



ProPeace

# Environmental Peacebuilding

Youth-Led Research in Kosovo on Environment and Wellbeing

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# Introduction

## Exploring youth and environment

Kosovo continues to navigate complex post-conflict dynamics while facing increasing environmental and climate-related pressures. Air pollution, water stress, unmanaged waste, land degradation, and limited wastewater treatment affect communities across the country and have become everyday concerns for many residents. While these challenges are often approached as technical or environmental issues, they also carry clear social and peacebuilding implications. Environmental degradation affects health, livelihoods, trust in institutions, and relations between communities.

This research positions the environment as a neutral and inclusive entry point for peacebuilding and youth engagement. Environmental risks cross ethnic, political, and geographic divides, affecting Albanian, Serb, and other communities alike. In a context where interethnic relations remain sensitive, shared environmental concerns offer rare opportunities for dialogue, cooperation, and joint problem-solving. The study focuses on young people as key actors, recognising both their vulnerability to environmental and mental health stressors and their potential role as bridge builders within divided communities.

The research was conducted as part of a youth-led peacebuilding initiative implemented by a peacebuilding organization Pro Peace in partnership with SIT, a local organisation. It aims to understand how environmental challenges contribute to social tension and how youth engagement around environmental and mental wellbeing issues can support social cohesion and interethnic dialogue. Data was collected through surveys, interviews, and four (4) focus group discussions. This included two online surveys with 150 young people, face-to-face tablet surveys with stakeholders participants, in-depth interviews with community members, institutions, and international actors, structured questionnaires with 12 institutional representatives, and four focus groups involving 28 youth and community members.

Perceived seriousness of environmental problems in youth communities (45% very serious, 34.4% serious, 11.3% not serious).

# Context and Background

## Environmental and Climate Context

Kosovo faces multiple environmental challenges, including poor air quality, increasing heat extremes, water stress, polluted rivers, unsanitary landfills, and limited wastewater treatment. These pressures are compounded by climate change and weak municipal service capacity in many areas. Rural communities and minority-populated areas are often more exposed due to limited infrastructure and investment.

**Top three environmental challenges ranked by youth: 32.4% waste management, 20.6% air pollution, 20.6% water pollution.**

The legacy of the 1990s conflict further complicates environmental management. Landmines and explosive remnants of war continue to restrict safe land use in some areas, limiting agriculture, grazing, and community development. Environmental degradation in these contexts reinforces vulnerability and a sense of abandonment.



# Context and Background

## Historical Relationship Between Communities and the Environment

During the Yugoslav period and throughout the 1990s, many communities in Kosovo relied heavily on land and natural resources due to economic exclusion and limited access to public services. Following the war, large-scale internal migration from rural areas to urban centres reduced local stewardship of land and weakened traditional environmental management practices. This shift contributed to environmental degradation, particularly in rural and peripheral areas where fewer residents remain to advocate for services or protection.

### Environment, Mental Wellbeing, and Social Tension

Environmental stressors directly affect mental wellbeing. Interviewees frequently linked pollution, unsafe water, and unmanaged waste to anxiety, feelings of insecurity, and frustration. When environmental harm is perceived as uneven or neglected, it can deepen mistrust between communities and institutions and, in some cases, between ethnic groups. These dynamics position environmental issues as both a source of tension and a potential entry point for peacebuilding.

Regarding environmental conflicts, 16.6% of young people stated that they had witnessed environmental disputes or conflicts, while 83.4% reported that they had not experienced such situations.

**Agreement with statements about environmental challenges (38.5% frustration, 30.8% tension, 23.1% youth role, 7.7% community action).**  
**Youth witnessing environmental disputes/conflicts (16.6% yes, 83.4% no).**

# Research Objectives and Questions

## The research aimed to:

- Understand how environmental challenges affect daily life, wellbeing, and perceptions of fairness across communities.
- Explore how environmental issues contribute to internal and interethnic tensions.
- Examine young people's perceptions, roles, and capacities in addressing environmental and social challenges.
- Identify opportunities for using environmental engagement as a tool for peacebuilding
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## Key research questions included:

1. How do different communities experience environmental challenges in Kosovo?
2. How are environmental issues linked to social tension, trust, and interethnic relations?
3. How do young people perceive their role in addressing environmental and mental wellbeing challenges?
4. How can youth-led environmental action contribute to peacebuilding and social cohesion?

- Pjesëmarrja e të rinjve në aktivitete të lidhura me mjedisin dhe/ose ndërtimin e paqes (76.85 po, 23.3% jo).
- Motivimet kryesore për angazhim mjedisor kanë qenë: shëndeti (72.8%), mbrojtja e mjedisit (70.9%), mirëqenia e komunitetit (37.1%), drejtësia sociale (12.6%) dhe mundësitë ekonomike (11.3%).
- Pengesa në angazhimin e të rinjve: mungesa e njohurive 53.6%, mungesa e mundësive 41.1%, mbështetja e kufizuar nga autoritetet 39.1%, mungesa e fondeve 31.8%.

# Methodology

This study used a qualitative, participatory research approach led by young people, combining qualitative and quantitative tools to capture diverse perspectives.

## Data Collection Methods

- **Key Informant Interviews:** Conducted with municipal representatives, embassies, INGOs, environmental experts, civil society actors, and community leaders.
- **Focus Group Discussions:** Held with young people from different ethnic backgrounds in multiple locations, including mixed and ethnically diverse areas.
- **Semi-structured Interviews:** Conducted with community members affected by environmental challenges.
- **Youth Questionnaire (online):** Distributed to young people to capture broader perceptions, awareness, and experiences related to environmental issues, mental wellbeing, and social relations.

The online youth questionnaire targeted youth groups, students, and community volunteers aged 14–29. Respondents were 67.3% male and 32.7% female, with 83.4% at high school level and 15.2% at university level. Participants represented a wide range of municipalities, with the highest participation from Prishtina and Mitrovica, reflecting both urban and post-conflict contexts

**Preferred youth-led projects: waste management 62.9%, tree-planting/greening 53.6%, awareness campaigns 27.2%, dialogue 26.5%, more parks/green spaces 2%, vaccination/control of animals 0.7%.**

## Sampling and Locations

Research activities were conducted in several municipalities, including Prishtina, Mitrovica, Gjilan, and Gjakova. Participants included Albanian, Serb, and other community members, with a particular focus on youth.

## Limitations

The research prioritised depth over representativeness. Findings reflect perceptions and lived experiences rather than statistically generalisable data. However, consistency across methods strengthens the validity of the findings.

# Findings

## Environmental Challenges as Shared Concerns

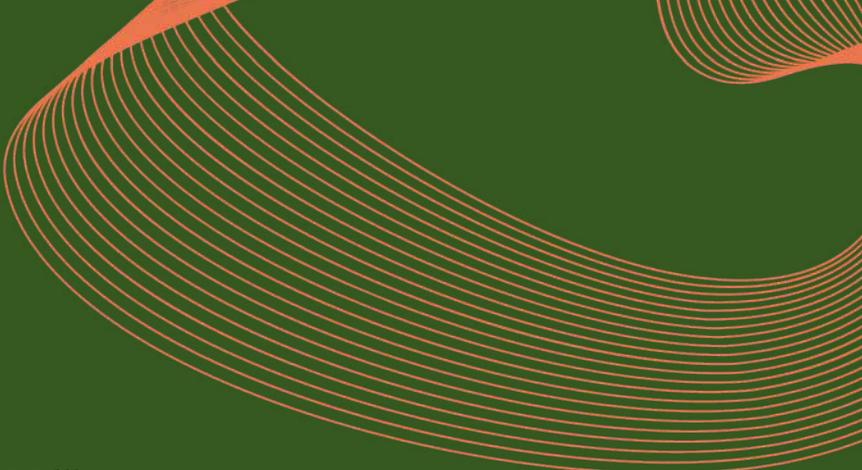
Across interviews, FGDs, and questionnaires, participants consistently identified pollution, waste management, air quality, and water pollution as major concerns.

Overall, the findings indicate that environmental degradation generates frustration and strained relations with authorities, yet also highlights untapped potential for youth leadership in addressing environmental challenges amid limited community engagement. These findings illustrate that pollution and poor waste management are the main sources of frustration (38.5%), followed by perceptions that environmental problems cause tension with authorities (30.8%). While 23.1% believe youth can play a key role, only 7.7% feel that their community actively protects the environment.

## Unequal Impact and Perceived Neglect

While environmental challenges are widely shared, their impacts are not evenly distributed. Participants from rural and minority communities reported weaker municipal services, limited institutional response, and higher exposure to environmental risks.

**Ranking of three most pressing environmental challenges: waste management 32.4%, air pollution 20.6%, water pollution 20.6%, industrial contamination 11.8%, floods/droughts 8.8%.**



## Environmental Stress and Mental Wellbeing

Environmental degradation was closely linked to stress, anxiety, and feelings of insecurity.

Participants consistently linked environmental neglect to negative impacts on mental health, including psychological stress, frustration, and reduced enjoyment of public and educational spaces. These effects were seen as contributing to social tension and strained interpersonal relationships within schools and communities. In this context, participants emphasized that recycling widely practiced in developed countries, should be adopted early and consistently as a practical step toward improving environmental conditions and wellbeing. Poorly maintained and gloomy school environments, particularly in technical schools, were highlighted as further undermining morale, increasing irritability, and diminishing overall wellbeing.

## Environment and Interethnic Relations

Environmental issues were frequently described as one of the few areas where interethnic cooperation feels possible.

The participants and young people emphasized that environmental issues are widely recognized as shared concerns that cut across ethnic and social divisions. Because pollution, waste, and water quality ultimately affect all communities, environmental protection was seen as a relatively neutral and non-politicized entry point for dialogue, collective action, and peacebuilding provided that existing inequalities in exposure and access are openly acknowledged and addressed.

## **Youth Agency, Participation, and Exclusion**

Youth respondents expressed strong motivation to address environmental issues and recognised their potential role as change agents.

- **Agreement with statements on climate hazards, environmental degradation, and institutional action.**

### Discussion: Environment as a Tool for Peacebuilding

The findings demonstrate that environmental challenges act simultaneously as stressors and opportunities. When unmanaged, they fuel frustration, mistrust, and social tension. When approached collaboratively, they offer a neutral and inclusive platform for engagement. Youth-led environmental research and action enable young people from different backgrounds to work together on shared concerns, shifting attention away from identity-based divisions toward collective responsibility.

Integrating mental wellbeing into environmental engagement strengthens empathy, recognition, and trust. Engagement with municipalities and institutions further supports accountability and vertical trust.

- Communities or sectors most affected by environmental issues: rural, urban, minority, youth, industrial areas.
- Institutional strategy/budget for environmental adaptation: 6 yes, 5 no.
- Coordination ratings with other institutions, civil society, donors, local communities.
- Main obstacles to effective environmental management: funding 81.8%, low political priority 81.8%, lack of technical capacity 45.5%, poor coordination 45.5%, low public awareness 36.4%.
- Frequency of environmental disputes: occasionally 45.5%, often 27.3%, rarely 18.2%, very rarely 9.1%.
- Issues generating most tension: waste/landfills 72.7%, unequal services 54.5%, water access 45.5%, land use 45.5%, factory pollution 27.3%.
- Institution involvement in environmental disputes: 6 yes, 5 no.
- Public awareness rating: generally limited.
- Support needed to strengthen institutional environmental response: funding 81.8%, training 54.5%, coordination 45.5%, technical expertise 45.5%, public engagement 27.3%.

### Quotes

- “We see pollution every day, but we do not see real action from institutions.”
- “Air quality affects our health and daily life, especially during winter.”
- “There are many environmental laws, but they are not implemented on the ground.”
- “Young people want to contribute, but there are no concrete opportunities or support.”
- “Environmental problems are discussed often, but responsibility is always shifted.”
- “Every time it snows, the white snow quickly turns brown, showing the level of air pollution.”
- “There is only one planet. Protecting it is our shared duty.”<sup>8</sup>

### Conclusions

## Conclusions

Environmental challenges in Kosovo are deeply intertwined with social cohesion and peacebuilding. Pollution, water stress, and environmental neglect affect mental wellbeing and trust, particularly among young people and minority communities. At the same time, these shared challenges create opportunities for interethnic dialogue and cooperation when framed through an environmental peacebuilding lens.

Youth-led engagement that connects environment and mental health can strengthen social cohesion, foster cross-community relationships, and support more inclusive decision-making processes.

## Recommendations

- Support youth-led environmental initiatives as confidence-building and peacebuilding measures.
- Integrate mental wellbeing into environmental programming and policy.
- Create inclusive platforms for interethnic youth dialogue around environmental issues.
- Strengthen cooperation between youth, municipalities, and civil society.
- Prioritise environmentally vulnerable and marginalised communities in policy and practice

# RESEACH

This report was made possible by the Pro Peace in Kosovo. The content of this report is the sole responsibility of SIT - Center for Counseling, Social Service and Research. It does not necessarily reflect the views of Pro Peace in Kosovo.



This research was conducted by a group of more than 30 young researchers representing four cities across Kosovo. The research process was led by Kadri Gashi, Chief Executive Officer of SIT – Center for Counseling, Social Services and Research, and Wesam Al Mubarak, Project Manager at Pro Peace Kosovo. The youth researchers were actively engaged throughout all stages of the study, including data collection, analysis, and reflection, contributing diverse local perspectives and ensuring the research is grounded in community-level experiences.

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