

# GUIDEBOOK

## GOOD PRACTICES ON CIVIC ACTIVATION OF YOUTH IN ECOLOGICAL ISSUES IN SLOVENIA



Information brochure

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## 1. Overview

**Introduction**

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Slovenijo**

**Star papir za  
novo upanje**

**Plastic pirates**

**Mladi za  
podnebno  
pravičnost**

**Other examples**

This brochure aims to present several examples and good practices of youth activation, specifically for environmental causes in Slovenia. For most of the showcased projects and initiatives they are the main or one of the main target groups, while the end features a brief look at examples where their activation is more indirect, coincidental or only long-term.

The authors hope it will provide relevant insight, perhaps inspire replication, but at least show the youth are a force for good — a force to be reckoned with and supported, whether it is for environmental causes or others.

First, however, a brief look at the benefits and setting where the examples took place.

## 2. Introduction

### What is active citizenship?

Active citizenship takes many forms, but it is not just about political participation, voting in elections or referendums, or following the everyday political developments and drama.

It is much more — it is **any activity of citizens for the wider public good**, in any public or societal sphere.

The core characteristics are:

- using the chance for joint democratic decision making,
- societal fabric and topic co-creation at the local, national or international level,
- improving societal inclusion and cohesion,
- all while teaching respect, responsibility, human rights and democratic principles.

### Slovenia and youth

Slovenia has an aging population, with a 15 % decrease of youth (people aged between 15 and 29 years) in the last ten years. This brings their share to **14.7 % or roughly 308,000 people**.

Education levels and risk of poverty have improved (to just below 10 %) in that period. It is clear the youth of today is digitally savvy, which affects the ways in which they should be communicated with. 60 % of people aged between 16 and 24 have excellent or basic digital competences, all use the Internet daily or almost daily, and 98 % use a smartphone.

## Volunteering and youth

Volunteering is a productive way of informal learning, building a social network, improving autonomy and taking responsibility for work done. It also strengthens a key human value, solidarity.

Volunteering is the most common form of active citizenship in Slovenia and is typically facilitated by non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

Data only exists for so called “**organized volunteering**”, where solely pre-registered organizations and volunteers doing at least 24 hours of volunteering per year are counted. This means that it is **a subset** of all volunteering, but even there the relative numbers speak to significant youth involvement.

Data for 2021:

- up to 18-year olds: 5 % of all male and 7 % of all female volunteers
- 18 to 30-year olds: 8 % of all male and 11 % of all female volunteers
- 2.4 % of reported hours were spent volunteering in the field of environmental protection and nature preservation (all ages)

## Commentary on engaging youth

The youth can undeniably add a lot of value to any civic activation project, however the authors of this brochure believe that too often, they are used as participants or to-be agents of change for two bad reasons:

- Out of **laziness**: youths still in educational processes are often easy to work with, since they are forced to comply by their educational institutions. And their habits haven't been cemented yet by decades of life. Who doesn't like guaranteed participation?
- Out of a **misplaced lack of urgency**, something especially true in the field of environmental protection. Everyone knows the saying “kids are our future”. That's tautologically true, but it ignores the fact that most of the youth are not decision makers, more often than not not even in their own households. For rapid enough change, activating older segments of society

is paramount, regardless how much harder it may be. We do not have the time to wait for a perfect next generation — our planetary crisis demands immediate action.

An argument can be made that youth can be an inspiring vector of change in older relatives, but that holds mostly for pre-youth children.

### **Društvo Ekologi brez meja**

The first three examples in the following sections were all organized or co-organized by the same NGO — *Društvo Ekologi brez meja*. It was born out of a pressing need for environmental civic activation, represented by the first example, and still strives to improve the state of our shared environment.

They focus on motivation and cooperation with individuals, communities, policy makers, industry, businesses and researchers in the area of an efficient use of natural resources with the aim to reduce costs, preserve nature and health, and create new green jobs. They educate and build opportunities for better waste prevention, reuse, separate collection, recycling and composting of materials in waste. Or put simply, they advocate and implement zero waste and circular economy practices at all levels.



### 3. Očistimo Slovenijo

*Očistimo Slovenijo* is a family of massive volunteer projects undertaken in [2010](#), [2012](#) and to a smaller extent later, under the umbrella of the first [World Cleanup Day](#) (2018).

They were inspired by the *Let's do it* movement from Estonia and have a deceptively simple underlying idea: **a single-day country-level cleanup of illegally dumped and littered waste.**

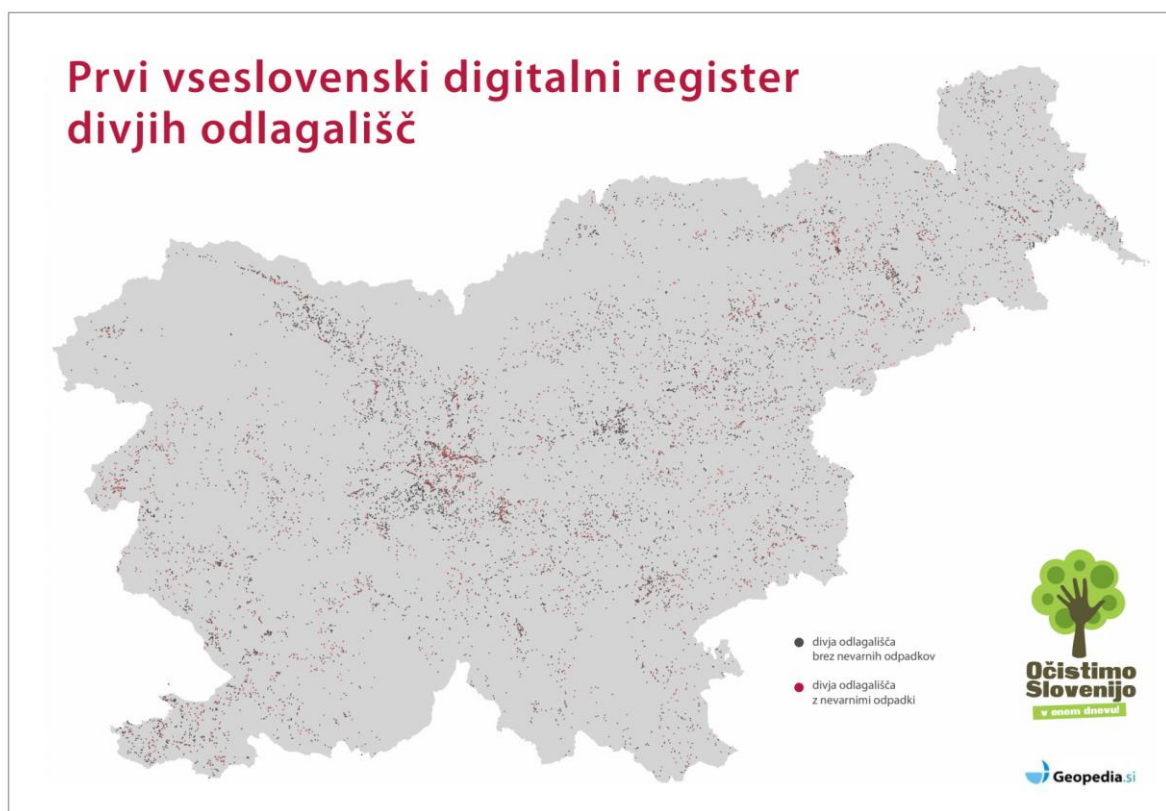
Country-level as in trying to cover as much territory as possible and engage as many people as possible regardless of circumstance.

For example, the NGO had **half a year** to implement everything needed to reach these goals of the inaugural project in 2010:

Goals 2010	Realization
200,000 participants carry out the biggest environmental project in the history of Slovenia (10 % of the population).	270,000 participants (13.5 % of the population)
Remove 20,000 tons of illegally dumped waste.	11,000 tons
The first country-wide digital registry of illegal dump sites.	Done, with over 12,000 sites documented in detail
Unite all the existing spring clean-up actions.	Done
Spread awareness on environmental issues and aid in a positive long-term change in the environmental legislation.	Done

... all while having no initial funding, team or public recognition. However, that proved to be part of the appeal and the results were a huge success. The national participation rate of 14 % is **a world record still to this day!**





A render from the first country-wide digital registry of illegal dump sites that was handed to the *Ministry of Environment and Spatial planning*.

### Secrets of success

How did such an outlandish idea manage to succeed?

The haphazardly grown organizing team **truly believed** in the core idea and exuded it at every step. They poured **countless volunteer hours** into making it happen; the project took over the life of many. Importantly, it wasn't a project about pointing fingers, assigning blame, but about recognizing that there is a **problem that we can fix ourselves** without waiting for political will, public authorities or some other intervention. Everyone was welcome to contribute and partners were constantly sought – with joint action comes a lot of **synergy**.

Other key secrets of success were:

- an inspirational Estonian **precedent**: someone already did something similar, so it *is* possible, even if the goals were doubled,
- the existing **tradition** of clean-ups in Slovenia: while all small and local, it



meant there is some awareness and human infrastructure already in place,

- **longing for positive** societal vibes: it was the middle of the economic recession, morale was low and the news, more so than usual, filled with negative content,
- coalition with the **media**: good stories are sought, especially grass-roots,
- project's **apolitical and non-profit** nature (and unknown people) made it obvious there is no hidden agenda,
- **attraction** of a massive 1-day volunteer action.

## Youth involvement

While the projects deliberately targeted everyone, youth were heavily involved and taken into account when planning. In fact, it is not a stretch to say the **projects were youth-led**.

Roles:

- organization: much of the core team and local teams were youths
- mapping: finding and documenting illegal dump sites, where students in particular contributed a lot of time for crowdsourced imagery verification and ground truthing
- promotion: events, preparation of materials, dissemination ...
- cleanup: participation at the main event and/or the school day before

Looking at the numbers of school-going children participating on the cleanup day itself confirms large youth activation was achieved. The numbers include children still attending kindergarten, but exclude students and older, so they are a good overall indicator:

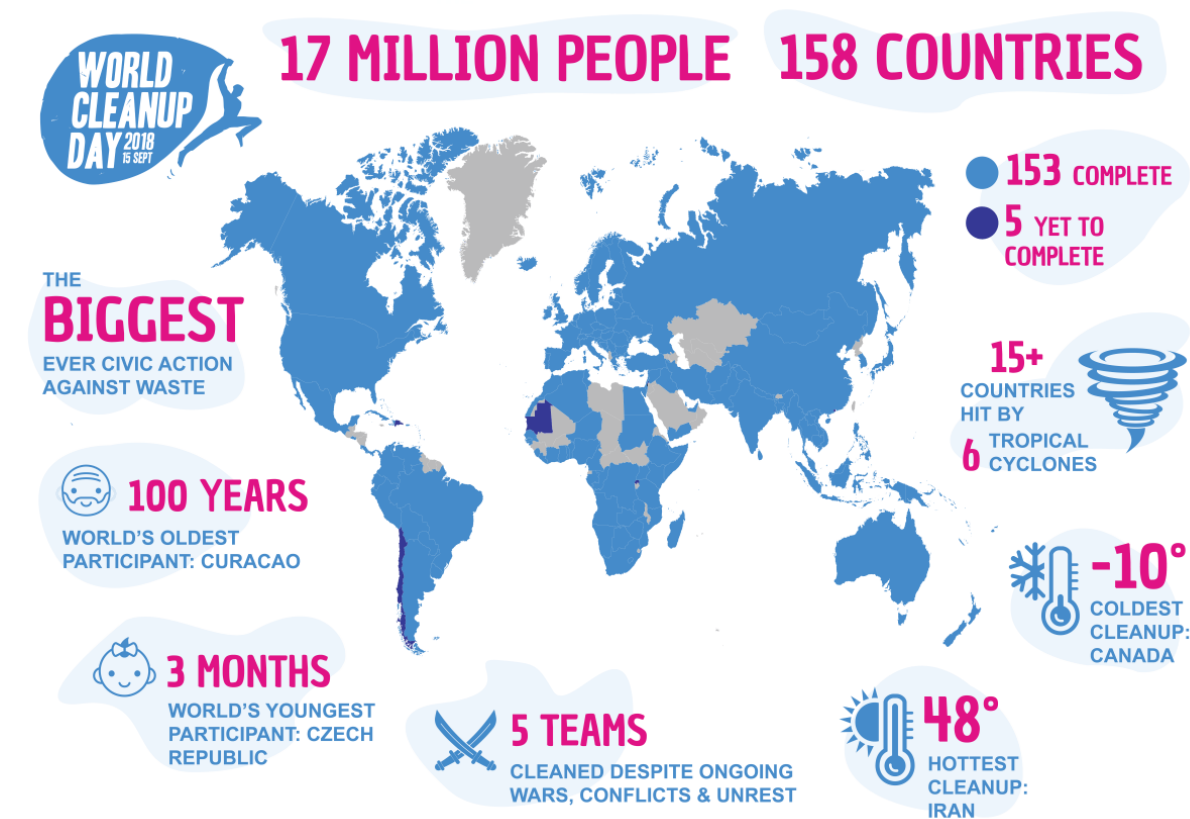
- 2010: 86,232 kids - 32 % of all participants
- 2012: 133,667 kids - 46 % of all participants
- 2018: 23,613 kids - 65 % of all participants

Special materials were created for teachers, so they could engage with their pupils more effectively in the classrooms as well.

## Wide reaching impacts

Slovenia was one of the first countries participating in the *Let's do it* movement after it “escaped” the Baltics. The team supported its growth by mentoring and especially by successfully convincing activists in several Balkan countries to implement similar projects themselves. Remarkably Albania and Kosovo stand out as being the hosts of some of the most persistent and successful campaigns, still going strong to this day.

By 2018 the movement was already global and organized the first **World Cleanup Day**, uniting the national cleanups on a single day in autumn.



As was the case in Slovenia, many of the campaigns are to this day youth-led and/or rely on — and of course inspire — heavy youth civic activation.

## 4. Star papir za novo upanje

Another project trying to upgrade an existing tradition was *Star papir za novo upanje* (old paper for new hope), first organized in 2011, with a reprisal in 2012 and 2014.

The tradition is that of school kids **collecting waste paper** as a way to fundraise, usually for end-of-year school trips. The projects aimed to engage also others to help by providing waste paper and jointly reinforce the need for proper separate collection of paper — and subsequently for the protection of the environment in general.

The twist was that the generated funding would be used at least partly for **humanitarian relief**. The goals were thus also to encourage active thinking about societal problems (who should get funding?) and build compassion.

### Results

In total, over the years, the project included youth participants from 431 educational institutions, helped by 398 companies and numerous individuals. Together they collected over 791 tons of waste paper, which was lower than the targets, but still sufficiently successful — almost 46,000 EUR was raised.

In the first year half of the funds went to a project in Malawi and the other half, **by popular vote**, to help rebuild a house for a family in need. The next year all the funds went for school camps for socially disadvantaged kids. The last year the split was different: half of the funds went back to the participating schools and half to the voted project, this time for relief after a natural disaster in Slovenia.

## Lessons learned

Tradition is a double-edged sword. Some institutions did not want to participate and benefit from synergies for the simple reason that they wanted all the funds for themselves. It might seem petty, but it is a legitimate choice.

The prices of waste paper are market-driven, so the monetary output per ton of collected paper varied unpredictably and unfortunately significantly. This meant much less money could be donated.

Price performance of the donations is also important — after all, as a project you want to maximize impact. So donating half of the proceeds to a verified charity in Malawi seemed like a good choice the first year. One euro is worth much more than in Slovenia. However, sadly there was a lot of backlash in the end, so for the following years all the funding remained in Slovenia.



From an environmental point of view, a different waste fraction might have been a better choice, since separate paper collection was already going well.

## 5. Plastic pirates

[Plastic pirates - Go Europe!](#) is a **citizen science** project that was started in 2016 by Chile and Germany and made international during Germany's joint presidency of the EU Council with Portugal and Slovenia in 2020. The main activity is standardized mapping and sampling of **plastic waste in and along rivers by youth**, while established scientists then verify and analyze the results.

The goal is to gather important missing data on riverine pollution, raise awareness, teach about science and encourage international collaboration.

In Slovenia the project was spearheaded by the *National institute of biology (marine branch)*, the *Institute for Water of the Republic of Slovenia* and *Društvo Ekologi brez meja*. The same group still runs it today, as there has been a high demand from schools for more sampling. The limiting factor is funding for the analytical part, as nets have to be painstakingly inspected for each microplastic piece under a microscope, which takes a lot of time.

The initial plan was to sample 50 locations in spring and 50 in autumn of 2021, due to limited availability of equipment, specifically the microplastic filter nets. Since then, the project **spread** downstream the Sava river basin (**Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia**) with sampling by youth on the Sava river day. Since then another round has been held in Slovenia and also other groups have started contributing as citizen scientists. At the same time, the project received European funding and is spreading to **Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Lithuania and Spain**.





## Results

The overall project results and data from sampling sites are [visible on this map](#). Even before the project exploded, it engaged over 15,000 children and youth.

In Slovenia 117 samplings that produced viable data took place so far and some more are in the verification process. 1533 children from across the country participated in the first two seasons alone. Over 14,000 pieces of trash have been collected and plastic waste dominates (68 % share) — cigarette butts, bags, styrofoam, packaging and random plastic pieces. **Over a half of all sampled rivers contained microplastics**, no sample was without waste. The results were notably worse during the spring sampling compared to the autumn one.

## Secrets of success

There are many contributing factors to the success of the campaign. One simple fact is that field work is always more tempting than learning in a classroom setting. Good support from the project (translated materials) and team (training, Q&A, troubleshooting) go a long way. Having it all wrapped into a bigger, publicly loudly communicated campaign, and the fact that it is for the common good also increase interest.

Some other positive factors were of a more temporary nature:

- The fact that the core of the Slovenian project was happening during their presidency of the EU Council gave the project a lot of nominal political support and an international spotlight.
- The coronavirus pandemic was still not over, so appetites for field work were even higher than usual.
- Teachers received so-called promotion points for participation in the first sampling. A pessimist might say that this was the main reason for the flood of applications, but interest in subsequent samplings, where this was not the case, proved otherwise.

## 6. Mladi za podnebno pravičnost

[Mladi za podnebno pravičnost](#) (“**Youth for climate justice**”) is a youth-led, self-organized, democratic and diverse movement of over a hundred individuals from across Slovenia. It can be considered the Slovenian counterpart to *Fridays For Future*.

They strive for decent living conditions for everyone on a preserved planet. Using non-violent methods of resistance they fight for concrete, human- and environmentally friendly measures, and preventing exploitation by building alternatives to the current system.

Most people would recognize them from their notable protesting actions, but they also have a capacity building and awareness raising aspect, promoting public debate on the climate crisis.



For example, they held climate assemblies, democratic processes to talk about their futures and plans, where they prepared a long list of concrete demands for various sectors of society / economy / government.

They engage with scientists (preparation of national climate plan, 2 day symposium on the effects of the environmental crisis on waters and



biodiversity), decision makers at the local level (supporting the citizens of Anhovo in their plights) and decision makers at the national level. That is manifested through policy watchdogging, in 2021 support for the civil society's referendum campaign and for the general elections in 2022, an analysis of the programmes of political parties.

Smaller projects complement their work. For example they organized "2 days without meat", a week of eco fashion, and a mobile tree (sapling on a bike) as a way to promote sustainable mobility and the greening of cities.

## 7. Other examples

Some honorable mentions with more indirect forms of activation:

- [Šolski ekovrtovi](#) (School eco-gardens): a network of kindergartens and schools practicing gardening and composting with their pupils.
- [Ekošola](#) (FEE Slovenia): an international programme of environmental education for higher awareness of sustainable development among youths.
- [Training for activists at the local level](#): prepared during the BEZWA project, it's a curriculum and handbook for zero waste activism.
- Environmental NGOs in general host a lot of youth staff.

## Recommendations

Civic activation of youth for the environment needs the same enabling conditions as activation on other topics. Open and meaningful collaboration, data sharing (after all, we have the *Aarhus convention*), support with knowledge and experience, and, of course, funding.

Brochure prepared as part of the project  
„We are active for the climate!” / „Działamy dla klimatu!”



# Działamy! dla klimatu

Project implementers:



**POZnań\***  
metropolia

**NorSensus**  
MEDIAFORUM



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