inaction and more plastic was added each day until the sculpture was drowned in plastics.

Acknowledgements
This learning module was co-created by the UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network's Ages of Globalization and Global Schools Program (Katja Anger-Delimi, Amanda Abrom and Gelek Tshering) & Compass Education (Gitanjali Paul).

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How to Use This Module

This module is a flexible learning journey through three phases:

DISCOVER

Step into the topic and explore what's at stake

CONNECT

Engage with global voices and shared experiences

TRANSFORM

Reflect deeply, imagine alternatives, and take steps toward change

Each component can be done in class or as homework. Time estimates are suggestions only, adaptable to diverse contexts and students' needs.

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See What's At Stake

Environmental sustainability affects everyone, shaping how people live, eat, breathe, and connect. It determines whether you have access to clean water and fresh air, whether your food is secure, whether your community is resilient to floods and droughts, and whether the natural world your generation inherits can still support life as we know it. **But how healthy is our planet today — and why are some communities more vulnerable than others?**
The evidence is stark:

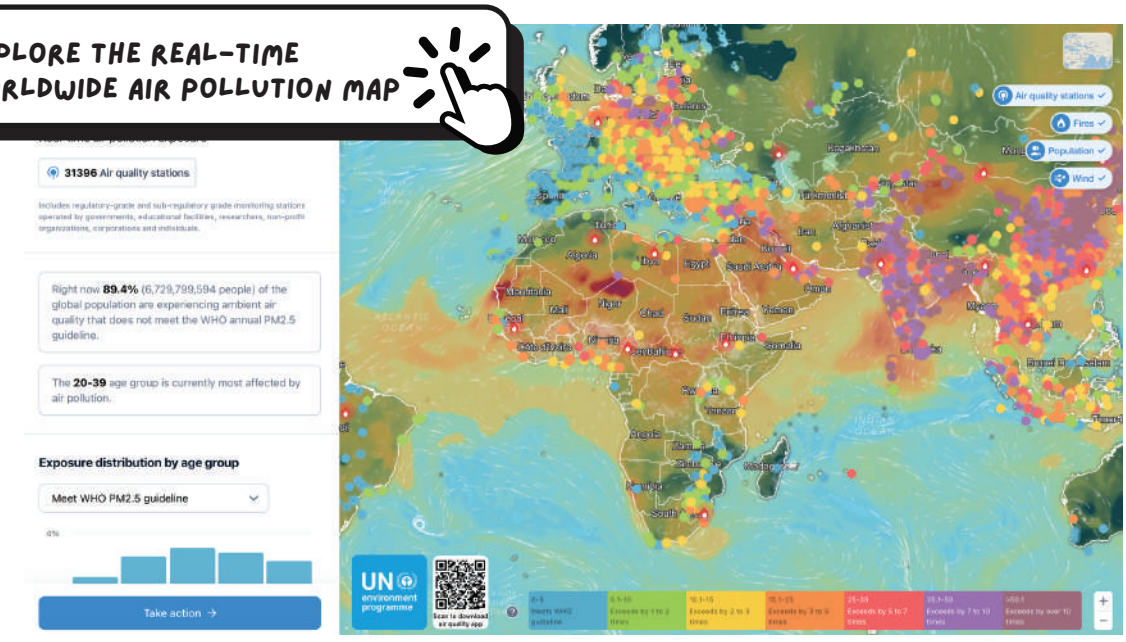
Seven of nine planetary boundaries have already been crossed. Humanity is operating outside the safe limits that sustain life on Earth. Biodiversity is collapsing at unprecedented rates, oceans are filling with plastic, soils are degrading, and the climate is destabilizing in ways that disproportionately harm the communities least responsible for the damage.

In 2024 alone, extreme weather events displaced millions of people, destroyed harvests, and pushed fragile ecosystems past tipping points. And yet the tools and knowledge to change course exist. The question is whether we have the collective will to use them.

Truly sustainable societies are not only free from pollution and waste. They have systems, values, and norms that allow people to meet their needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet theirs. They protect biodiversity, transition to clean energy, and ensure that the benefits and burdens of our relationship with nature are shared fairly.

In this module, you will explore what environmental sustainability means in your own context, connect global patterns to local realities, and consider how you can help build a healthier, more just relationship between people and planet. Protecting our environment is not the task of scientists and policymakers alone. It starts with the choices we make, the systems we question, and the actions we take every day.

EXPLORE THE REAL-TIME WORLDWIDE AIR POLLUTION MAP



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Global Voices for Environmental Sustainability

Hear from global leaders, young activists, and community changemakers on why environmental sustainability is one of the defining challenges of our time and what it will take to act.

António Guterres, Secretary-General of the United Nations shares a message on World Environment Day (June 5, 2025). He focuses on the fight to beat plastic pollution and the detrimental impacts it has on human health and our planet. The movement for change must be enacted immediately and Guterres urges negotiators from different countries to unite on a treaty to end plastic pollution.

What part can young people play in environmental sustainability? Greta Thunberg from Sweden speaks at the UN COP24 climate talk about children and youth being the voice for environmental justice. **She urges young people to make change and speak up for the environment.** Thunberg touches on the fact that the environment and our civilization are being sacrificed for luxury for a few elite.

Supriya Sahu is leading an environmental movement to protect communities from extreme heat in Tamil Nadu, India. She employs simple, low-cost cooling methods and large-scale environmental restoration. Through climate-smart urban planning, tree-planting, and environmental stewardship, Sahu shapes Tamil Nadu into a model of resilience, innovation, and hope for the future.

Building Blocks for Environmental Sustainability

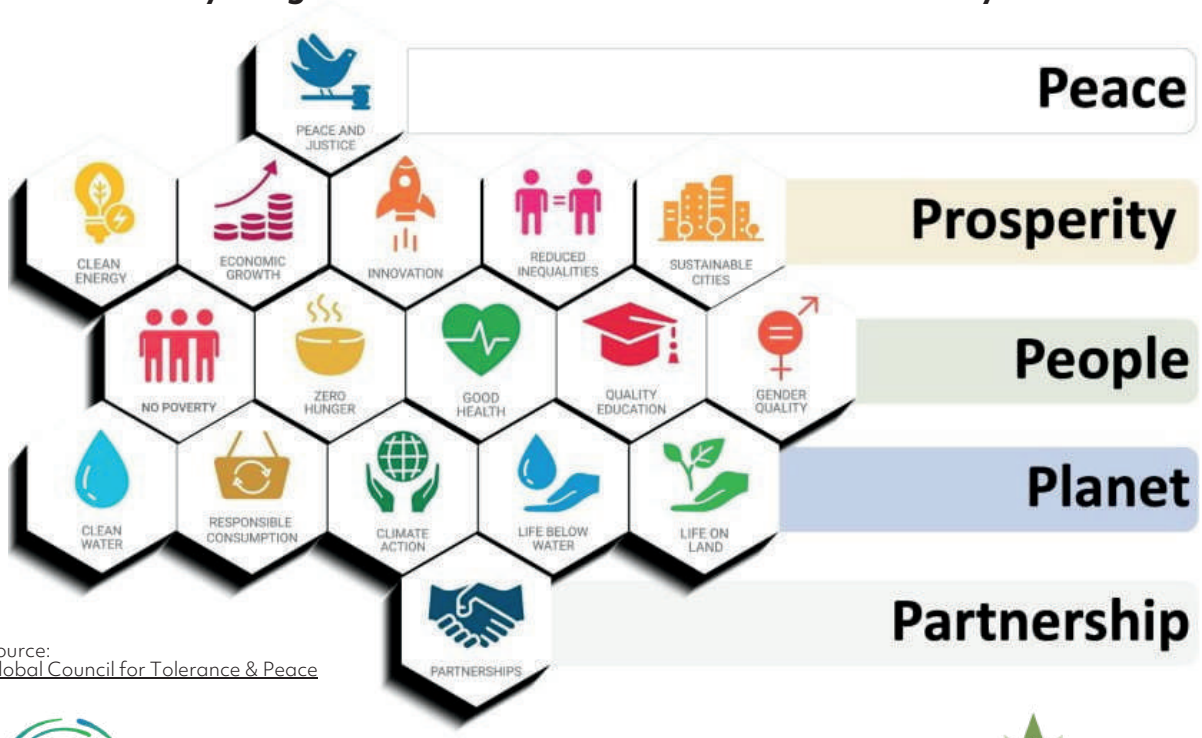
The **Sustainable Development Goals** (SDGs) offer a shared blueprint for peaceful, sustainable, and resilient societies. These interconnected goals emphasize that social, economic, and environmental sustainability are deeply interdependent. Specific SDGs target environmental protection, highlighting the urgent need to combat climate change, conserve biodiversity, and sustain ecosystems. Here we highlight three:

This goal seeks to combat climate change by reducing greenhouse gas emissions, increasing resilience to climate impacts, and promoting climate education and awareness. It encourages countries to take concrete actions to reduce global warming, which threatens biodiversity, food security, and human health worldwide (SDG 13).

This goal focuses on conserving and sustainably using the oceans, seas, and marine resources. It addresses key issues like marine pollution, ocean acidification, overfishing, and the protection of marine ecosystems. Healthy oceans play a crucial role in supporting biodiversity, regulating climate, and providing livelihoods for millions of people (SDG 14).

This goal emphasizes the protection, restoration, and sustainable management of terrestrial ecosystems, including forests, wetlands, and biodiversity hotspots. It addresses the threats of deforestation, land degradation, and loss of biodiversity, which are vital for ecosystem stability, carbon storage, and food resources. Protecting land-based ecosystems helps maintain ecological balance and supports local communities (SDG 15).

Everything Is Connected: The 17 SDGs and What They Share



Source:
Global Council for Tolerance & Peace

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Global Frameworks

Environmental sustainability is not just a scientific challenge. It is a political and legal one. The agreements and institutions below represent decades of international effort to set shared rules, hold governments accountable, and coordinate action at a scale no single country can achieve alone.

The Paris Agreement (2015): At COP 21 in Paris, world leaders set long term goals to guide nations in reducing green house gas emissions, assess progress towards these goals, and provide financial resource to developing countries to mitigate climate change. This is a legally binding international treaty with 195 having signed. The Agreement provides a framework to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals.

UN Sustainable Development Goals (2015-2023): Adopted by all UN Member States, the SDGs provide a blueprint for global peace and prosperity. They focus on the interconnected nature of global issues and are an urgent call to action.

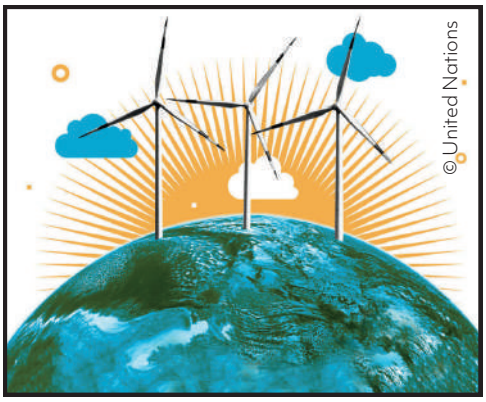
UN Environment Programme (1972): The UNEP was established following the Stockholm Conference on Human Environment. They aimed to coordinate global environmental efforts and address emerging issues with pollution and environmental crises.

Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Flora and Fauna (1973): An international agreement between 185 nations that regulates the trade of over 40,900 species of animal and plants to protect them from endangerment. Aims to protect species at risk of extinction due to international trade.

Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (1988): The IPCC was created to provide policy makers with regular scientific assessments on climate change including dangers, risks, and mitigation options. They provide vital insight and scientific knowledge on climate change.

Greenhouse Gas Protocol (1998): Setting standards and providing tangible methods to measure and manage greenhouse gas emissions. They aim to develop standards, tools and training that helps countries and cities track progress towards their climate goals.

Carbon Disclosure Project (2000): A global non-profit that collects and analyzes data on climate change and deforestation to help stakeholders manage environmental risks. They promote transparency and holding companies accountable on environmental impact.



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Conference of the Parties (COP)

The COP is an annual conference to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), where world leaders, scientists, activists, and youth representatives gather to discuss and act on climate change. The COP Presidency and conference location rotates among five regions of Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, Central and Eastern Europe and Western Europe, and Others.

COP follows decades of international climate negotiations aimed at reducing greenhouse gas emissions, adapting to climate impacts, and creating a sustainable future for all. The "COP" meetings are critical because they bring together nearly 200 countries to assess progress and make decisions to address climate change. COP's primary focus is enact concrete action based on previous climate pledges to ultimately strengthen the Paris Agreement and hold world leaders accountable.

© Brookings

Why Does This Matter?

- The decisions made at COP shape global response to issues stemming from climate change that directly impacts the future of our planet. Young people's input and actions are vital in making sure leaders prioritize ambitious, equitable solutions.
- Youth activists and organizations play active roles at COP meetings, raising awareness and pushing for bolder actions. Young people amplify their voices on environmental sustainability issues, demanding accountability and concrete action from decision-makers.
- COP is linked to several Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including climate action (SDG 13), life below water (SDG 14), and life on land (SDG 15). This is a platform where youth can advocate for a sustainable and equitable future, emphasizing the need to meet these interconnected goals by 2030.
- COP encourages youth participation, attending as delegates, events, or following the outcomes online. Youth-led solutions are essential in areas like climate technology, green energy, and sustainable business practices, all discussed at the conference.

How To Get Involved

- Join youth led organizations, follow COP updates, raise awareness and advocate for policies.
- Engage with the UNFCCC processes and broader climate policy-making in the Youth Climate Champion role to provide youth perspectives.
- The COP Youth Delegates program aims to to empower young delegates aged 18-35 in climate policy-making and advocacy.

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3 Key Action Areas for Environmental Sustainability

1. Biodiversity Conservation

Biodiversity plays an essential role in ecosystem and health balance. Each species contributes to essential ecosystem services such as pollination and soil formation, creating resilience against environmental shifts like climate change or disease outbreaks. Protecting biodiversity ensures ecosystems remain function and supportive of human and environmental health (UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration).

Conservation is essential to maintain biodiversity and ecosystem stability. Efforts include protecting endangered species and restoring ecosystems and habitats. Young people play a vital roles in conservation efforts, getting involved in education, clean-ups and community-led projects. This helps protect biodiversity at the community level, pushes leaders to change environmentally harmful policies, and inspires broader environmental stewardship (UNEP #GenerationRestoration).

2. Renewable Energy and Technology

Renewable energy and technological innovation are essential to achieving environmental sustainability. Green energy sources produce electricity without releasing harmful greenhouse gasses, which help reduce pollution. By transitioning to renewable energy, we rely less on fossil fuels, preserving natural resources and protecting the air and water we all depend on.

Innovative technology like electric vehicles, energy-efficient buildings, and recycling systems play a large role by minimizing waste and conserving energy. Smart technology can reduce energy use in homes, and improved materials in manufacturing allow products to be reused or recycled. Together, green energy and technological innovation are an important lever for paving the way to a more sustainable future for everyone.

Young people can advocate for renewable energy by encouraging schools to adopt green practices, like using solar panels or LED. They can explore energy-saving habits, like reducing electricity use, or acquiring green skills for a career in environmental and tech innovation fields.

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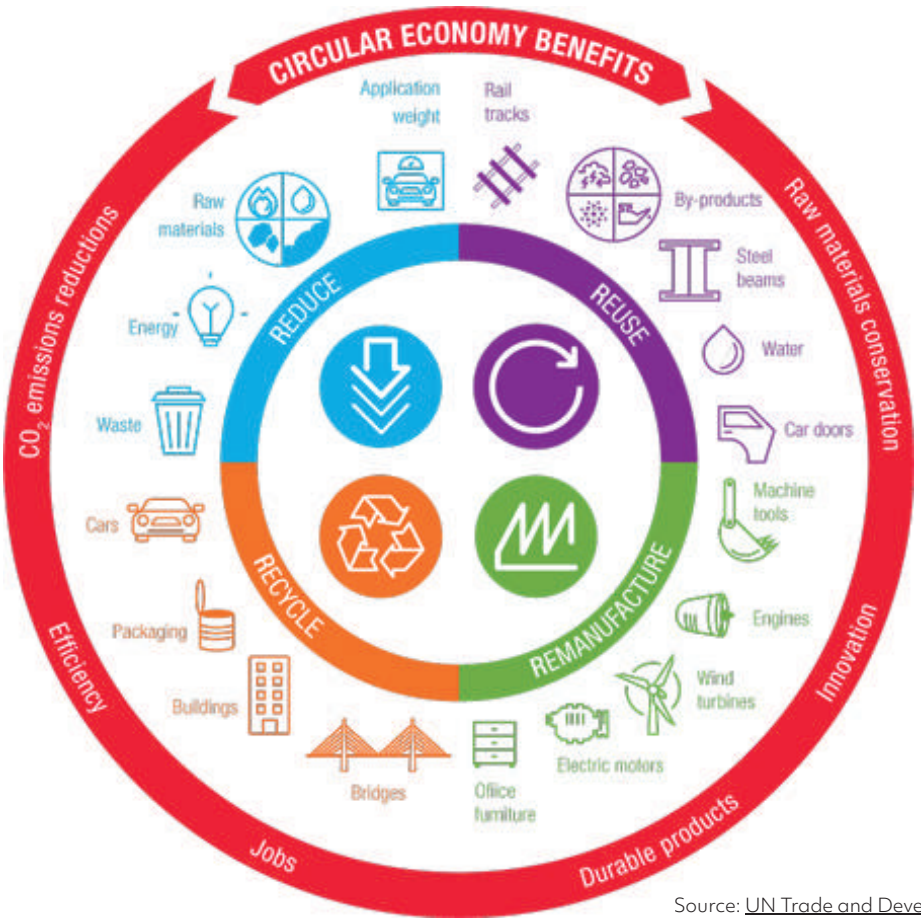
3. Circular Economy & Responsible Consumption and Production

The circular economy is a sustainable alternative to the linear economy, which assumes that we have continuous access to infinite natural resources. It is essential to understand the problems of the **'take-make-waste' model** and recognize the limits of natural resources. Key elements of a circular economy are material life cycles, refurbishing, and product designs, thereby reducing waste and emissions, and enhancing sustainability (UNESCO).

Waste reduction is a key aspect of the circular economy. **By reducing the demand for new materials and keeping items in circulation longer, we decrease the environmental impact of manufacturing and disposal.** For example, choosing a repaired bicycle over a new one, or buying secondhand clothing instead of fast fashion, keeps resources in use and cuts the carbon cost of production.

Young people can support a circular economy by practicing the **"6Rs": refuse, reduce, reuse, repair, repurpose, and recycle**. But individual action is only part of the picture. The most powerful levers are systemic. Young people can advocate for extended producer responsibility laws that hold companies accountable for the full lifecycle of their products, push for bans on planned obsolescence, support local repair and sharing economies, and campaign for policies that make sustainable choices the default rather than the exception.



Source: UN Trade and Development (UNCTAD).

Common Myths and Misconceptions - Debunked

This activity invites you to test and challenge common assumptions about what environmental sustainability really means in practice. Below are a few statements often heard in public debate or everyday conversation — some partly true, others oversimplified. In small groups, decide whether you agree or disagree with each one before reading the explanations. Then, reflect on how these ideas influence public opinion, policymaking, or everyday life in your own context.

MYTH

"Climate change has always happened, we need not worry about it."

FACT

It is true that the planets climate has fluctuated but it has been relatively stable since the last ice age 10,000 years ago. This is faltering, the Earth is heating up at its fastest rate in at least 2,000 years and is about 1.2°C hotter than pre-industrial times. The last 10 years have been the warmest on record, surpassing global temperature records.

MYTH

"People are not involved in climate change, it is a natural process."

FACT

While climate change is a natural phenomenon, human activity is exacerbating its impacts. A report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) found that humans are responsible for almost all the global warming over the past 200 years. This has been caused by high levels of fossil fuel combustion.

MYTH

"Environmental issues do not impact me personally."

FACT

Climate change is leading to increased droughts, intense storms, loss of coral reefs, shrinking glaciers, bigger and more frequent wildfires, and rising seas. Even if the impacts of this are not felt immediately, it will eventually be felt worldwide.

MYTH

"I cannot make a difference since I am not a big company."

FACT

It is a fact that large companies and industries are the largest emitter of carbon emissions and consumer of fossil fuels. However, this does not mean that individuals have no power. Each of us can make a tangible difference through taking action by being conscious of our consumption habits, educating ourselves and our community, and lobbying our elected officials to enact laws protecting the environment.

Discussion

- Which of these ideas do you hear most often in your community or the media?
- Why do these myths persist, and how might they shape people's views of environmental sustainability?
- What real-world examples — local or global — show individuals and youth challenging these assumptions through action or dialogue?

Explore Key Concepts

Biodiversity Conservation is protecting the variety of life on Earth, including ecosystems, species, and genetic diversity. Conservation of biodiversity supports ecosystem resilience, allows environments to adapt, and provides essential resources for human health. **Preserving biodiversity allows us to protect processes that regulate climate, control disease, and ensure ecosystem stability, which are all crucial for sustainable development and human well-being** (UN & UNEP).

The Carbon Footprint represents the **total greenhouse gas emissions** from an activity or entity, measured in **carbon dioxide equivalents (CO_2e)**, including **direct sources like transportation and indirect sources such as electricity and manufacturing.** Individuals are encouraged to reduce their personal footprints, this idea was promoted by fossil fuel companies to shift responsibility onto consumers. Although individual actions matter, this framing can **distract from the much larger role of corporations and the need for systemic solutions** like stronger regulations and sustainable business practices (UN Climate Action).

Circular Economy operates on three core principles: **eliminating waste and pollution, circulating products at their highest utility, and regenerating natural systems.** The goal: move away from the traditional "take-make-waste" model to one that **uses resources for as long as possible, and minimizes waste by recycling, repairing, and reusing materials within a closed-loop system.** This reduces environmental impact, builds long-term resilience, economic opportunities, and sustainable resource management. **Supporting a shift toward renewable energy and sustainable production practices** (UNESCO).

Climate Change Mitigation is the process of reducing greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions to limit global warming. **The two main strategies are: reducing emissions and enhancing "sinks," or natural systems that absorb GHGs.** Mitigation includes transitioning to renewable energy, increasing energy efficiency, and conserving forests. These efforts are essential for achieving the Paris Agreement's targets and a sustainable future for all (UNFCCC).

Environmental Justice ensures that **environmental policies and benefits are distributed fairly**, addressing the unequal burden of environmental degradation often on marginalized communities. **All individuals, regardless of race, income, or geographic location, should have equal access to clean air, water, and natural resources** and be protected from pollution and climate change (UN SDGs, UNEP).

Pollution Prevention means minimizing the release of contaminants into the environment to protect public health, ecosystems, and natural resources.

- **Air Pollution:** Reducing vehicle and industrial emissions to limit airborne pollutants that harm health and contribute to climate change.
- **Water Pollution:** Preventing harmful waste, chemicals, and plastics from entering water sources to protect ecosystems and drinking water.
- **Soil Pollution:** Controlling agricultural runoff and hazardous waste to maintain soil health and food safety, and ecosystem services.
- **Noise Pollution:** Limiting excessive sound from transportation and industry that affects human health and wildlife.
- **Light Pollution:** Reducing artificial lighting that disrupts ecosystems and sleep cycles. (UNEP)

Renewable Energy is generated from natural sources that are abundant and continuously replenished, like sunlight, wind, water, and geothermal heat. **These sources don't deplete and emit minimal greenhouse gas emissions.** They are essential for reducing climate impact and promoting a sustainable, cleaner future. **In order to achieve SDG 7-affordable, reliable, and sustainable energy for all by 2030** (UN SDG 7).

Sustainable Agriculture promotes methods that **preserve soil health, reduce chemical inputs, and conserve water.** It aims to provide sufficient food while maintaining ecosystem health and biodiversity (FAO).

Reflection Questions

- Which of these ideas feels most relevant in your community?
- How do these concepts connect? For example, how might a circular economy lead to a more environmentally just world?
- Where do you see conservation efforts or sources of pollution in action around you?

Sustainable Consumption and Production is about optimizing resource use to meet present needs while ensuring future generations have access to essential resources. It encompasses reducing waste, using resources efficiently, and adopting eco-friendly practices throughout the production lifecycle. **This involves designing products for durability, prioritizing renewable energy, and promoting responsible consumer choices** (UN SDG 12).

Water Conservation involves managing freshwater resources to prevent scarcity, ensure equitable access, and protect ecosystems. **This is essential for sustainable development, supporting goals like food security, health, economic growth, and environmental sustainability**. Practices include reducing water waste in agriculture, industry, and individual households. **Water conservation addresses present and future needs, supporting resilience against climate change and water-related crises** (UN SDG 6).

Understand the Stakeholders & Systems

Protecting and restoring our planet is a collective effort. It depends on cooperation across all levels of society and on understanding how diverse actors, from international bodies to local communities, work together to create systemic, lasting change.

🏛️ GOVERNMENTS AND POLICY MAKERS

Set laws and policies that protect the environment, reduce pollution, and deliver on international commitments like the Paris Agreement and the SDGs. Effective leadership ensures accountable institutions and sustainable development.

💼 INDUSTRY & THE PRIVATE SECTOR

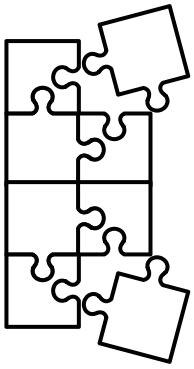
Producers bear primary responsibility for the environmental impact of what they make, from extraction to disposal. The fossil fuel industry in particular has actively obstructed climate action for decades. But businesses across sectors can also be part of the solution by investing in renewable energy, adopting circular economy principles, and embedding sustainability into supply chains through genuine accountability, not greenwashing.

🌍 INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

Bodies like the United Nations and the African Union coordinate global sustainability efforts, support developing nations with finance and technology, and hold member states accountable through shared frameworks and reporting mechanisms.

🔬 SCIENTISTS & RESEARCHERS

Generate the evidence base that drives policy, public understanding, and innovation. Bodies like the IPCC translate complex data into actionable guidance. Without rigorous independent science, informed decision-making on climate, biodiversity, and pollution is impossible.



🏘️ COMMUNITIES

Frontline responders to environmental degradation, communities play a vital role in grassroots action and land and water protection. Indigenous and local communities hold invaluable ecological knowledge that is increasingly recognized as essential to effective conservation.

💬 CIVIL SOCIETY & NGOS

Monitor governments and corporations, campaign for stronger environmental protections, and give voice to communities most affected by environmental degradation.

💰 DONORS & PHILANTHROPY

Donors and philanthropic actors, including int. agencies, foundations, and local benefactors, provide critical funding for environmental sustainability education, and community initiatives.

✨ YOUTH & THE GENERAL PUBLIC

From Fridays for Future to local restoration projects, young people are driving systemic change and building the coalitions needed to protect the planet they will inherit. The general public sustains this momentum through everyday (consumer) choices and civic participation.

💻 MEDIA & TECHNOLOGY

Shape public opinion and amplify sustainability initiatives, but can also spread misinformation. AI and digital tools offer new possibilities for monitoring ecosystems and coordinating global action.

Examples from Different Regions

Bhutan: The Only Carbon Negative Country in the World

Challenge: Global climate change, rapid globalization, and the growing demand for natural resources pose a serious threat to the forests of this small Himalayan country, which has made the protection of its natural environment a constitutional obligation.
Response: Bhutan focuses on sustainable economic development through eco-tourism, organic farming, and renewable energy, and enshrines nature conservation in its constitution, requiring that at least 60% of its land remain under forest cover. It measures national progress through Gross National Happiness rather than GDP alone.
Lesson Learned: Bhutan shows that countries can balance economic development with protecting natural resources, and that choosing a different measure of progress can fundamentally change the decisions a society makes.

Netherlands: Youth-Led Climate Litigation

Challenge: Despite international commitments, governments have repeatedly failed to reduce greenhouse gas emissions at the pace science demands.
Response: In 2019, the Dutch Supreme Court ruled in favor of the Urgenda Foundation, which sued the Dutch government on behalf of ~900 citizens for failing to meet its own climate targets. It was the first successful climate liability case of its kind in the world, and has since inspired similar youth-led legal challenges in Germany, Colombia, and beyond.
Lesson Learned: Civil society and young people can hold governments legally accountable for climate commitments. Courts are increasingly recognized as a powerful arena for climate action, and legal precedents set in one country can ripple elsewhere

Brazil: Curitiba, The Model for Urban Sustainability

Challenge: How rapidly growing cities can accommodate population growth without destroying ecosystems, overwhelming infrastructure, and deepening inequality
Response: Curitiba is a globally recognized model for urban sustainability through integrated programs of green spaces, efficient public transport, waste management, and urban agriculture. The city has invested in making sustainable choices the most accessible option for residents regardless of income.
Lesson Learned: Environmental sustainability does not need to come at the sacrifice of economic or social development. With long-term planning and political will, cities can be designed around people and planet simultaneously.

New Zealand: The Whanganui River and Indigenous Environmental Leadership

Challenge: Decades of industrial use, pollution, and land development severely degraded the Whanganui River, sacred to the Māori people, who fight for its protection since 140 years.
Response: In 2017, New Zealand granted the River full legal personhood, recognizing it as a living entity with rights of its own. This landmark decision was the direct result of sustained Māori advocacy and their concept of the river as an ancestor, not a resource.
Lesson Learned: Indigenous communities hold ecological knowledge and relationships with nature that Western legal and scientific frameworks are only beginning to recognize. Centering indigenous voices in environmental governance produces more just and more effective outcomes for people and planet alike.

Dive into the Research

Learners are encouraged to partake in guided research and activities to explore the topic. Research can be completed independently in a computer lab, as a homework assignment, by talking to community members, visiting a library, or as a classroom, club or community activity.

This research worksheet will help you explore the topic in your country and community by analyzing policies, trends, and challenges. Answer each question using reliable data and sources. Reflect on the findings and connect them to global challenges. Be ready to discuss or present your research.

Learner Research Worksheet: Investigate Your COUNTRY and Community	
Name:	
1. What does **environmental sustainability** mean, and why is it important for our planet?	
2. Identify **two major global environmental challenges**, which also impact your country. Briefly **describe its impact on the environment and human health.**	
3. Which of the **UN's 17 SDGs focus specifically on environmental sustainability?** Choose **one environmental SDG and describe its purpose and goals.**	
4. Find out **two actions** that individuals in your community are taking to **promote environmental sustainability.**	
5. How is **water conservation** in your school/community? Are there any **policies to reduce water waste?**	
6. What **energy-saving measures are in place at your community**(e.g., LED lighting, reminders to turn off lights)? **Suggest other practices.**	

DISCOVER CONNECT TRANSFORM

This worksheet will help you assess how your school or community is promoting peace and security and identify areas for improvement. Use this as a guide to observe, ask questions, and take notes on peacebuilding practices in your school or neighbourhood.

Learner Research Worksheet: Investigate Your SCHOOL or Community		
Investigate	*Yes, No, Unsure*	*Notes and Observations*
Does your school/community **teach about environmental sustainability**? If yes, **give an example** of an activity or lesson. If not, **suggest a program or topic that could be introduced** to raise awareness.		
Does your school/community **have a recycling program**? If so, what materials are collected, and where are recycling bins located? **How effective do you think the program is?**		
Are there any **clubs or projects at your school/community center focused on environmental sustainability?** If so, describe one. If not, **brainstorm an idea for a club or project that students could start.**		
Does your school or **community run awareness activities or campaigns about climate change**, reducing pollution or habitat restoration?		

DISCOVER CONNECT TRANSFORM

ACTIVITY 3

In this activity, learners explore how young people around the world are taking the lead in promoting sustainability, conservation, climate action, and environmental justice. They will investigate a youth-led movement or organization, consider its impact, and reflect on how similar strategies could be applied in their own communities.

Examples of Youth-Led Movements:

- **This Is Zero Hour:** An international climate justice organization that organizes lobby days, climate summits, art festivals and climate marches. Amplifying youth leaders and highlighting intersectionality.
- **World's Youth for Climate Justice:** A global campaign to take climate change to the International Court of Justice to get an Advisory Opinion. To clarify state obligations to protect people from effects of climate change.
- **UNESCO Youth Climate Action Network:** A UN led initiative to connect and support global youth-led climate networks. Aims to empower young people to take leadership in environmental sustainability movements.
- **Gen Z Activism (Regional/National):** While not a single organization, the wave of youth activism under the "Gen Z" banner in countries such as Morocco, Nepal, Madagascar, etc., demonstrates how young people are mobilizing for political change, transparency, accountability, and environmental justice.
- **Add a local youth movement or initiative or choose one that resonates with you.**

Research / Discussion Questions

- What is the mission or goal of the youth-led movement you chose?
- What strategies or actions do the youth use to create change (e.g., protests, social media campaigns, community projects)?
- Who are the key actors or partners involved in supporting the movement?
- What impact has the movement had locally, nationally, or globally?
- How could similar actions be applied in your own community to address local issues?

Go Further

You can find additional reading and useful resources to further build on the ideas and contents provided in this guide and to engage in a process of transformation and empowerment.

Courses & Publications

- Environment and Climate Change (free online course for young people)
- Teaching and Learning for Transformative Action (UNESCO, 2019)
- UNESCO | Trash Hack: Action Learning for Sustainable Development

Websites & Multimedia

- UNICEF | Toolkit for young climate activists
- Navigating the Digital World: Essential Tips for Online Safety
- UNICEF's new social media group for Young People
- World's Largest Lesson
- TED-Ed: Video bank for teachers and students
- The UN´s Lazy Person´s Guide to Saving the World
- Games4Sustainability. Sustainability Gamepedia

Documentaries & Films

Films about the environment and human impacts on our planet.
All free to watch.

LINK TO FILM

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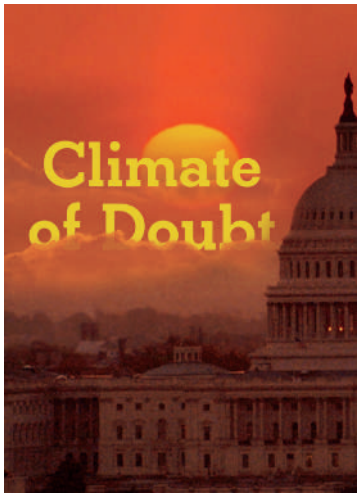

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Meet the Speakers

Erik Solheim

Former Norwegian Minister of the Environment & Former Executive Director of the UN Environment Programme

Erik Solheim is a well-known global leader on environmental sustainability. He served as Norwegian minister of Environment and International Development from 2005-2012. During his time as Minister, Erik Solheim put into place the Nature Diversity Act, which many consider to be Norway's most important piece of environmental legislation in the last 100 years. The Norwegian Climate and Forest Initiative, in which Norway cooperates closely with Brazil, Indonesia, Guyana and other countries to conserve rainforests, was also established under him, which provided critical input to establishing UN REDD, the global coalition to reduce emissions from deforestation and forest degradation.

Erik was the Executive Chair of the OECD Development Assistance Committee (the main body of world donors) from 2012-2016 and Executive Director of UN Environment from 2016-2018. He has also received a number of awards, including UN Environment's Champions of the Earth and TIME Magazine's Hero of the Environment.

"If we all come together and work together, there is no limit to what we can achieve on planet Earth."

Boyan Slat

Inventor & Entrepreneur, Founder and CEO of The Ocean Cleanup

Boyan Slat is a Dutch inventor and entrepreneur, passionate about creating megaprojects to address planetary problems. He is the founder and CEO of The Ocean Cleanup; a non-profit organization developing and scaling technologies to rid the world's oceans of plastic. The organization aims to put itself out of business, with the goal of removing 90% of floating ocean plastic by 2040. How did he get started? While on vacation in Greece at 16 years old, Boyan was SCUBA diving and saw more plastic bags than fish in the sea, which left him thinking "Why can't we just clean this up?".

He started looking into the problem and possible technology solutions to clean up ocean plastic pollution, dedicating a school project to developing his idea further. He presented his ideas at a TEDx Conference in late 2012. In February 2013, the TEDx video suddenly went viral, and the momentum that followed allowed Boyan to drop out of his Aerospace Engineering degree to officially found The Ocean Cleanup.

"When people say something is impossible, the sheer absoluteness of that statement should be a motivation to investigate further."

Case Study: The Ocean Clean-Up

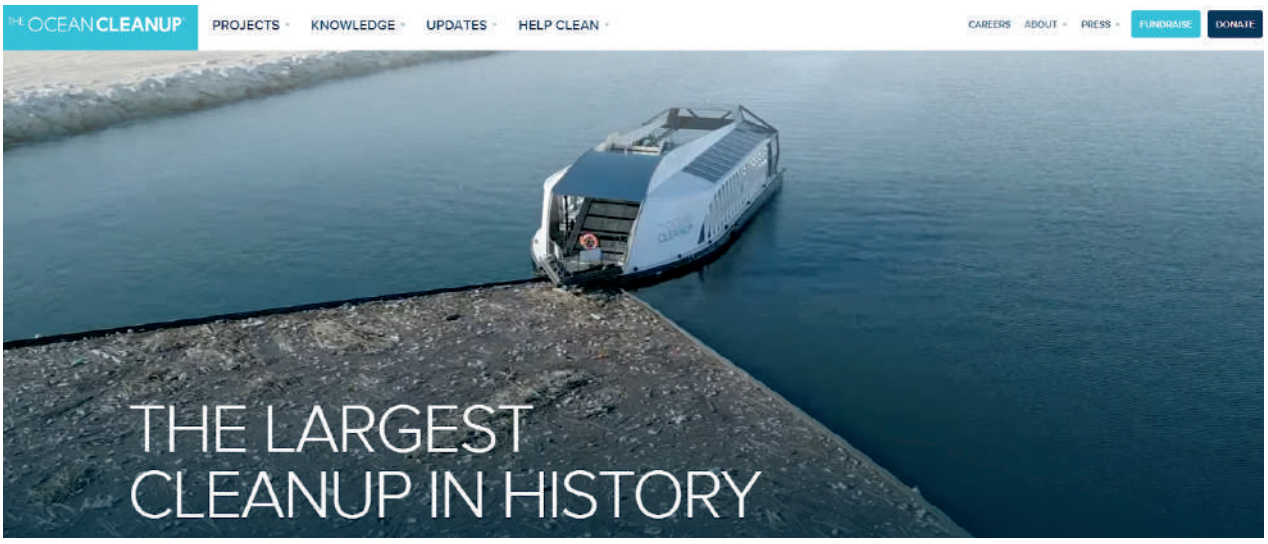
The Ocean Clean-Up is a non-profit initiative dedicated to reducing marine pollution by removing plastic waste from oceans and rivers. Founded by Boyan Slat in 2013, the project targets the Great Pacific Garbage Patch and heavily polluted rivers, aiming to remove 90% of ocean plastic by 2040.

The Ocean Clean-Up employs innovative technology to capture floating plastic and prevent new waste from reaching the ocean. In rivers, the "Interceptor" devices trap debris before it flows to the sea, while in oceans, large floating barriers concentrate plastic, making collection efficient. These solutions address pollution at its sources and in accumulation zones, both crucial for long-term impact. Take a look at these videos (Video 1, Video 2) for more information.

Since launching, The Ocean Clean-Up has removed thousands of tons of waste from oceans and rivers. Beyond cleanup, it aims to raise global awareness on reducing plastic use and pollution. The initiative demonstrates how technology can support environmental sustainability and inspire global action against marine pollution.

Young people can contribute to The Ocean Cleanup's mission by participating in the Citizen Science Program, where they use a smartphone app to collect and report data on plastic pollution in rivers and oceans. By documenting plastic waste in their local waterways, they help pinpoint pollution hotspots and monitor accumulation patterns, which aids The Ocean Cleanup in developing targeted cleanup strategies. This global effort adds valuable information to one of the most extensive databases on marine pollution, allowing young people to play a hands-on role in advancing solutions for cleaner oceans.

For more details on getting involved, visit The Ocean Clean-Up's website.



Watch the Dialogue

In this part, learners watch a global dialogue that brings together youth leaders and global decision-makers to explore environmental sustainability through concrete actions such as reducing pollution, conserving biodiversity, and renewable energy.

Through perspectives from different regions and levels of leadership, the dialogue connects local experiences of environmental sustainability movements with broader political, social, and systemic dynamics shaping the world today. Participants are invited to reflect on why environmental sustainability matters now, how collaboration, dialogue, technology, and institutions influence our planet, and where power and responsibility lie in creating lasting change.

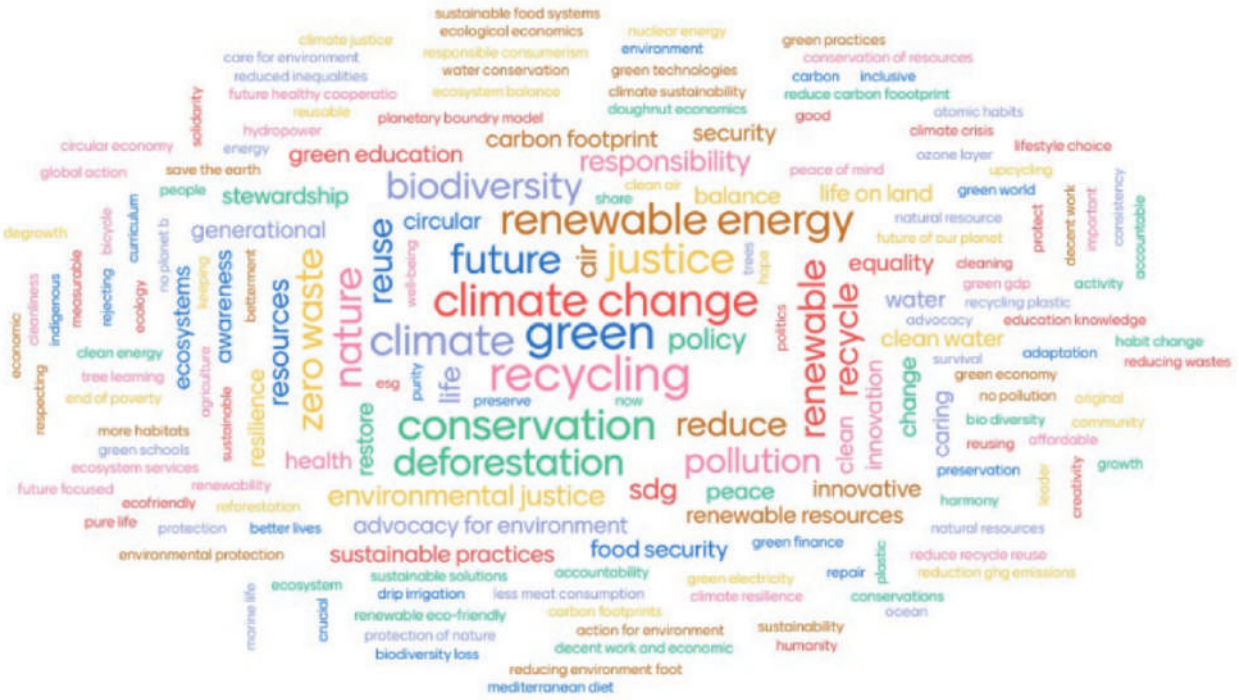
As learners watch, they gain insight into how youth are already driving sustainability efforts in their communities, where systems enable or constrain their action, and what must change for these efforts to be sustained and scaled. The dialogue highlights the importance of listening across differences, engaging critically with global challenges, and translating reflection into action.

Learners are encouraged to watch together as a class or assign the dialogue as homework, and to use it as a springboard for discussion, reflection, and concrete action toward sustainable, just, and inclusive societies.

CLICK HERE

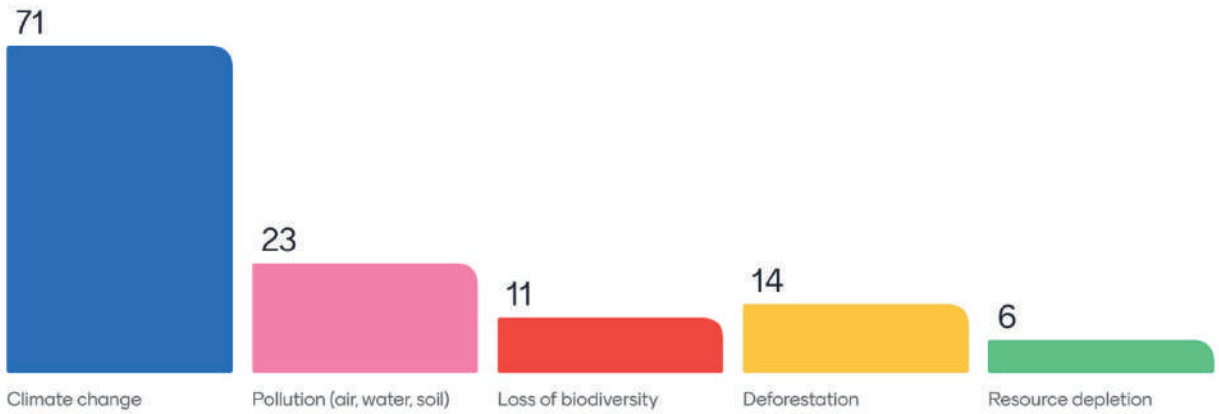
Explore the Insights

Participants shared what environmental sustainability means to them — their responses form this word cloud, where size reflects frequency. Climate change, biodiversity, renewable energy, and justice rose to the top. **Ask your students to choose 2–3 words that resonate most with them and write a short reflection: why these words, and what do they reveal about how they understand environmental sustainability?**

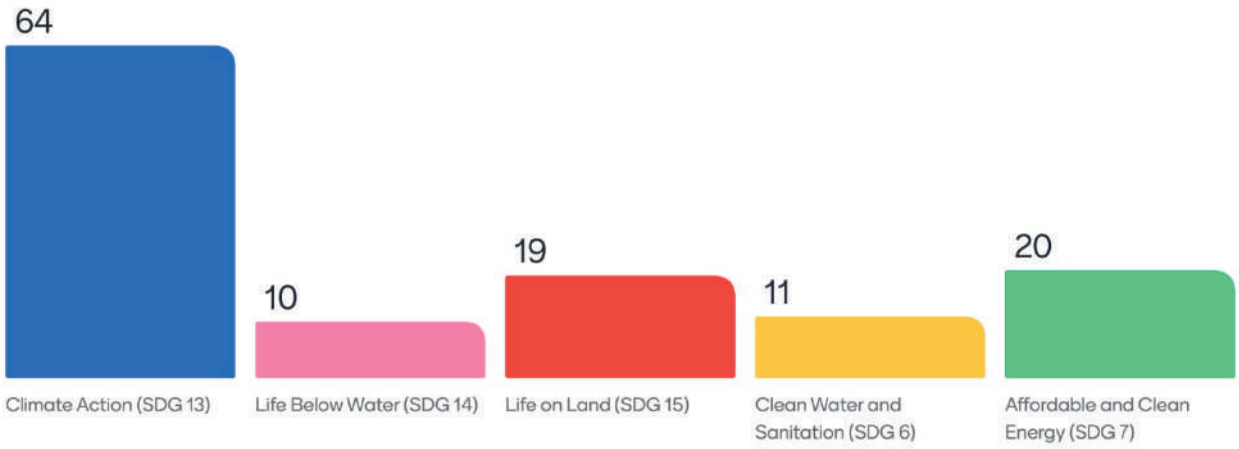


The polls below capture where participants stood on some of the big questions in sustainability. **Read the results and consider: how do these compare to what you think?**

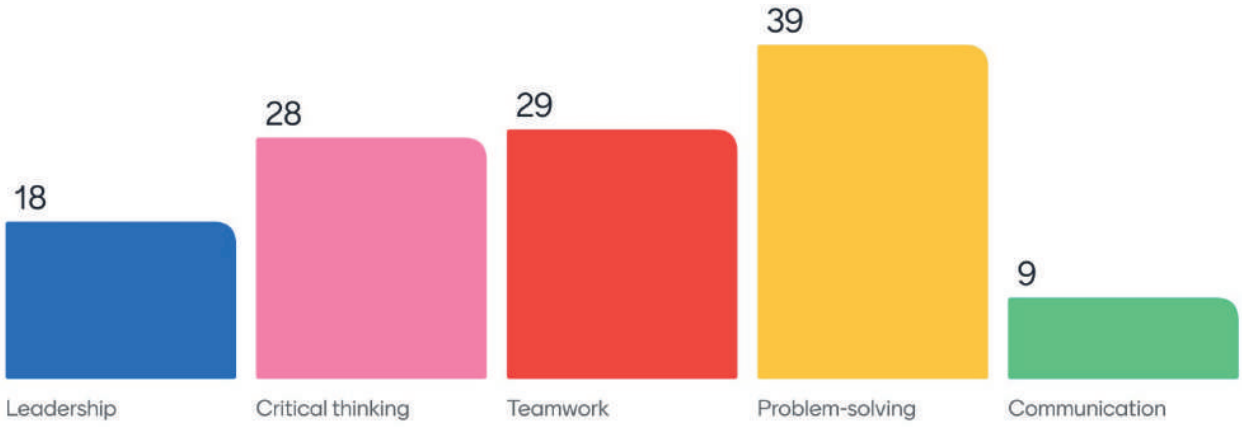
Poll 1 What do you think is the biggest environmental challenge we face today?



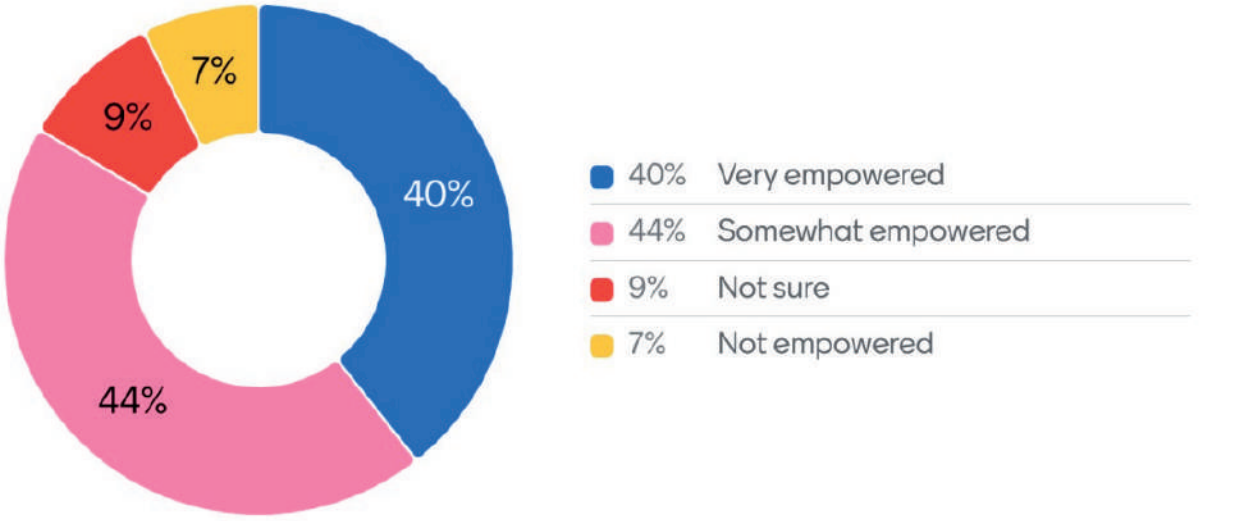
Poll 2 **Which Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) do you feel most connected to?**



Poll 3 **In your opinion, what's the most important skill for young people to make an impact on sustainability?**



Poll 4 **How empowered do you feel to make a difference in your community on environmental issues?**



Participants were asked the question "**What actions can young people take to support environmental sustainability in their homes, schools and communities?**" Some of the responses are displayed below.

"I believe that agreeing with each other and accepting that there is a problem is the first step to environmental sustainability. Solving the problem is the next step on the path."

"In my opinion, the youth's mindset plays a huge role. We cannot make change without the right mindset — we should raise awareness and little by little bring the change into our lives."

"Eat local and seasonal food, manage your water footprint, adapt the 5Rs in your home, and lead eco campaigns in your school and community."

"Taking small steps can be influential and lead to the initiative of big steps. Getting one person at a time educated on environmental sustainability can lead to clubs being created, and more."

"Go out and collect trash with friends; propose sustainable projects at school; go outside to see how beautiful nature is — if we don't experience it, it'll be harder to love and save it."

"Young people can conserve energy and water at home, promote recycling, start eco-projects at school, and join community cleanups or tree planting. Advocating for green policies amplifies their impact."

"Organize yourselves, make a local group or join one that already exists. And get your mission clear."

"Go beyond recycling projects. Collect data on plastic use in your school and present the information to your administration and local city council to change policies on plastics."

Reflect on the Dialogue

ACTIVITY

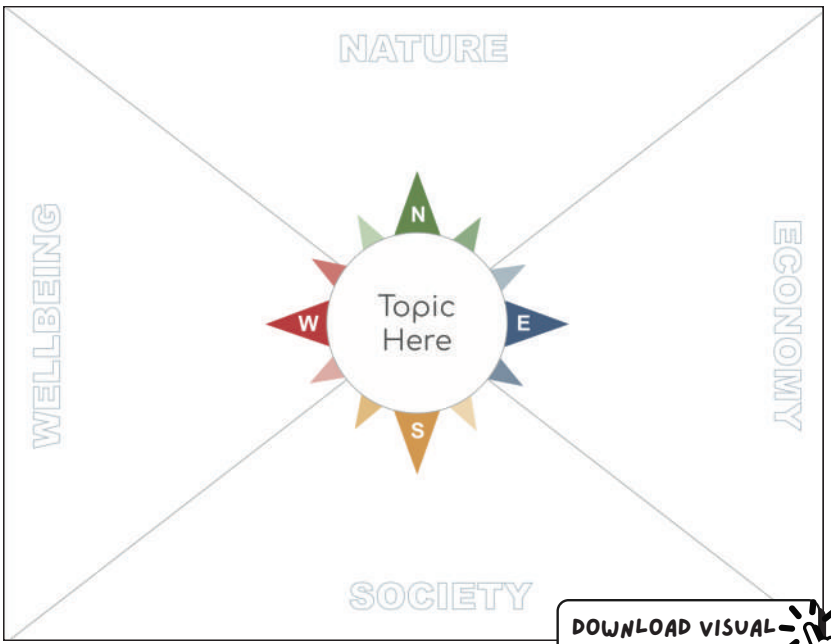
In this activity, learners use the **Sustainability Compass** as a reflection and conversation tool to examine interconnected aspects, diverse perspectives, and cause and effect relationships.

Goal: To help learners reflect critically on the shared dialogue.

Tool: Using the **Sustainability Compass**, students reflect on information gathered from four perspectives — Nature, Economy, Society, and Wellbeing — to think analytically and explore complexity. This can be used to create a shared understanding or definition of a concept or topic.

Example Cards:

Biodiveristy Conservation	Climate Change Mitigation
Renewable Energy	Circular Economy
Water Conservation	Sustainable Agriculture
Pollution Prevention	Air Pollution
Water Pollution	Soil Pollution
Noise Pollution	Light Pollution
Carbon Footprint	Environmental Justice
Sustainable Production and Consumption	



Classroom Process

- Gather important information, concepts, quotes, observations, questions, and/or thoughts. Write each idea on it's own card or sticky note.
- Sort the cards on the compass. If this is collaborative work, it might be helpful to place one card at a time and discuss. Using the Compass as a conversation tool to support visible thinking.
- Discuss relationships that you notice between elements. Draw arrows to show the connections between ideas.
- Have a look at the systems map you created. What do you notice?

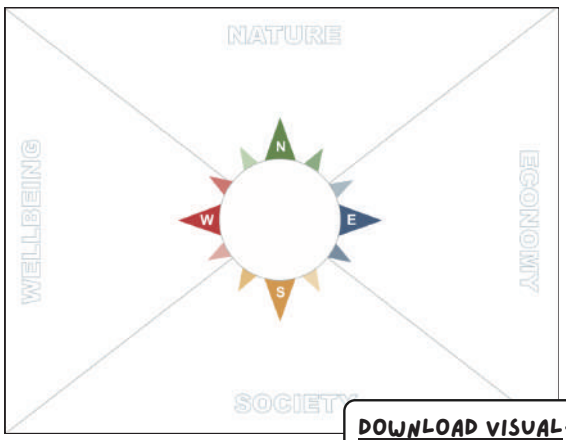
ACTIVITY

Trace the Patterns

In this activity, learners use the **Sustainability Compass** as a tool to research, investigate, and analyze current issues and events.

Goal: To support learners research issues and events.

Tool: Use the **Sustainability Compass** as a research tool to analyze a current event, news story, image, short story, or news clip focused on an environmental sustainability issue that you care about.



DOWNLOAD VISUAL

Classroom Process

- Decide on an article, story, image, or event that you'd like to research.
- Each small group or individual take the perspective of one Compass point.
- Dig deeper: Brainstorm research questions from your unique Compass point. Fill your own Compass point with information gathered.
- Think Big Picture: Have a look at the information gathered. Draw arrows to show the cause & effect connections between ideas. Feel free to draw arrows within and between Sustainability Compass points.
- Have a look at the systems map you created. What do you notice?

ACTIVITY 1

Go Below the Surface

In this activity, learners use the **Systems Iceberg** as a tool to discover what's happening below what's visible - helping us surface deeper levels of understanding, and identify where meaningful change can happen.

Goal: Learners will analyse a scenario to explore negative & positive peace within a school context and visualize systems that drive behavior from different levels.

Tool: The Systems Iceberg helps us evaluate an issue or event by examining the root causes, underlying structures, and mental models that can trigger it. Supporting learners in developing new perspectives and effective solutions.

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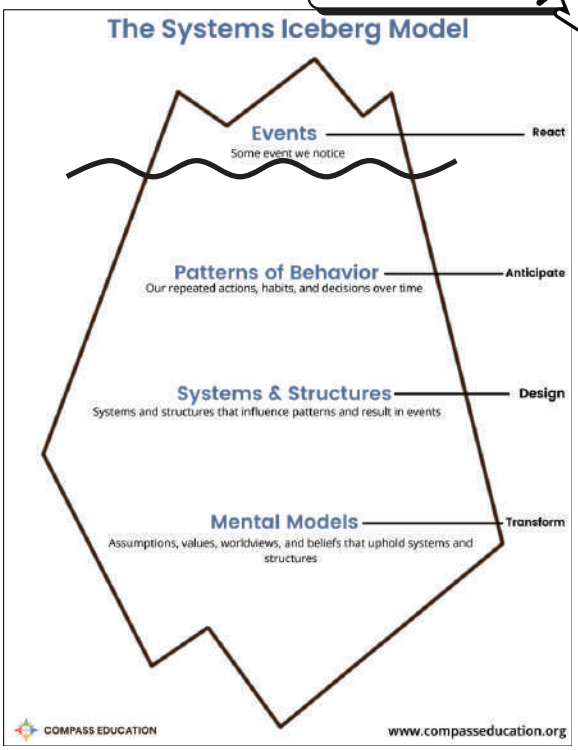


Example Cards:

Biodiveristy Conservation	Climate Change Mitigation
Renewable Energy	Circular Economy
Water Conservation	Sustainable Agriculture
Pollution Prevention	Air Pollution
Water Pollution	Soil Pollution
Noise Pollution	Light Pollution
Carbon Footprint	Environmental Justice
Sustainable Production and Consumption	

Classroom Process

- Read the Case Studies & place the sorting cards within the levels of the Iceberg where you feel they best belong. Take time to discuss and share perspectives. Feel free to create your own cards to add.
- Have a look at your Iceberg analysis. Where do you feel the students might have the most leverage to create sustainable (long-lasting) change? Why?
- What actions and habits might help them sustain positive change?

DISCOVER CONNECT TRANSFORM

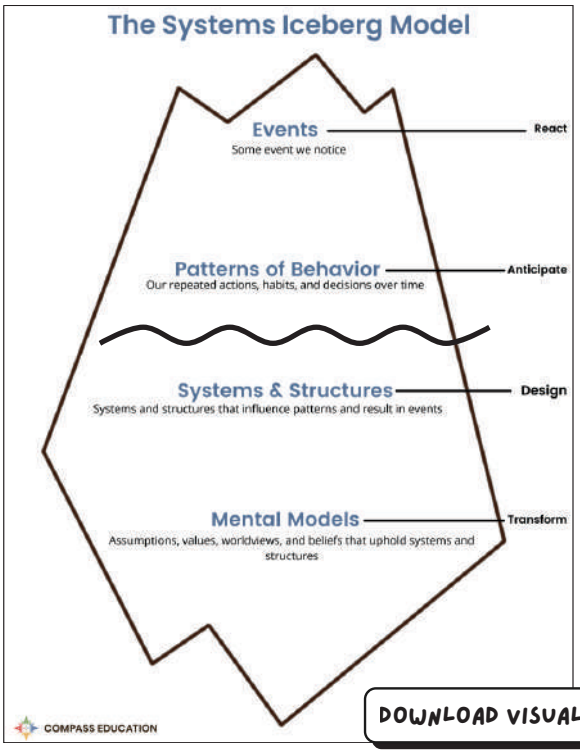
ACTIVITY 2

In this activity, learners use the **Systems Iceberg** as a tool to discover what's happening below what's visible. This helps us surface deeper levels of understanding and identify where we can create meaningful change.

Goal: Support learners to visualize systems that drive events from different levels.

Tool: The Systems Iceberg helps us evaluate an issue or event by examining the root causes, underlying structures, and mental models that can trigger it, supporting learners in developing new perspectives and effective solutions.

- **Events** → What's visible. Symptoms we see. (e.g., a peaceful protest).
- **Patterns** → Trends over time (e.g. increasing youth engagement in issues, use of social media).
- **Systems & Structures** → Systems that reinforce patterns (e.g. access to clean water).
- **Mental Models** → Ways of thinking, beliefs, or assumptions (e.g.,"It's my responsibility to speak out and take action" or "We are all in this together").



Example:

- Soil pollution
  - "Healthy soil is essential to life."
  - "I can impact the quality of soil in my community."
  - "Soil is natural; not just a man made product in the store."
  - "My actions impact the local soil quality."

Ocean CleanUp Case Study

Classroom Process

- Identify an event or issue you'd like to investigate, and/or might like to take action for positive change within your own context.
- Using the resources gathered, place identified drivers within the levels of the Iceberg where you feel they best belong. Take time to discuss and share perspectives.
- Have a look at your Iceberg analysis. Where do you feel you have leverage to create change within your own relationships, groups, schools, and/or communities? Influencing change at any level below the "water" can have an important impact. What actions could you take to create change at multiple levels?

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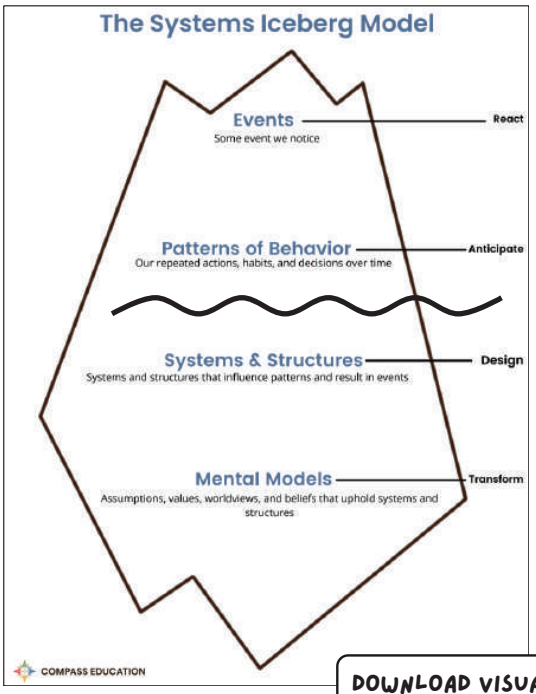
ACTIVITY 3

"What mindsets, beliefs, values could we hold in our community if we believe it's important to address environmental sustainability?" In this activity, learners use the **Systems Iceberg** as a tool to thoughtfully and intentionally create meaningful change and maximize positive impact.

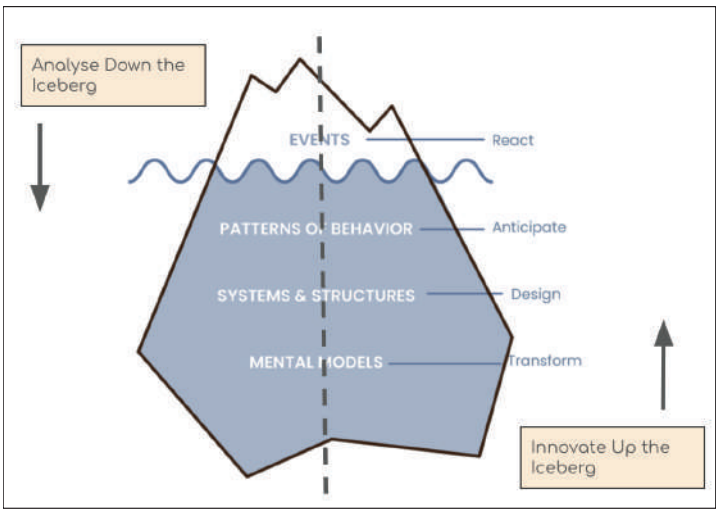
Goal: Support learners to identify areas in which they can take meaningful action to create positive change.

Tool: The Systems Iceberg supports learners in investigating the depth of an issue and identifying meaningful and actionable solutions.



DOWNLOAD VISUAL

Down the Iceberg to Analyze an Issue or Event, Up the Iceberg to Innovate for Positive Change



Classroom Process

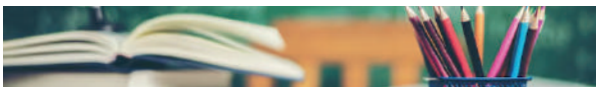
- Identify an event or issue you'd like to investigate, and/or might like to take action for positive change within your own context.
- Analyze the issue/event by going down the Iceberg.
- Consider: As we deepen our understanding we can work our way up the iceberg to innovate new ideas, sustainable solutions, and identify opportunities & actions we can take ourselves to create & influence positive change.
- Discuss: If mental models or structures changed, how would patterns and events shift?
- Reflect: Which level(s) of the iceberg do you think you have the greatest power to impact? How does that change across different contexts?
- Share: "Every sustainable action you take – whether it's using less plastic, voting in elections, or speaking up for the environment helps create a safer, more resilient world for us all." - What is something you think all youth should know about taking action for environmental sustainability?

Take Action

This section includes ideas for action and a global social media challenge you can participate in.

Pathways for Action

Sustainable development and environmentalism requires action at every level. Young people, in particular, have the energy, creativity, and commitment to drive meaningful change. By promoting dialogue, advocating for the environment, and connecting with global youth movements, learners can take practical steps toward advancing environmental sustainability in their own communities and beyond.



Raising Awareness and Education

Environmental sustainability and climate action begins with education. Take steps to educate yourself in current climate issues.

Ideas for action:

- Organize or attend environmental sustainability clubs in your school or community.
- Launch peer-led workshops on local environmental orgzanizations and efforts.
- Use digital platforms to share stories of sustainable practices.

Advocate for Peace and Justice

Systemic change depends on youth voices being heard by decision-makers.

Ideas for action:

- Write letters or petitions to local representatives on youth priorities.
- Participate in Model UN or youth councils to practice diplomacy and advocacy.
- Campaign online for SDG 13: Climate Action.

Be a Concious Consumer

Consume products conciously and try to buy second-hand items. Refurbish and repurpose products.

Ideas for action:

- Research companies and products before you buy them.
- Go thrifting and learn how to sew.
- Encourage others to think about their consumption habits.

Use Arts, Media, and Sports for Environmental Sustainability

Creative expression and sports are powerful tools to connect diverse groups and promote cooperation.

Ideas for action:

- Create murals, performances, or exhibitions.
- Host sports tournaments that bring together youth from different backgrounds.
- Produce short videos, podcasts, or social media campaigns about environmental sustainability.

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ACTIVITY

Social Media Challenge #OurVoiceOurPower

Task: In small groups, create a simple social media campaign on a global issue linked to the SDGs.

Goal: Decide what your post aims to do, e.g. raise awareness, share a solution, or showcase an action.

Platform & Permissions: Post from a school/club/NGO account if possible (or a dedicated class account). Choose an age-appropriate platform and follow school/parent consent rules.

Tagging: Tag "Ages of Globalization" and "Global Schools Program". Use #UNatYourDoorstep and #OurVoiceOurPower.

Quality & Safety: Be respectful, fact-based, and visually clear.

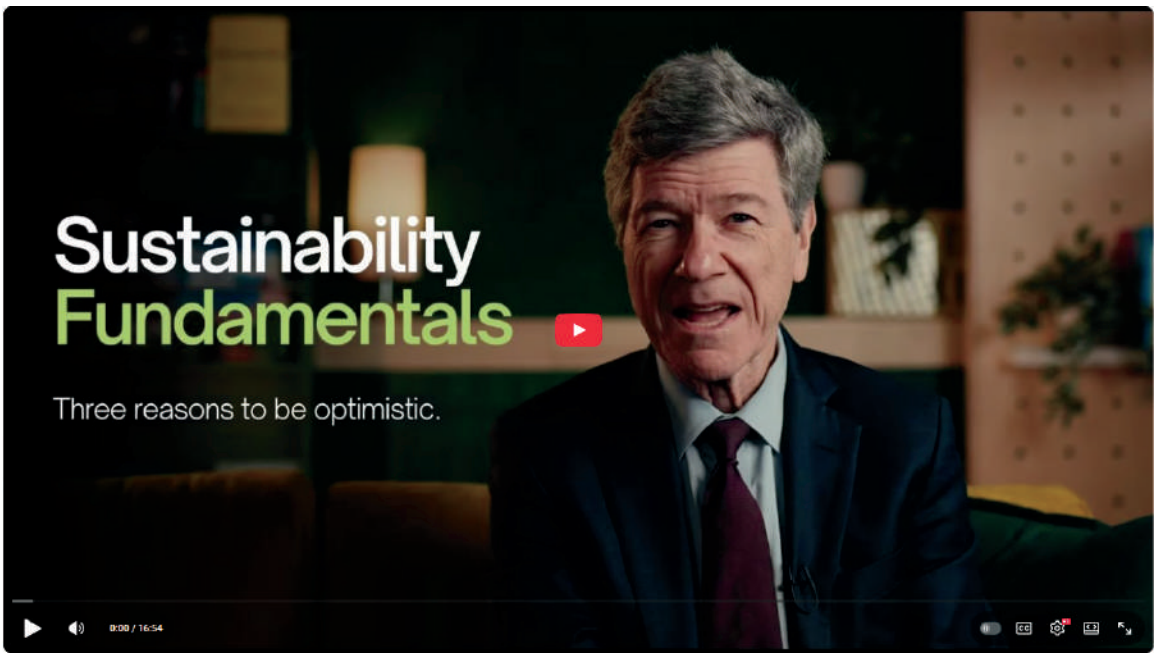
Timeline: The campaign runs until June 2026.

No social media? Share internally via your class blog, posters, video reels shown in class, or exchange with a partner classroom.

THE MOST-LIKED POSTS WILL BE AMPLIFIED

Ages of Globalization:

Global Schools Program:



Watch this video by Professor Jeffrey Sachs to understand the importance of the SDGs, why they offer hope for the future, and how we can all take action to achieve them.

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Social Media Challenge Planning Template

DOWNLOAD THE TEMPLATE!

Form a Team & Choose Your Topic
Working in small groups is ideal for brainstorming and building on each other's ideas. Take a look at the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), pick an issue/SDG(s) you are passionate about, propose a solution or share information, solutions and actions. Research and discuss it with your peers, educator(s), and families. Understand different perspectives and think about what message(s) you want to share using research, facts, and statistics.

Set Your Goals
Think about what you want to accomplish with your post(s). Do you aim to:

- Raise awareness about an issue?
- Share your thoughts or solutions?
- Encourage others to take action or share their own perspectives?

Choose Your Platform
Ask your instructor if you can use your school's/club/community/NGO social media account(s) or if you can create a dedicated account for your post(s). Will you be using Instagram, Twitter, TikTok, or Facebook? Make sure you know how to navigate the platforms effectively and safely.

Creating Your Content
Length & Format: What type of content are you creating (e.g., a short video, a photo series, a written post)? Keep your message positive, respectful, and impactful. Aim to inspire and connect with others.
Visuals: Create eye-catching visuals, e.g. by creating a free https://www.canva.com/ account. Whether it's a photo, a graphic, or a video, make sure it supports your message.
Hashtags & Tags: Use the campaign's official hashtags: #OurVoiceOurPower for the #SDGs and your unique hashtag(s). Don't forget to tag the official accounts @Ages of Globalisation (LinkedIn, Facebook and Instagram) and @Global Schools Program (LinkedIn, Facebook, Instagram, X/Twitter).

Posting Your Content
Are you posting from your school/club/community/NGO account or your personal account? Make sure your post's privacy settings are appropriate. Discuss with your teacher or parents if you're unsure.

Engage with Others
Engage with other posts in the campaign by liking, commenting, or re-sharing them. Show support, ask questions, and start conversations!
Keep track of how your post is doing. Respond to comments and thank people for their support.

Reflect on Your Experience
After posting, think about the impact of your contribution. How did it make you feel? What did you learn? Share your experience with others. What worked well? What could you improve next time?

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Reflect & Review

In this section, we offer suggestions to review and assess learners' understanding and engagement with the topic and the activities in this module. The focus is on evaluating grasp of background information, participation in activities, and the ability to propose actionable, youth-led solutions. We also encourage educators to celebrate learners' accomplishments and growth.

Guiding Questions

- **Background Understanding**: Did learners demonstrate a clear understanding of key concepts related to environmental sustainability (e.g., different forms of pollution, climate change mitigation, sustainable consumption and production, circular economy, environmental justice, links to SDG 13)?
- **Research Accuracy**: Are the responses in the Learner Research Worksheet accurate and reflective of a deep understanding of local and global sustainability practices? Did students use credible sources (e.g., UN agencies, national statistics, reputable NGOs/research institutes)?
- **Community Insight**: Did learners effectively investigate how their school's or community's approach to environmental sustainability? Assess the quality of observations and the feasibility of proposed improvements (e.g.,practices to reduce individual carbon footprint, how to increase sustainable consumption, environmental justice activism).
- **Discussion Participation**: How actively did students participate in dialogue and debate on environmental sustainability? Look for engagement, critical thinking, respectful listening, and the ability to connect root causes to environmental impacts (ecosystem degradation impacts on food and water supples, economies, migration patterns, climate stress) to real contexts.
- **Activity Engagement**: Did learners effectively use systems tools (e.g., stakeholder mapping, Compass, Iceberg) to analyze drivers of environmental pollution and identify leverage points (policy change, partnerships, youth initiatives)? Evaluate how well they linked actions to SDG 13 and environmental sustainability.
- **Social Media Challenge / Action Outputs**: Evaluate the creativity, relevance, and impact of students' environmental sustainability posts or action concepts. Did they raise awareness, propose practical steps, cite evidence, and use campaign tags appropriately?

DISCOVER CONNECT TRANSFORM

Ideas for Assessment Methods

📝 Quizzes

- What are the different forms of pollution and how can they be prevented/mitigated?
- What is the circular economy and how does it differ from the traditional (linear) economy?
- Give one example of a sustainable development practice and describe how it works.
- What is a carbon footprint and how was it weaponized by large cooperations?
- List two indicators associated with SDG 13.
- Identify two environmental issues in your context and one potential leverage point for each.

🗣️ Presentations & Group Discussion

Have learners present findings from their Country or School/Community research and facilitate discussion:

- "How does the circular economy work and what steps can we take to transition to it from the traditional linear economy?"
- "Do companies and industries have a duty to care for the environment? What actions can they take to do this?"
- "Biodiversity Conservation: Why It Matters"
- "How collaboration among stakeholders (government, consumers, producers, civil society, media/ tech, youth) can promote environmentalism."

🧭 Activity Reports on Systems Tools

- Review learners' Compass/Iceberg mapping. Assess clarity of cause–effect pathways, quality of evidence, identification of leverage points.

✍️ Reflection Essays

- Identify three key action areas for environmental sustainability. How can these be implemented in your own community?
- Explain how disinformation erodes trust in science and contributes to disbelief in climate change. How does this exacerbate the problems caused by climate change?
- Investigate one case of environmental injustice and propose a plan to mitigate this.
- Map the stakeholders for one issue (e.g., climate change, pollution, loss of biodiversity) and describe a partnership strategy.

🤝 Self-Assessment & Peer Feedback

Invite short reflections and pair with a simple peer rubric focusing on accuracy, empathy, systems thinking, and feasibility of actions.

- One belief I changed about environmental sustainability is…
- One practice our school could adopt to reduce waste is…
- One partnership we need (and why) is…

📱 Social Media Campaign Impact

- Track engagement. Consider clarity of message, ethical framing, accuracy, constructive tone, and clear call to action.

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