



PSYCLIC

**CLIMATE ACTIVISTS
FOCUS GROUPS**

REPORT

PROJECT PARTNERS:



UNIVERSITÄT
DES
SAARLANDES



rijksuniversiteit
 groningen



UNIVERSITAT_{DE}
BARCELONA

Learnkey

AUTHORS:

Angela Castrechini¹, Isabel Pellicer¹, David Martínez-Salguero¹, Gerard Quilez¹, Sergi Valera¹, Enric Pol¹, Gabriel Muinos², Niklas George³, Nida Bajwa³, Mindaugas Galeckas⁴.

¹ University of Barcelona, Spain

² University of Groningen, Netherlands

³ Saarland University, Germany

⁴ Learnkey, Lithuania



Erasmus+

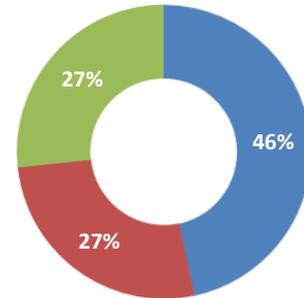
PSYCLIC is a joint initiative between the Saarland, Groningen, and Barcelona universities. The project's aim is to generate educational content for psychology students through digital and innovative learning strategies to promote the understanding, evaluation, and effectiveness of the activism and social movements related to climate change.

This joint effort to create quality content for students drove us to do a preliminary phase for studying the actual needs of activist groups, NGOs, and other organizations that work to preserve the environment. This action aims to connect the future theoretical content with the current needs of those involved. The consortium decided to hold focus groups with representatives of organizations, gather information about them, and establish contacts to support and have feedback at the same time.

1. CHARACTERISTICS AND METHODOLOGY OF THE FOCUS GROUPS

Three universities were involved in the PSYCLIC project, the University of Barcelona (Spain), the University of Groningen (Netherlands), and Saarland University (Germany). Each of them held a focus group with activists and professionals involved in the fight against climate change. These focus groups took place in 2021, with each group adapting the meeting to the time availability of the activists. In the case of the focus groups organized by the Barcelona and Groningen teams, the online format was used instead of hosting an in-person meeting. The duration of the focus group in Barcelona was 1 hour and 40 minutes; the duration of the focus group in Groningen was 1 hour and 20 minutes; and of the Saarland one, 2 hours and 45 minutes.

■ Saarland ■ Groningen ■ Barcelona



Origin of participants in the Focus Groups

The participants came from diverse associations, NGOs, and activist groups from each territory. In Barcelona, four activists attended the reunion: two participants from the activist group Fridays for Future Barcelona, one member of the non-profit cooperative Resilience Earth, and one worker from the NGO Desos Opció Solidària. In the focus group hosted by the Groningen team, two participants were involved in the organization Landelijk Kernenergie Archief, and another two participants were volunteering in the Zeehondencentrum. The Saarland University focus group consisted of seven participants: two Fridays for Future activists and five Psychologists for Future activists.



Associations, NGOs, and Activist Groups that participated in the Focus Groups

The thematic blocks developed by each university dealt with the activities and objectives of the activists, their motivation and recruitment methods, their organization, the internal and external problems they face, and finally, what tools or resources they consider would make them more effective. Each focus group's development, order, and content were slightly different, so this report will present the results regrouped in various topics, following a similar order to facilitate a shared understanding and the differences between activists and territories.



2. RESULTS

2.1. Aims of the Activists

The activists and workers of NGOs and cooperatives expressed that their objectives or tasks regarding climate change are:

- **To disseminate and generate significant learning** regarding the climate emergency.
- **To generate ecological competencies** to fight against climate change through courses and workshops in universities, companies, and other activist groups.

- **To increase awareness and actions to stop climate change**, seeking a “butterfly effect” of contagion of such awareness and attitudes.
- **To influence and pressure** politicians and businesses, so they take the needed measures. Sometimes through strategic plans such as taking advantage of electoral appointments.
- **To take action and fight for the cause** on an individual level. Younger activists seemed more driven by disagreement and the lack of a clear action line.
- Ultimately, **to promote a paradigmatic and systemic change**.
- Professional associations are also in **need of funding**.

2.2. Audience They Want to Reach

These same workers and activists stated that the target audience they want to reach includes people with very different profiles:

- **Adolescents and young** activists under 30.
- **Educational and family communities**.
- **Media and social media**.
- More indirectly, **politicians and businessmen**.
- Ultimately, they want to appeal to **society as a whole**.

2.3. How They Make Themselves Known

To make themselves known, activists use different methods:

- **Protest actions**, such as demonstrations and symbolic actions.
- **Social networks**, both to call to action and to reach new audiences (Barcelona and Groningen), for which they contact influencers (Saarland).
- **Word of mouth** through direct contacts

(Barcelona and Groningen).

- Direct contact with people through **street-level actions** (Saarland), such as engaging in direct conversation to thank the use of the bicycle (“Fahrrad Dank Aktion” in Hamburg).
- **Mass media influence**, spreading images of protests and social movements that attract more people (Barcelona) and publishing reports, essays, and editorial pieces (Groningen).
- **Teaching courses** for universities and companies (Barcelona and Saarland)
- **Organizing open assemblies in public places**, which increases the curiosity of the people who pass by (Barcelona)
- **Through sending newsletters** with the tasks and projects in progress (Saarland and Groningen). This action, however, only reaches people who are already curious about the topic.
- **By allowing people into their facilities.** One of the Groningen organizations takes care of seals and allows people to visit the center.

Saarland activists conclude that contact is done primarily with those already interested and that it is difficult to reach people outside the “bubble” (although that is precisely the goal).

2.4. How They Recruit New Members and Activists

The methods to get more people to join activist groups, associations, and NGOs are related to the previously mentioned ways of making themselves known and some other actions:

- With a **snowball effect**: new people jump in through social contacts of the activists themselves (Barcelona and Groningen).
- In **protest actions**, interested people approach them and volunteer to collaborate (Barcelona).
- **Some organizations coordinate open assemblies** that welcome passerby people

and new members (Barcelona).

- Through the **connection with other organizations and activist groups** (Barcelona, Groningen, and Saarland) that work on environmental issues or other aspects of social justice. The aim is to create a support network between organizations and link new participants.

Once interest has been established, Saarland activists take the following initiation steps:

- **Contact via email with those interested**, asking them about their occupation (e.g., the field of study or professional profile).
- An **intake meeting** is held (currently online) to invite new interested people to know the organization, the current activists, and the projects underway. The organizations of the Barcelona focus group organize **welcome assemblies** instead.
- New activists are joined to the **chat group** to find the tasks for each project. Each local working group has a “contact person.”

Saarland activists conclude that it is vital that newcomers are included in the organization quickly. Otherwise, they tend to drop out. Contrastingly, the volunteers from one of Groningen’s organizations reported a formal protocol that includes a standardized intake and training for new volunteers.

2.5. Motivation and Maintenance

The motivations mentioned by activists for participating in groups against climate change were the following:

- **A personal conviction** that political, economic, and social changes are needed.
- **Intrinsic motivation**: participants perceived activism as something personal and voluntary that can even be a place to have fun and work.

- **Social motivation:** getting in touch with equally-minded people and getting integrated into a group. Activists tend to establish friendship bonds within the organizations, even considering other activists as a family in some cases.
- **Self-efficacy:** feeling that they are no longer alone and helpless against climate change and performing tasks within the activist group that fit personal abilities.
- **Feedback:** activists obtain information about their performance in the more institutionalized groups, even though this is not the case for the more informal organizations.

The characteristics that help to keep people in the long term within the groups are:

- **Having a firm conviction:** it is difficult to stop once you start.
- **Having strong emotions:** being angry towards environmental problems and keeping feelings of love towards animals and the environment.
- **Self-efficacy experiences:** one can feel helpful and fulfilled within the group.
- **Finding the right balance between commitment and risk of burnout,** avoiding that tasks are not distributed equally.
- **A good organizational culture that takes mutual care into account,** especially in stressful situations.

On the other hand, activists in Barcelona point out that the lack of time and social and institutional recognition of activism is the external aspects that cause the most significant loss of volunteers.

2.6. Management

The organizations that participated in the Barcelona focus group use similar management

systems but with different nuances:

- The activists operate on an **assembly** basis. During those sessions, the actions are organized according to the political agenda and other movements' schedules. Sometimes decision-making is slow. On the other hand, this system makes the work less focused on specific people and becomes more transversal, making it easier for new people to take over.
- The NGO works under a "**sociocracy**" **model:** they make working groups with specific people, but they work by consensus. The common points and progress are exposed in the assemblies. In other words: there is a common coordination space, but the work is decentralized and therefore is more effective.

In the **Groningen** focus group, the organizations showed two different management systems that seem to be the results of the projects' profile of each organization.

- One organization keeps an **explicit management structure**, where each person involved understands the tasks that are expected of them to perform. In addition to the explicit distribution of tasks, the organization is equally explicit about each task's time frame and deadlines.
- Another organization is managed by a **small number of highly involved activists** that organize every objective, task, and time frame. Once they have decided the critical aspects of the upcoming activities, they distribute the tasks among themselves or reach out to other people.

The representatives of the **Saarland** meetings belonged to grassroots movements that did not have an explicit formal management system. Specifically, the participants of the Saarland group meeting reported that:

- **Many communication programs are used**, such as Signal, Peerdome or Zoom, creating additional complexity.
- Sometimes there are **disagreements about the type of chat or program** to choose.
- **Effectiveness Measurement.**

To measure its effectiveness, Barcelona, Groningen, and Saarland activists acknowledge that no structured evaluation is done:

- So far, they define success **intuitively**, perceiving that they are reaching many people.
- Some activists stated that the organizations **do not have time to do evaluations.**
- They find it **challenging to define the criteria** for what constitutes success.
- They can evaluate public engagement in **social networks**, using the number of clicks, likes, subscriptions, and followers (this is especially the case in Fridays for Future).
- Sometimes, there are concrete goals, but other times there are **unrealistic goals or goals that do not depend directly on them**, such as the overall goal of ensuring that the increase in global temperature does not exceed 1.5 degrees.

2.7. Problems They Face

The activists shared various problems that they usually face as a group, on which they agreed. These revolve around the difficulties people face in getting started and staying in climate activism, stress and burnout, teamwork organizing, leadership problems, and lack of volunteers.

Problem 1: Difficulties on starting and staying in political activism

- Lack of time.
- Difficulties in reconciling activism with work and family.

- Unclear distribution of roles and responsibilities, with lack of structures.
- Little sense of self-efficacy, since success moments are rare.
- The emotional burden of concern about climate change, along with frustration with politicians.
- It requires a high cognitive load since much new information has to be learned and assimilated.
- Difficulties in finding tasks at the beginning.
- Lack of social and political recognition, absence of a salary, lack of feedback.
- Problems establishing contacts, maintaining and organizing with them.

Problem 2: Stress and burnout

- Stress with self-management and time management.
- Part-time commitment compromises paid work.
- Lack of resources (e.g., people, skills or money).
- Sense of urgency given that the most committed people are the most needed by the organization.
- Emotional and cognitive load.
- Need to have much energy to stay active.
- Need for resilience to face volunteer work.
- Need to know how to handle frustration.
- Lack of spaces for self-care and mutual care.

Problem 3: Problems on teamwork organization

- Regarding **planning**:
 - Many activists reported that they only think about short-term goals.
- Regarding **task delegation**:
 - If something is perceived as difficult, fewer people volunteer to do it.
 - Only a few are actually active.

- There is volunteer rotation due to a lack of motivation or time.
- Regarding **group dynamics**:
 - The groups are too big or too small.
 - There is a diffusion of responsibility.
 - There are difficulties in contacting people internally and assigning tasks.
- Regarding possible **internal conflicts**:
 - Indecision on how to deal with conflictive or troublemaking people.
 - People highly engaged and well-regarded by peers leave because of conflict with others.
 - Lack of time to deal with conflicts.
 - A specialized work group called “awareness AG” is responsible for mediating conflicts (internally and as a service for other activist groups). But at the moment there is a lack of public and internal campaigns promoting this offer.

Problem 4: Leadership problems

- In some organizations, there are no leadership roles.
 - There are no project managers; there are group “spokespersons.”
 - Management is primarily done collaboratively.
 - Difficulties in making decisions and coordinating.
 - Slow, deliberative process.
- Many members are against a concentration of power and hierarchies.
- Having a management position involves more work, which is perceived as an unattractive role.

These are the most commonly shared issues by the participants of the focus groups. However, the organizations seem to be working adequately in

several cases, and the workflow would be more adjusted.

Possible solutions that activists and workers in Barcelona proposed were:

- Designing and planning with holistic vision and long-term objectives.
- Operating by assemblies, which was simultaneously perceived as a problem and solution.
- Implementation of rotating commissions.
- Defining the level of involvement and time available that each member has from the beginning.
- Learning from other successful social movements.

2.8. Tools, Training, and Knowledge That Would Help Them

Finally, activists were asked what tools, training, or knowledge they needed to develop their work effectively.

Resources:

- The need to get **funds** for the projects.
- The need to have **paid work**.

Training and knowledge:

- **How to handle the frustration** and emotional burden of activism.
- **How to promote care and self-care**: learning to create spaces and tools for it.
- **How to promote a paradigm shift** in the conception of work and activism.
- **How to make decision-making processes more efficient** in order to act faster.
- **How to lead** within the context of assemblies.
- **How to resolve internal conflicts**, especially how to handle troublemaking people.
- **How to write proposals** for public funding.
- **How to transfer knowledge** within the

organization to avoid losing skills when some people leave.

- **How to coordinate** and manage projects.
- **How to design communication projects.**
- **How to mediate and moderate**, maybe to involve external mediators to train internal mediators and moderators.
- **How to give feedback**, both positive and structured and negative and constructive
- **How to manage change:** support in the processes of structural changes
- **How to manage time.**

Barcelona activists also expressed that they would prefer face-to-face learning devices instead of virtual ones.

3. CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of these meetings was to gather the needs of climate activists, to validate and adjust the theoretical contents proposed in PSYCLIC

concerning their actual and current needs.

Much of the content included in the PSYCLIC project was mentioned in the focus groups' participants, observing a substantial overlap in the results of the different groups and regions. In addition to the expected issues and needs, new ones emerged as relevant topics for activists, such as resources for frustration management, knowledge and implementation of self-care practices to prevent burnout, and techniques or strategies to make decision-making more efficient and thus be able to streamline actions.

Participants also pointed out that leadership is a relevant topic, but not in the classic sense of organizational psychology, but adapted to assemblies, and that, therefore, includes the formation of work teams. All these issues refer to psychological and social resources and strategies, which undoubtedly validates and reinforces the need for the PSYCLIC project.

