

**Interreg
Danube Region**



Co-funded by
the European Union


DANURELY -WS

Youth Involvement in Water Management in the Danube Region

STATE OF THE ART REPORT

AUTHORS: Primoz Skrt – GWP CEE and Alzbeta Sochanova – GWP CEE

CONTRIBUTORS: Dejan Komatina, Ágnes Kovács, Ágota Patyik,
László Balatonyi, Tamás Pálvölgyi (L-UPS)
Andrea Vranovská, Dana Vrblíková (WRI)
Marijana Petrovic, Vladislav Maras (FTTE)

Document Content

1	Introduction Youth and Water Management	2
2	Stakeholder group Who are we addressing	3
3	Challenges Status quo of the situation	5
4	Voices from the Region Interviews with experts	13
5	What Youth Thinks? Survey among youth	16
6	Mapping of Existing Initiatives Detailed overview of projects, organizations	18
7	Conclusions Main take aways and next steps	21
8	References List of used resources	23

Introduction

This report presents a state-of-the-art analysis of youth engagement in water management in the Danube Region, with a focus on identifying existing good practices, gaps, challenges, and possible opportunities for the better involvement in the future. It targets young people aged 16–37, including current and future students, young professionals, researchers, postgraduates, and active young citizens. Understanding the specific challenges and needs of this group is essential for designing effective tools, capacity-building measures, and/or new transnational initiatives that empower youth as active contributors to water sustainability.

The analysis addresses four major challenges: (1) limited knowledge and awareness of water-related issues among youth, **(2)** lack of skills for resilient water management and intergenerational learning, **(3)** low inclusivity and limited leadership opportunities, and **(4)** a persistent communication gap between generations and institutions.

This report is produced in the framework of the DANURELY-WS Seed Money Facility project (Interreg Danube Region Programme), which explores funding opportunities and lays the groundwork for a larger transnational project focused on strengthening youth engagement in the water sector. The methodology combines (1) desk research (reviewing current initiatives, sources, data and youth engagement models), (2) an online youth survey carried out across the youth in the Danube countries, and (3) expert interviews. Particular attention was given to youth-led or youth-focused actions in the region and lessons learned from key regional stakeholders such as the International Commission for the Protection of the Danube River (ICPDR), the EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR), International Association of Water Service Companies in the Danube River Catchment Area and existing initiatives such as Danube Youth Organisations Network, Danube Youth Council, European Youth Parliament for Water, Young Water Professionals Network, Sava Youth Parliament, and others.

Covering the full geographical scope of the Danube Region, this report maps the existing landscape of youth involvement in water governance, highlights key barriers and enabling conditions, and showcases existing practices to inform future strategic planning and project development.

Understanding the needs, challenges, and expectations of young people is essential for designing impactful solutions and securing targeted funding for their engagement in water management. Strengthening cooperation across sectors, borders, and generations can unlock the potential of youth as drivers of innovation, sustainability, and resilience. As the water sector faces growing capacity gaps, involving and empowering young people is not only a strategic priority — it is a necessity for the sector's future.

Target groups

Youth Aged 16–37

The primary target group of the analysis conducted within the DANURELY-WS project is young people aged 16 to 37 across the Danube Region, including:

- **Students** (secondary, vocational, and tertiary level), particularly those studying environmental sciences, geography, hydrology, hydrogeology and related fields.
- **Young professionals and early-career experts** in the water and environmental sectors, including those working in utilities, research institutions, NGOs, and local, national and international authorities.
- **Young researchers and postgraduates**, who represent a key knowledge and innovation pool but often lack opportunities to influence policy or co-develop solutions.
- **Active young citizens**, including members of youth councils, volunteers, and climate activists, who are interested in sustainable and climate-resilient water management but may lack structured ways to participate in formal governance.

This group is often underrepresented in decision-making, faces limited access to training or funding, and is affected by low awareness of career pathways in the water sector. The project aims to respond to their challenges, build capacity, and enhance their long-term engagement.

Educational Organizations

The analysis targets:

- **Secondary schools, vocational training institutions, and universities** involved in environmental education, sustainable development, geography, water management, and climate-related curricula.
- **Research centres and university networks** (e.g., Danube Rectors' Conference) that support interdisciplinary training and mobility across the region.

These institutions play a key role in shaping knowledge, values, and career choices related to water management. However, many educational programs offer limited coverage of integrated water topics or opportunities for student involvement in real-world water projects. There is a need to

strengthen cooperation with these institutions by integrating youth engagement tools and citizen science approaches into curricula and extra-curricular activities.

Organizations Working with Youth

This includes:

- **Youth NGOs, associations, and student unions** active in environmental, civic, or community engagement (e.g., European Geography Association, YOUNGO chapters, climate hubs).
- **Regional and national youth platforms and initiatives**, such as the Danube Youth Council, Danube Youth Organisations Network, Sava Youth Parliament, and Erasmus+ alumni groups.
- **Intermediary and support organizations** that provide training, mobility, mentoring, and funding for youth participation (e.g., Erasmus+ National Agencies, Eurodesk, and local youth info points).

These actors are key for outreach, facilitation of local focus groups, and piloting of tools and activities. Their involvement ensures that the future large-scale project will build on existing networks, to reach diverse youth audiences, and create synergies with ongoing youth initiatives across the region.



Photo 1: Participants at DANURELY-WS roundtable in Bratislava – November 2024 (Source: GWP CEE)

Main Challenges

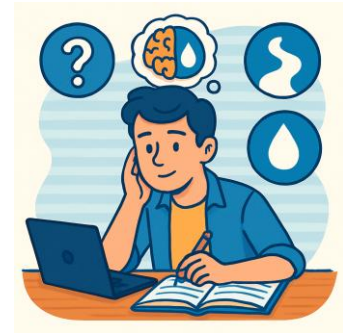
A structured analysis reveals four main challenges limiting effective youth engagement in water management across the Danube Region. These challenges were already defined in the proposal preparatory stage and were further investigated through desk research, prior studies, and stakeholder initiatives, but also some inputs received during the DANURELY-WS stakeholder exchanges.

Photo 2: Brainstorming at DANURELY-WS roundtable in Bratislava – November 2024 (Source: GWP CEE)



Knowledge and Awareness

STATUS QUO: "Youth lack awareness of water-related issues and water role in sustainability. Water security is partially tackled by formal and informal education. Youth age groups have differing skills and knowledge needs. Youth is unsure in leading sustainable initiatives. They do not choose water management career, and the sector is facing serious lack of capacities."



Many young people report **low awareness** of the complexity of water-related issues and their role in environmental sustainability. A study in Hungary (EUSDR PA4, 2023) found that while youth show concern for climate change, only half are strongly interested in water protection, and many feel access to credible information is inadequate ([Source](#)). This gap in awareness leaves many youths uncertain about how water challenges connect to their daily lives and future careers.

The survey conducted by the Ludovika University of Public Service (LUPS) within the DANURELY-WS project reveals that, while young generations are sensitive to the water crisis, their knowledge is incomplete, and they are highly dissatisfied with governmental communication. However, they are open to experiential, visual, and interactive communication formats. Future water communication efforts must consider:

- The dominance of digital platforms (TikTok, YouTube, Instagram, Discord), often unfamiliar or unaccepted by older generations,
- The power of visual content – images, videos, emojis, memes – over text,
- The importance of real-time, interactive content, often shaped by audiences (e.g. live reactions, polls, comment debates), and
- The need for short, scrollable formats like 15-second videos, stories, and clips.

Results of the LUPS' survey clearly show that the younger generation's primary source of knowledge and information remains education – particularly formal education, meaning learning that takes place within the frameworks of primary, secondary, and higher education. This highlights the key role educational institutions play in laying the foundation for water-related knowledge and in fostering water awareness among future generations.

The results of survey conducted by [World Resources Institute](#) (WRI) showed that respondents highlighted the importance of improving knowledge of young generation by conducting local projects and initiatives stimulating young generation to learn more about specific topics and to create their own vision and opinion on the water management challenges under supervision, mentoring or consultations of professionals participating in Citizen Science activities allowing young generation to take part in scientific surveys (e.g. collecting information on invasive species of plants and animals in given locations, black dumps, barriers in streams), involving students in research projects to increase their motivation – to see directly the practical impact or improvement of the solution (e.g., cooperation with municipalities, water management authorities or research

institutions) and enabling young generation to take part in summer schools and international exchange to learn about different approaches, technologies and policy contexts as well as to gather skills for collaborative work and broader perspectives on water sustainability (e.g., within Erasmus+ or COST networks), workshops, conferences and networking events to improve communication skills and keeping them informed about the latest trends, innovations and challenges competitions focused on various water management related topics.

The survey results suggest that, in addition to knowledge, practical skills and tangible results in the field of sustainable water management could motivate the younger generation to get involved and work in this field: hands-on training and fieldwork providing students practical experience (e.g. groundwater monitoring, water sampling, GIS training, etc.)

However, educational systems unevenly address topics like water security and resource management, limiting students' exposure at school or university. Innovative programs exist (for example, Austria's Generation Blue youth water platform), but such comprehensive efforts are rare outside of single-country initiatives ([Source](#)). This insight is supported by the findings of the DANCERS project, which concluded that across the Danube Basin there is no coherent network for training in water management and sustainable development. While educational and mobility schemes exist, they lack coordination, and dedicated curricula at bachelor, master's, and doctoral levels are notably absent—highlighting limited exposure to integrated water management in formal education ([Source](#)).

As a result, **water-sector careers remain off the radar** for most youth. The lack of mainstream educational content on water management contributes to persistent skills shortages in utilities and water authorities, which struggle to attract new young talent ([Source](#)).

Therefore, it is not sufficient to rely solely on awareness-raising campaigns; there is a pressing need to comprehensively rethink educational curricula, integrating the topics, practical examples, and region-specific aspects of sustainable water management. This reform should not only take place at the national level, but at least at the river basin level, as water, by its very nature, does not recognize political or administrative boundaries. The shared future and water security of young people living in the Danube Basin can only be ensured if our systems of education and upbringing reflect this cross-border, collective responsibility.

The limited public and stakeholder familiarity with EU Cohesion Policy and Interreg programmes—even among politically active volunteers (e.g. Interreg Volunteer Youth)—reinforces the finding that the topic is not sufficiently addressed and promoted ([Source](#)).

Skills for Resilience & Intergenerational Learning

STATUS QUO: Green transition under worsening climate affects the integrated water management. New skills are required for sector transformation. Science and technology integration, inter-sectoral thinking, transdisciplinary and international exchange shall be fostered, while preserving and building on the practical experience and knowledge gained in the past. Meaningful intergenerational learning and targeted capacity building can bridge the gap between youth and sectors' employees.



Climate change and evolving water risks demand **new competencies**: digital tools, ecosystem-based thinking, cross-sector collaboration, fundraising skills and **transdisciplinary problem solving**. Education and capacity development are crucial to accelerate the development, adoption and institutionalization of more sustainable and equitable water management practices. They involve the sharing of knowledge and skills between teachers, students, institutions, SMEs and other relevant organizations ([Source](#)). Traditional curricula rarely equip youth with these skills. Cooperation between youth and experienced professionals is still weak: intergenerational knowledge transfer remains largely informal or absent, hindering mutual learning and mentorship opportunities.

Due to the aging population in all European countries and the brain drain of young people, the problem of knowledge transfer is even more pronounced. To ensure the continuity of information sharing by older generation is a fundamental condition for smooth functioning of the water sector. However, the older generation has to look for proper tools and ways of communication to be heard and accepted by younger generation.

This gap is also identified by Interreg Danube that addresses this through 3rd call - the SO3.2 is clearly stating the need to support Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVE) and build on the work of EUSDR PA9 – Danube Region Platform on Centres of Vocational Excellence ([Source](#)). Further on, the DANURELY-WS roundtable in Bratislava (Nov 2024) highlighted the need for capacity-building programmes and structured mentorship to bridge this gap.

Inclusivity and Leadership

STATUS QUO: Youth are not involved continuously and rarely can lead impactful initiatives affecting policies. Youth need to acquire skills for leading dialogues and facilitating development of joint projects. Progress achieved by establishing of the Danube Youth Council, shall be complemented by addressing institutional barriers, and strengthening youth-led initiatives in resource mobilisation.



Youth participation in policymaking has gained significant momentum in recent years yet remains in transition toward more institutionalized inclusion. A major milestone was achieved in 2022, when the **Danube Youth Council** was established (in 2024 it was granted observer status at the ICPDR - [Source](#)), allowing youth to contribute to discussions on river basin management and policy priorities.

Activities of the Danube Youth Council include:

- participation in EUSDR core governance meetings, to represent the viewpoints of the young generation and provide EUSDR stakeholders with advice and recommendations
- involvement in EUSDR Priority Areas
- active contribution to the EUSDR Annual Forum and other events/conferences
- collaboration with the respective EUSDR Presidency
- joint work on specific thematic issues relevant to the Danube Region, e.g. through the publication of papers/essays.

This progress is complemented by the growing **Danube Youth Organisation Network**, which fosters cross-border collaboration and representation of youth interests across the region ([Source](#)). In addition, the engagement and role of the youth from Danube countries in the activities of the European Youth Parliament for Water have seen a considerable increase over the last few years.

Despite these advances, opportunities for meaningful youth influence on water policy at the national and transnational level remain largely project-based or campaign-driven. Young voices are often heard during isolated consultations, but ongoing structural engagement, leadership development, and access to funding are still limited.

Insights from the DANURELY-WS roundtable underline the urgent need for mechanisms that support youth-led initiatives, enhance strategic resource mobilization, and ensure continuity beyond one-off events.

Similarly to the previous challenge, this one was also mentioned by the Interreg Danube Programme and youth engagement is clearly identified in the 3rd call under priority 4.

Bridging the Communication Gap

STATUS QUO: Bridging the communication gap is a recognized challenge, and recent surveys (e.g., EUSDR PA4, GWP CEE) showed how to communicate. Yet, the channels are not established, and content to be developed. Intergenerational communication with the generation Z, and both-side communication should be supported. Peer-to-peer exchanges and changemakers shall become part of in mainstreaming water issues.



Communication efforts to engage youth are **inconsistent and underdeveloped**. While platforms such as “Generation Blue” in Austria provide youth-friendly water education, coverage across the region is irregular and lacking systematic scale-up water quality. Most countries lack a dedicated youth water platform, resulting in limited outreach. Many young people still find information on water issues either too technical or not readily accessible, weakening their engagement.

A UNICEF/ETF regional poll (2024), spanning 14 countries including several Danube countries shows that nearly 48% of youth believe there are insufficient opportunities to express opinions on environmental and climate policies, and an additional 19% say they’re unaware of any platforms at all—totalling nearly 70% who feel excluded or uninformed around participation channels ([Source](#)).

According to the poll conducted by LUPS within the DANURELY-WS project, it is crucial to recognize that Generation Z (born between 1997 and 2012) and Generation Alpha (born after 2013) have been socialized in the digital age – a shift that has brought not only technological but also deep linguistic and cultural changes. One of the key characteristics of the digital era is that these generations – Gen Z as “digital natives” and Gen Alpha as “AI natives” – have created new linguistic and cultural codes. One defining element of this new code is **meme-based language**, which functions both as a marker of generational identity and as a tool for community-building. In the open-ended responses of the survey, terms such as “**sigma**” and “**skibidi**” appeared repeatedly, both of which are globally recognized parts of this emerging digital vocabulary.

It is important to understand that these expressions are not merely trendy or humorous slang; they reflect a **radically different communication logic** based on **visual culture and online community dynamics**, in contrast to the **linear, text-based communication styles** of older generations. “Sigma” originally refers to a Greek letter, but in TikTok and Reddit communities it evolved into the concept of the “sigma male” – an independent, self-assured man who does not conform to social expectations. Young people now use this label in a self-reflective, ironic way, often as a response to overwhelming issues like the climate crisis. These terms are therefore not just slang, but **complex, collective networks of meaning**. A 2025 study (Adhi & Masykuroh) even visually illustrated the cultural, emotional, and symbolic layers of meaning embedded in the use of “sigma” and “skibidi” among Gen Z and Alpha youth.

Considering all this, it becomes clear that **the generations transmitting knowledge and those receiving it are essentially speaking different languages**. This creates a serious challenge in education, awareness-raising, and institutional communication. However, there is also **good news**: the language developed by Gen Z and Alpha is **global in nature**. Thanks to **visual and digital codes**, even a lack of traditional language competencies is no longer a barrier to engagement. This means that **if we learn to speak their language**, we can build authentic dialogue and collaboration – essential foundations for tackling the water-related challenges of the future.

It should also be kept in mind that, for younger generations, visual communication is of fundamental importance – it is their primary language in the digital space. However, visualizing water-related problems presents a particular challenge, as images of drought, desertification, or water scarcity often evoke associations with death, destruction, and hopelessness in the minds of viewers. These strong negative visuals – especially for younger audiences – frequently trigger psychological defense or blocking mechanisms, such as denial, disengagement, or irony. In such cases, the mind instinctively filters out stimuli that are overly anxiety-inducing or disturbing, leading to the opposite effect: instead of activating and engaging the audience, we may push them into passivity. This presents a particularly complex and compelling challenge today when it is nearly impossible to make any event or message attractive or accessible to Generation Z and Alpha without a strong visual component. Therefore, it is essential that water-related communication develops new visual strategies that are sensitive, creative, and psychologically aware – not to frighten or alienate, but to include and inspire.

While events like sessions of the European Youth Parliament for Water ([Source](#)) or DANURELY-WS webinars offer high-quality engagement opportunities, they remain one-off or periodic, with no recurring mechanisms for structured dialogue between youth and decision-makers across the Danube Region.

The Danube Youth Council and the emerging Danube Youth Organisations Network have laid important groundwork by creating youth representation within the EUSDR framework, but these remain the exception rather than the norm. In national contexts, youth-driven water dialogues are usually confined to one-off events, such as conferences or consultations.

The region still lacks recurring, accessible channels for youth and decision-makers to communicate regularly. In short, structured dialogue is emerging but not yet the norm, making it challenging for youth voices to be consistently heard outside special events.

For effectively reaching Generations Z and Alpha, it is important to take the following steps to ensure that we are not just "talking about young people", but with them – and in a way that is meaningful, relatable and inspiring for them:

<p>1. Build platform-based presence</p>	<p>Young people live on TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, and Discord — not on governmental websites. Short videos, visual storytelling, and influencer-based content shape their thinking. Create water-themed TikTok profiles, launch campaign videos, use relevant memes and trends to channel key messages.</p>
-----------------------------------------	---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

2. Focus on visual and experience-driven communication	The desertification video elicited strong emotional and action-oriented responses. Use images and videos over text, and integrate real-time, experience-based activities: simulations, interactive maps, community challenges, gamified apps (e.g., “Save the Danube” mobile game).
3. Involve youth in co-creating content	The digital generation is not a passive audience — they are active content creators. Communication feels authentic when they can participate. Set up youth communication teams or creative labs for video/campaign planning; organize “water blog” contests or meme creation challenges.

Voices from the Region

Interviews with experts

To deepen our understanding of youth engagement in the water sector, we conducted a series of expert interviews with young professionals, youth representatives, and other relevant stakeholders. These individuals—whether directly involved in the DANURELY-WS project or not—offered valuable insights into the opportunities, needs, and ongoing or missing solutions that shape youth involvement across the Danube Region.

The interviews provide a qualitative layer to this report, helping to identify gaps, surface success stories, and capture lived experiences. They serve as both a diagnostic tool and a compass for future action, offering guidance on what should be prioritized in future funding, capacity-building, and engagement strategies. In total, we conducted 10 interviews, with voices from Slovakia, Hungary, Serbia, as well as key experts offering a regional perspective—essential for a topic that inherently transcends national borders.

By bringing together national and transnational insights, this chapter aims to highlight actionable lessons and shared challenges, supporting the development of more tailored, inclusive, and impactful youth-focused initiatives in the water sector.

"Young people are eager to tackle the pressing challenges of our time; they are full of ideas and ready to put their skills to work. However, the transition from education to professional life can sometimes be challenging. Young people should be empowered when starting their professional career, e.g. through study visits, interactive exchanges with experts from the field, or exchanges with other young people, to make sure they have everything they need to truly make a sustainable impact in the water sector."

IRENE SCHNAIT

EUSDR

Danube Strategy Point

[Read full interview](#)

"The future of waterborne transport lies in the hands of young people - those who will develop it responsibly, sustainably, and with vision. They are not just system users - they are its future creators. That is why it is our duty to empower, engage, and inspire them."

ANITA ABODI

University of Belgrade - Faculty
of Transport and Traffic Eng.

Serbia

[Read full interview](#)

"Young people are not only the future but also the present of water governance. Engaging them meaningfully is essential to fostering a new generation of water stewards who are equipped to tackle current and future water challenges through innovation, collaboration, and commitment to sustainability."

MONIKA JETZIN
CWP Hungary

[Read full interview](#)

"The future of waterborne transport depends on the next generation. If we want a greener, smarter, and more resilient Danube region, we must actively involve youth today, not just as future professionals, but as creative drivers of change. "

SASA JOVANOVIC
Consultant
Austria

[Read full interview](#)

"As in all sectors, involving young people in water transport is essential. They bring energy, fresh perspectives, and a willingness to embrace change. It is especially important to rejuvenate crews on vessels and staff in ports. Young people are not afraid of innovation; they quickly adapt to new technologies and automation. They truly drive progress and as the old saying goes, "The future belongs to the youth."

ZIVANA LUKOVIC
Port Governance Agency
Serbia

[Read full interview](#)

"Water is essential for our life. Instead of being ignorant to it, we should work more on its protection and sustainable management."

MICHAELA CERVENANSKA
Slovak University of
Technology in Bratislava
Slovakia

[Read full interview](#)

"By combining academic support with practical opportunities and cross-border collaboration, universities can play a key role in preparing a new generation of skilled, motivated, and regionally connected water professionals."

KAMILA HODASOVA
Comenius University Bratislava
Slovakia

[Read full interview](#)

"Nowadays, it is also important to increase young people's interest to employ in water management. However, despite the enthusiasm of young people, which was given to them by environmental education in their childhood and youth, they may encounter limited job market opportunities (earnings, opportunities for practical application), when many students prefer more convenient and easier study fields with comparable or better job opportunities."

RENATA GROFOVA
Slovak Environment Agency
Slovakia

[Read full interview](#)

"Youth bring more than energy—they offer fresh perspectives, creativity, and serve as bridges between science, policy, and local communities. If we aim to build truly sustainable and adaptive water policies, it is not enough to simply "listen" to them—we must involve them in shaping decisions, designing strategies, and implementing actions on the ground."

ROCK AIME MISSAMOU
Ludovika University of Public
Service, Budapest
Hungary

[Read full interview](#)

"Staying effective in our sector means staying adaptable and keeping youth engagement as dynamic and innovative as the young people themselves."

HELENE MASLIAH GILKAROV
ICPDR
International Commission for
the Danube River

[Read full interview](#)

What Youth Thinks?

A key part of this project was to understand the real needs, expectations, and challenges of youth in the Danube Region. While much has already been achieved and experts have shared valuable insights, addressing youth engagement meaningfully requires listening directly to those most affected. To this end, we organized a youth roundtable in Bratislava, bringing together over 25 participants for an open, first-hand exchange. In parallel, we conducted a dedicated survey targeting young people across the region.

The survey received 17 responses. Although this is only the beginning of what will become a broader effort in the future, the current results already offer valuable insights across both country and sectoral perspectives.

Key Challenges Identified:

- Limited employment opportunities in the water sector.
- Restricted access to decision-making processes at institutional or policy levels.
- Insufficient mentoring and career guidance, especially for those entering the field.

Youth also highlighted that developing relevant skills is hindered by:

- A lack of funding for training and mobility.
- Limited access to internships and mentoring schemes.
- Weak institutional support for professional and leadership development.

One strong message that emerged: meaningful youth leadership is not about visibility alone—it requires trust, responsibility, and opportunities to lead and co-create.

Concrete Solutions and Tools Proposed by Youth:

- Organizing joint events between youth and senior professionals.
- Designing and funding capacity-building programmes tailored to youth needs.
- Ensuring youth participation in major regional events and conferences.
- Launching mentorship schemes and job-matching platforms.
- Enabling co-creation roles for youth in ongoing projects.
- Promoting study visits, job shadowing, and leadership training.
- Facilitating regular consultations with youth organizations and networks.

[Check the full survey and detailed analysis here](#)

In addition, the study conducted by LUPS found that the young people's perception of governmental communication regarding water-related issues – particularly extreme events such as drought – is highly critical. More than half of the young respondents expressed explicit dissatisfaction with official communication; only three rated it as "adequate", and none found it "very satisfactory". This clearly points to serious communication deficiencies and a loss of trust. Therefore, it is an urgent task in the region to develop governmental communication practices that

not only provide sufficient and high-quality information but are also capable of capturing and maintaining the attention of younger generations.

The interviews conducted by LUPS with young water professionals deliver a clear and consistent message: young people are both ready and capable of contributing to the future of water management – provided they are given genuine opportunities, recognition, and support. Mentorship and human connection remain crucial. Formal structures alone are not enough – young people need role models and guidance that align with their realities and future aspirations. Youth participation must become systemic and structured. Involving them in decision-making bodies and co-designing programs with them – rather than merely for them – fosters long-term commitment and mutual respect. Financial barriers pose significant limitations: in many cases, they prevent access to training, exchange programs, or even volunteering. Without sustainable funding, even the most promising initiatives risk fading away.

Language and access inequalities remain critical issues. For many, the dominance of English and the lack of localized content create invisible barriers to participating in international programs.

These findings clearly indicate a strong preference for **practical tools, hands-on experiences, and active participation opportunities**, especially within the water sector. In an age where digital platforms dominate communication and learning, it is particularly striking that **youth are asking for real-world engagement**, such as fieldwork, mentoring, and co-creation in live projects. Digital tools alone are not enough—young people want to understand water challenges by experiencing them directly and collaborating with professionals on tangible solutions. These elements should be at the core of any new project or policy aiming to make youth engagement in the water sector effective, meaningful, and lasting.

Existing Projects and Initiatives

A variety of youth-focused initiatives, projects, and platforms already contribute to water management and sustainability efforts across the Danube Region. These initiatives vary in scope—from local education campaigns and river festivals to international governance platforms and professional development networks.

Mapping these efforts is essential not only for understanding the current engagement landscape but also for identifying **synergies, gaps, and best practices** that can inform future action. Moreover, this mapping exercise serves as a **valuable tool for identifying relevant stakeholders**—including youth organizations, educational institutions, civil society actors, and governance bodies—who could be involved as **partners, contributors, or target groups** in upcoming proposals and fundraising efforts.

The following table summarizes selected initiatives that support **youth participation, capacity-building, awareness-raising, and governance engagement** in the water sector across the region.

Name	Youth Relevance	Scope	Website
Danube Youth Network	This network engages youth in activities related to environmental conservation and sustainable development across the Danube Basin.	Danube	DYN The Danube Youth Network
EarthEcho Water Challenge - International Youth Water Monitoring Project	Global citizen science water monitoring initiative - school-friendly engagement.	Global	EarthEcho Water Challenge
UNIFY Network (Youth for Water & Climate)	Global youth-led water & climate network.	Global	About - Youth for Water and Climate
Blue Schools Programme	Environmental schools certification - water education in schools.	EU	EU Blue Schools Network
BROZ	NGO for nature protection in Bratislava Region- school & youth volunteering.	SVK	https://www.broz.sk
Budapest University of Technology (BME)	Engineering university with strong water-related faculty - water student groups and projects.	HU	https://www.bme.hu
Clean Danube	Project: Initiative - activism and youth involvement - youth water-related education and engagement.	DE	Das Projekt - cleandanube
Clean Danube - Youth River Watch	River observation by youth - youth-led river monitoring.	RO, SRB	
Comenius University Bratislava, Faculty of Natural Sciences	Academic training & student engagement.	SVK	Faculty of Natural Sciences
Copernicus Alliance - European Network on Higher Education for Sustainable Development	University-based student engagement.	SVK	COPERNICUS Alliance - COPERNICUS Alliance
Danube Art Master	An international art competition engaging youth in artistic expression centered around the theme of the Danube River, fostering environmental consciousness.	Danube	DAM 2025
Danube Box Project	A comprehensive educational tool for teachers and educators. A project that educates youth about water quality and the importance of clean water in the Danube River through interactive learning tools.	Danube	Invitation to explore the Danube ICPDR Danube Box
Danube Day	Annual celebration and education event - youth activities in all DRB countries.	Danube	https://www.danubeday.org
Danube Rectors' Conference (DRC)	A network of over 70 universities from the Danube Region - Organizes the DRC Summer School, targeting young researchers and PhD students on Danube-related topics, including environmental challenges.	Danube	DRC - Danube Rectors' Conference

Danube Transnational Programme (EU)	A support platform for funding projects involving youth in water management	Danube	Interreg Danube Region
Danube Youth Council	Youth advisory group under EUSDR - Platform for youth participation.	Danube	Danube Youth Council - EUSDR - Danube Strategy Point
Danube Youth Organisations Network	An open network of youth organisations across the Danube Region- Platform for national or regional youth organisations or other entities working on youth issues with a non-profit profile functioning in the Danube Region.	Danube	https://danube-region.eu/dyon/
DANUrB	An interdisciplinary project focusing on urban riverfront development, involving youth in planning and sustainability efforts along the Danube.	Danube	DANUrB - A journey connecting communities
DAPHNE - Institute of Applied Ecology	NGO for nature protection and environmental education – youth and teachers education.	SVK	https://daphne.sk
Eco Logic	Environmental youth NGO- youth water programs.	NMK	https://ecologic.mk
EcoDanube	A youth-led initiative promoting ecological awareness and actions among young people in Danube countries, with a focus on river and wetland ecosystems.	Danube	
European Geography Association (EGEA)	A youth network of geography students and young geographers across Europe. Has active entities (local groups) in Danube countries like Austria, Hungary, Romania, Serbia, etc.	EU	EGEA
Green Balkans	NGO for biodiversity and water habitats – volunteers & youth education.	BLG	https://www.greenbalkans.org
Green Belt of the Danube – Mládežnícke ekologické výpravy	Nature conservation and youth expeditions along the Danube River; connects protected areas with youth engagement. Outdoor youth involvement, conservation learning.	Danube	Project - DaRe to Connect
Information Dissemination Team of the UNESCO Chair in Water Conflict Management at L-UPS	The team's recognizes the critical importance of intergenerational communication in tackling the complex challenges surrounding water resources.	HU	Weboldal nem található / Page Not Found
International Association for Danube Research (IAD) – Youth Activities	Scientific NGO affiliated with the ICPDR. Supports young scientists and students working on Danube-related research; offers youth sessions and prizes at their conferences.	Danube	IAD - home
International Sava River Day	Annual celebration and education event – water-related youth activities within the Sava Day celebration events.	Sava	https://www.savacommission.org
Jugendumweltplattform JUMP	Youth platform for environment – youth-focused environmental action.	AUT	Home - JUMP
Let's Do It Romania!	National movement for clean-ups: mass youth engagement.	RO	Despre noi - Let's Do It, Romania!
National Univ. of Water & Env. Engineering	Key institution for water studies– leading water university in region.	UA	https://nuwm.edu.ua
Plastic Pirates – Go Europe!	EU-wide citizen science & litter cleanup project – school/youth group participation.	EU	Plastic Pirates – Go Europe! Plastic Pirates
Sava Youth Parliament	Awareness raising related to water management, sustainable development, climate change. Water-related youth activities in all countries of the Sava River Basin	Sava	https://sava-youthparliament.com/
Slovak Technical University (STU)	Technical university with water-related programs – student research, youth opportunities.	SVK	https://www.stuba.sk
Szent István University (Hungary)	Hungarian university with strong water-related and agricultural programs	HU	Szent István University: Higher Education in Hungary
Technical University of Cluj-Napoca	Water research & student engagement– water student initiatives.	RO	https://www.utcluj.ro
Tisza Youth Program	Engagement in Tisza sub-basin – subregional youth cooperation.	Tisza	(20+) Facebook
Transdanube Travel Stories	Youth tourism and river heritage– storytelling by youth.	Danube	Transdanube Travel Stories
University of Belgrade – Faculty of Mechanical Engineering, Department of Naval Architecture	Academic training & student engagement.	SRB	https://www.mas.bg.ac.rs/

University of Belgrade – Faculty of Transport and Traffic Engineering, Department for Waterborne Transportation	Faculty offering bachelor, master and PhD studies in Waterborne Transportation – academic training & student engagement.	SRB	https://www.sfb.bg.ac.rs/index.php/sr-rs/
University of Belgrade – Faculty of Forestry	Academic training & student engagement.	SRB	https://www.sfb.bg.ac.rs/odseci/ej/
University of Bucharest – CEES	Environmental research & impact studies center - Supports student water research.	RO	https://unibuc.ro
University of Ljubljana	Environmental science and hydrology programs – youth water-related education.	SLO	https://www.uni-lj.si
University of Natural Resources (BOKU)	University offering degrees in water & environment – academic training & student engagement.	AUT	https://www.boku.ac.at
University of Novi Sad (Serbia)	University with environmental and water programs, active in Danube projects. Youth participation in Danube projects.	SRB	University of Novi Sad - UNIVERSITY
University of Zagreb	Faculty of Geotechnical Engineering – academic water programs.	CRO	https://www.unizg.hr
Water Detectives	Youth water monitoring project – student engagement - Very Young Youth - Primary/Secondary Schools.	HU	Water detective
WWF Danube-Carpathian Programme	Nature conservation network in DRB countries – youth volunteering & events.	Danube	Danube-Carpathian WWF
Young Researchers of Serbia (YRS)	National NGO for youth environment action – youth-led actions and camps.	SRB	MIS Home EN - Young Researchers of Serbia
Young Water Professionals Danube Network	Regional platform for early-career professionals in the water sector. Connecting young professionals and students interested in water-related disciplines across the Danube Basin.	Danube	Young Water Professionals - IWA Network
YOUNGO – Youth Constituency to the UNFCCC (<i>mládežníci z DRB krajín aktivne zapojení do vody a klímy</i>)	Official youth constituency to the UNFCCC; includes young people from the Danube region working on water, climate, and adaptation issues. Gives youth voice in international climate negotiations.	Global	YOUNGO UNFCCC
Youth Environment Europe (YEE)	Pan-European youth environmental network – youth-led, members from DRB.	EU	
Youth Parliament Danube	Initiative that aims to promote youth involvement in the water sector by increasing their awareness of water resource management issues and by fostering understanding of citizenship and democracy.	Danube	European WYPW World Youth Parliament for Water

Main Findings and Conclusions

The analysis confirms that the key challenges facing youth engagement in water management across the Danube Region are relevant, recognized, and have been addressed in various initiatives. However, they remain only partially resolved and require continuous, coordinated attention—especially at the regional and transnational level. EU funding mechanisms, including Interreg Danube, offer strong frameworks to support this, but more proactive involvement from the educational sector, policymaking bodies, and businesses is needed to create systemic change.

- 1. Awareness and Knowledge:** There is a clear need to embed water-related education into secondary school curricula, with emphasis not only on environmental risks but also on water-related careers as an attractive opportunity. Youth must be made aware that the water sector offers diverse professional pathways and plays a vital role in sustainability transitions.
- 2. Intergenerational Learning and Skills Development:** To close the skills gap and ensure intergenerational continuity in water governance, targeted tools and platforms must be established. Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVEs) are one promising approach, but this effort must go beyond projects and include structured involvement of business, academia, and public authorities across the region.
- 3. Youth Leadership:** While several good practices exist, there is still limited access to funding, networking, and implementation mechanisms that support youth-led action. There is an urgent need to move from consultation to empowerment, enabling young people to lead projects, influence policy, and implement concrete actions in the field.
- 4. Bridging the Communication Gap:** Communication initiatives are often short-term or disconnected. Despite many successful events and youth campaigns in the region, youth are still too often involved as observers rather than as active participants or co-creators. Sustainable models for dialogue, co-creation, and visibility are needed to build trust and continuity.

Conclusion

There is clear momentum and growing awareness, but also a strong need for further improvement and structural reinforcement. The DANURELY-WS project laid an important foundation, but follow-up initiatives are essential—and they must be complemented by long-term commitments from all sectors.

Youth are calling for practical tools, real opportunities, and space for meaningful engagement. Experts agree that the future of the water sector depends on a new generation that is motivated, knowledgeable, and empowered. It is our shared responsibility—to youth, to the Danube Region, to the environment, and to future generations—to make this a reality.

There is clear momentum and growing awareness, but also a strong need for further improvement and structural reinforcement. The DANURELY-WS project laid an important foundation, but follow-up initiatives are essential—and they must be complemented by long-term commitments from all sectors.

Youth is calling for practical tools, real opportunities, and space for meaningful engagement. Experts agree that the future of the water sector depends on a new generation that is motivated, knowledgeable, and empowered. It is our shared responsibility—to youth, to the Danube Region, to the environment, and to future generations—to make this a reality.

At the European level, recent assessments of EU macro-regional strategies confirm this urgency. The European Commission's 2025 Report on the implementation of EU macro-regional strategies highlights that meaningful participation of civil society, local communities and especially young people remains a critical but still underdeveloped dimension. While youth structures exist in several macro-regions, including the EUSDR, the report stresses that youth involvement must shift from ad-hoc engagement toward structured, continuous participation in decision-making processes. DANURELY-WS directly responds to this call by laying the groundwork for long-term youth empowerment in the water sector.

The 2025 EUSDR Process / Implementation Evaluation echoes these findings. It identifies persistent gaps in stakeholder engagement, noting that while youth participation has improved, it remains fragmented, project-dependent, and lacking institutionalisation. The evaluation underlines the importance of providing clear mandates, consistent resources, and stable governance mechanisms to ensure that young people are not only consulted but actively contribute to shaping regional policies. These conclusions reinforce the need for follow-up initiatives that build on project's results and move toward systemic, embedded youth engagement in water governance across the region.

Together, these EU-level assessments make it clear that the Danube Region stands at the crossroad: the foundations are in place, but the transition from isolated actions to long-term structural integration of youth voices is still ahead of us. Project demonstrates that young people are ready and willing to contribute. The question now is whether institutions, governments, and organisations will match that readiness with sustained commitment and support.

The future of the Danube also depends on it.

References

1. Scientific, policy, and analytical sources

Adhi, A. S., & Masykuroh, M. F. (2025). Sociolinguistic analysis of Gen Alpha's slang in YouTube Shorts comments of meme content creators. JELITA: Journal of English Language Teaching and Literature.

<https://www.jurnal.umbarru.ac.id/index.php/jelita/article/download/920/316>

DANCERS Consortium. (2016). Educating for action: Aligning skills with policies for sustainable development in the Danube river basin. UNESCO-IHE Institute for Water Education.

<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/26412421/>

ETF & UNICEF. (2024). From awareness to action: Engaging youth in the green economy and climate action. European Training Foundation & UNICEF.

https://www.etf.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2024-11/2024_Green%20Skills%20Report_Edited.pdf

European Commission. (2025, May 13). Report from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on the implementation of EU macro-regional strategies (COM(2025) 196 final).

https://danube-region.eu/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/COM2025196_0.pdf

EUSDR PA4 – Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade of Hungary & NRC Ltd. (2023). A basic study of the involvement of young people. EU Strategy for the Danube Region – Priority Area 4 (Water Quality).

<https://waterquality.danube-region.eu/a-basic-study-of-the-involvement-of-young-people/>

IAWD – International Association of Water Service Companies in the Danube Region. (n.d.). Water sector workforce in the Danube region.

<https://www.iawd.at/dwp/program-activities/analytical-and-advisory-work/water-sector-workforce-in-the-danube-region/>

M&E Factory. (2025, April 3). EUSDR Process/Implementation Evaluation – Final Report (2020-2024). European Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR).

https://danube-region.eu/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/EUSDR_process_evaluation_FinalReport_20250403.pdf

UNESCO. (2023). The United Nations World Water Development Report 2023: Partnerships and cooperation for water. UNESCO.

<https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000384657>

2. Youth education and skills platforms

EUSDR PA9 – People & Skills. (n.d.). CoVEs Platform – Centres of Vocational Excellence.

<https://peopleandskills.danube-region.eu/coves-platform/>

Federal Ministry of Agriculture, Regions and Tourism (Austria). (n.d.). Generation Blue.

<https://www.generationblue.at/>

Interreg Volunteer Youth (IVY). (n.d.). Enhancing European cooperation in the Danube Region.

<https://www.interregyouth.com/enhancing-european-cooperation-in-the-danube-region/>

International Commission for the Protection of the Danube River (ICPDR). (n.d.). ICPDR observers.

<https://www.icpdr.org/about-icpdr/organisation/observers>

Danube Strategy Point. (n.d.). Danube Strategy Point – Contact.

<https://danube-region.eu/contact/danube-strategy-point/>

3. Internal DANUrely-WS project sources

Global Water Partnership Central and Eastern Europe. (2025). DANUrely-WS youth survey: Knowledge, attitudes and awareness of young people in the Danube Region (Internal document). GWP CEE.

Global Water Partnership Central and Eastern Europe. (2024). DANUrely-WS roundtable with young water experts: Workshop summary and photographs, Bratislava (Internal document). GWP CEE.

Ludovika University of Public Service. (2025). Survey on public awareness and communication formats about water issues (Internal document). LUPS.

Ludovika University of Public Service. (2025). Semi-structured interviews with young water professionals and institutional representatives in the Danube Region (Internal interview dataset). LUPS.