

FRIENDS OF CHILDREN OF SERBIA



---

RESEARCH ON THE ATTITUDES OF CHILDREN  
AND YOUNG PEOPLE ABOUT  
ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION

**MY RIGHT TO THE FUTURE**

---



Co-funded by  
the European Union

June 2023



## SUMMARY:

Climate change and environmental destruction have a huge impact on the health of children and young people, and environmental protection is directly related to their future. At the same time, they have little and insufficient power to limit the negative consequences of climate change, which makes them particularly vulnerable to climate anxiety, as one of the new psycho-social phenomena of today. **The research "My right to the future", in addition to examining the attitudes of children and young people on environmental protection, is the first major research on climate anxiety among children and young people in Serbia. Also, the research implies the attitudes of young people about the relationship between decision-makers/institutions on the topic of environmental protection and climate change in our country.**

## INTRODUCTION:

**The research on the attitudes of children and young people about environmental protection "My right to the future" was created within the project "DIALOGUE from ECO anxiety to ECO action" which was realized with the support of the Tempus Foundation within the Erasmus+ program.** The goal of this project is to examine and, if necessary, turn the anxiety, hopelessness and apathy of young people into positive action for environmental sustainability. With the project, we aimed to actively involve young people in the processes of adopting and changing sustainable development policies, as well as increasing their influence on decision-makers at the local and national level. Also, through the project, we trained and empowered peer educators in the field of environmental protection and sustainable development from 12 municipalities in Serbia.

**Through the project as a whole, and research as part of it, we want young people to convey their views, insights and recommendations for solving environmental problems and sustainability in Serbia, and to establish mechanisms for the visibility of their activities and influence on changing awareness in the community.**

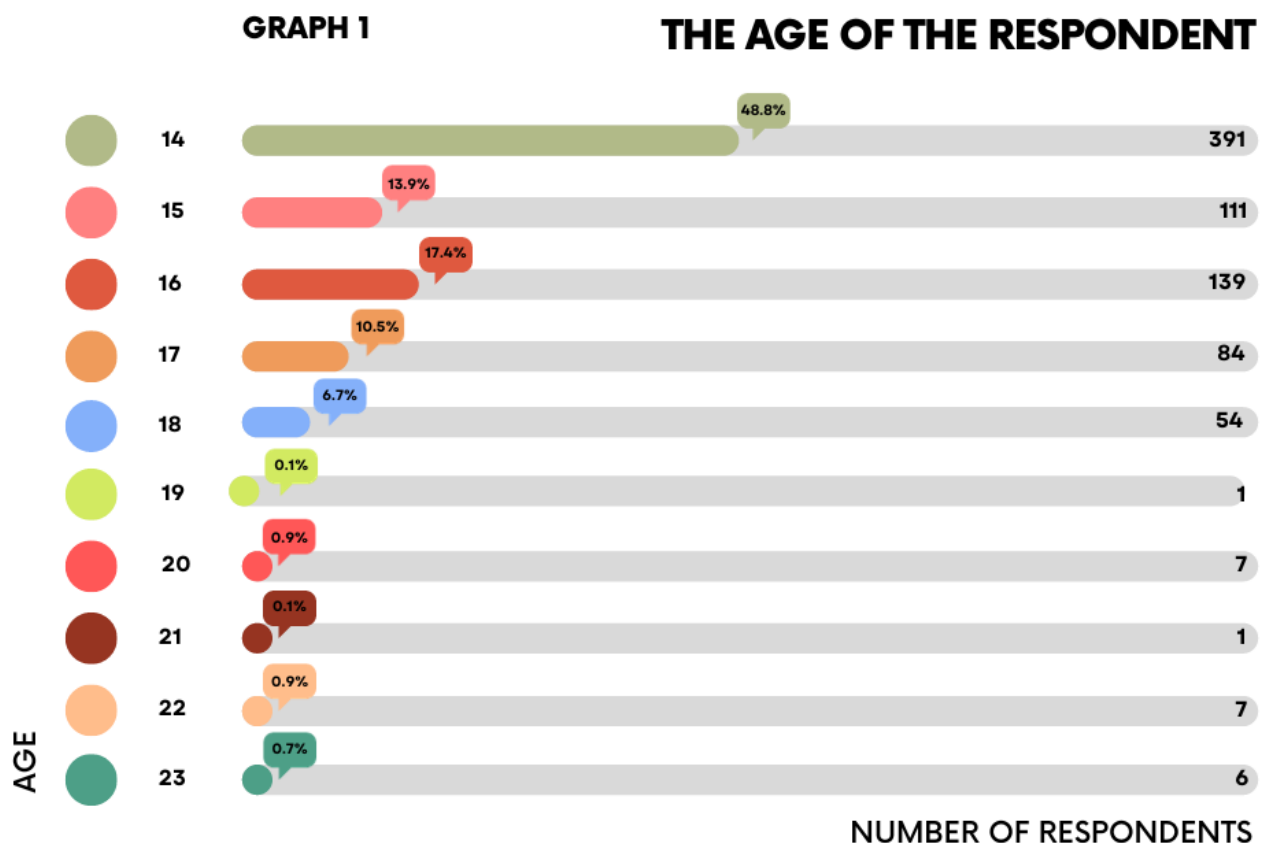
It is important to emphasize that before the research we recognized the need for active engagement of young people, and strengthening their role in consultative processes with public authorities, as well as designing mechanisms to reduce eco-anxiety.



## METHODOLOGY:

1. 801 people (children and youth), aged 14 to 23, participated in the research (graph no. 1). The opportunity to fill out the online questionnaire lasted from October 4, 2022 to the end of January 2023. Through the questionnaire, which contained thirteen questions, of which nine were closed-ended and four were open-ended, data were collected on the thoughts and feelings of the participants about environmental protection and climate change, as well as the answers and reactions of decision-makers to climate change in Serbia, in the opinion of young people, research participants. Inspired by the research 'Climate anxiety in children and young people and their beliefs about government responses to climate change: a global survey' (Hickman et al., [2021]), we developed part of the methodology of this research.<sup>1</sup>

The questionnaire was filled out by respondents from 74 towns and municipalities in Serbia.



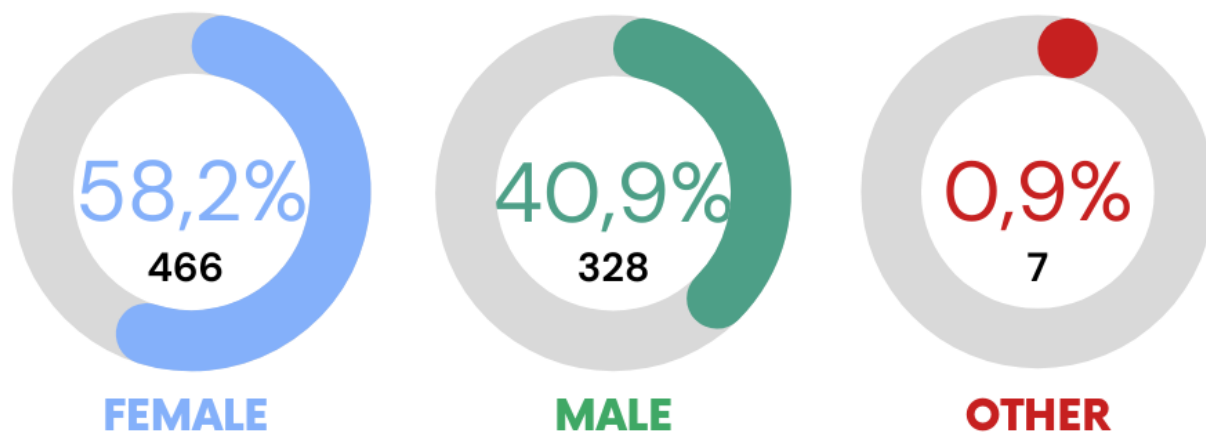
<sup>1</sup> C. Hickman, E. Marks, P. Pihkala, S. Clayton, RE Lewandowski, EE Mayall, B. Wray, C. Mellor, L. van Susteren; Climate anxiety in children and young people and their beliefs about government responses to climate change: a global survey; Lancet Planetary Health, 5 (2021), 10.1016/S2542-5196(21)00278-3



2. Of the total number of participants, 58.2% (466) of the participants are female, 40.9% (328) are male, and 0.99% of the respondents did not choose either of these two categories (they chose the category “other” - graph number 2 ).

**GRAPH 2**

## **GENDER OF THE PARTICIPANTS**



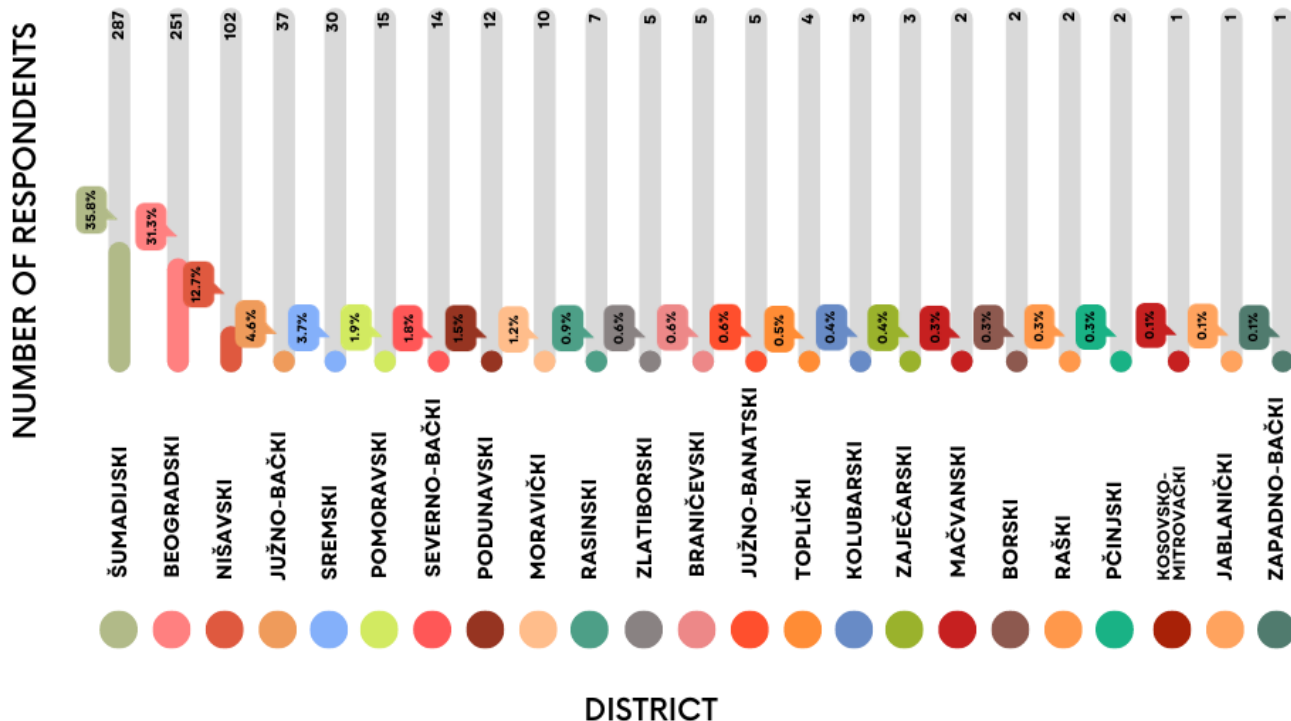
3. The research examined the attitudes of young people from 74 places (23 districts) in Serbia: Grocka, Lazarevac, Mladenovac, Novi Beograd, Palilula, Rakovica, Savski Venac, Sopot, Surčin, Voždovac, Vračar, Zvezdara, Bor, Majdanpek, Petrovac na Mlavi , Požarevac, Veliko Gradište, Bojnik, Bačka Palanka, Novi Sad, Srbobran, Temerin, Titel, Žabalj, Alibunar, Pančevo, Valjevo, Zubin Potok, Bogatić, Šabac, Belo Polje, Čačak, Gornji Milanovac, Aleksinac, Crveni Krst, Mediana, Merošina, Palilula, Pantelej, Vranje, Smederevo, Smederevska Palanka, Velika Plana, Ćuprija, Despotovac, Jagodina, Rekovac, Svilajnac, Ćićevac, Kruševac, Stragari, Kraljevo, Raška, Subotica, Inđija, Ruma, Batočina, Beloševac, Knić, Kragujevac, Lapovo, Rača, Stanovo, Topola, Prokuplje, Žitorađa, Knjaževac, Sokobanja, Apatin, Bajina Bašta, Kosjerić, Priboj and Sjenica.

The distribution of research participants, according to the 23 related districts, is shown in the table (graph no. 3).



GRAPH 3

## GEOGRAPHICAL DISTRIBUTION

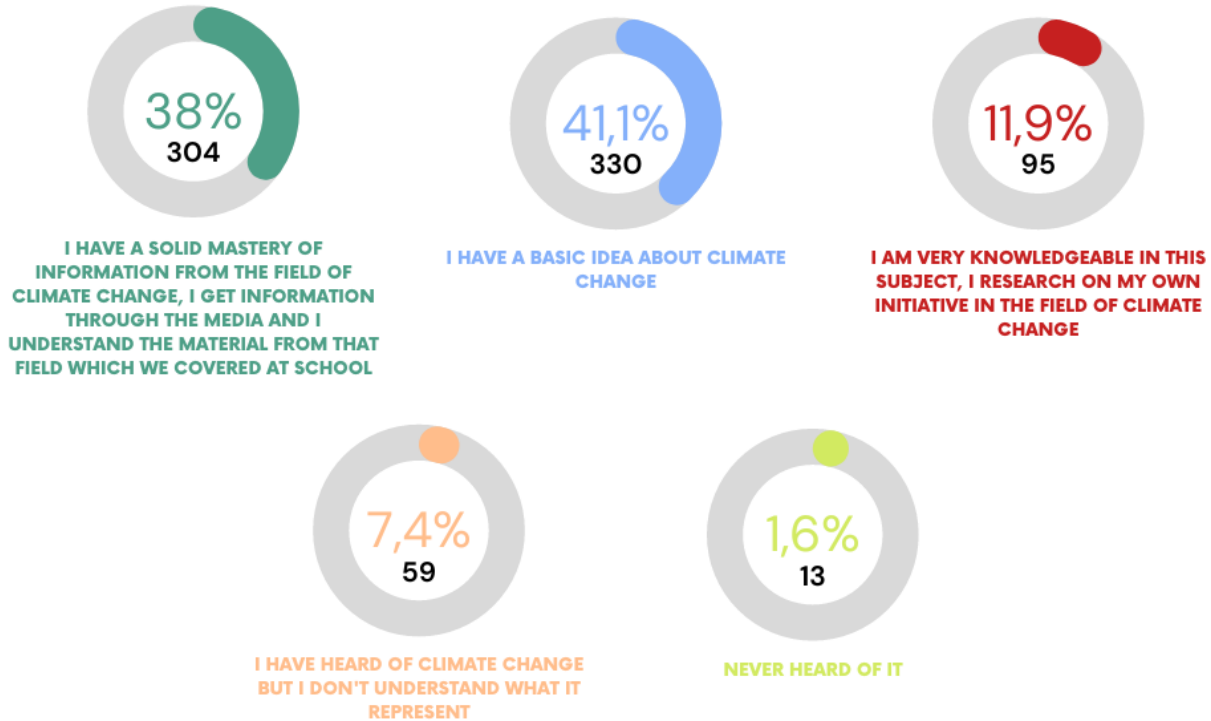


4. In response to the fourth question about whether they know what climate change is, as much as half of the participants (49.9%) declared that they have a solid command of information in the field of climate change, are informed through the media and school - they are very knowledgeable about this topic, they independently research current affairs in the field of climate change. 13 respondents (1.6%) have never heard of climate change. The largest number of research participants, 330 of them (41.1%), have a basic idea about climate change, and 59 of them (7.4%) have heard of the phenomenon, but do not understand exactly what it is (graph no. 4).



**GRAPH 4**

## DO YOU HAVE ANY IDEA WHAT CLIMATE CHANGE IS?



5. When asked what represents the greatest danger to the environment, the research participants gave a total of **814 answers** (some respondents gave answers that were divided into two categories according to the derived categorization - graph no. 5).

We classified the collected answers into the following groups:

- \***Pollution (in general): 163 responses (20%);**
- \***Air pollution: 162 responses (19.9%);**
- \***Industrial pollution and traffic: 141 responses (17.3%);**
- \***Human activity: 134 answers (16.5%)** Among the human activities dangerous for the environment, the interviewees mentioned bad management of natural resources, carelessness, as well as insufficient and/or inaccurate information;
- \***Excessive production of waste and insufficient and/or non-existent recycling: 73 responses (9%);**
- \***Global warming and climate change: 59 responses (7.2%);**
- \***Water and ocean pollution: 47 responses (5.8%);**

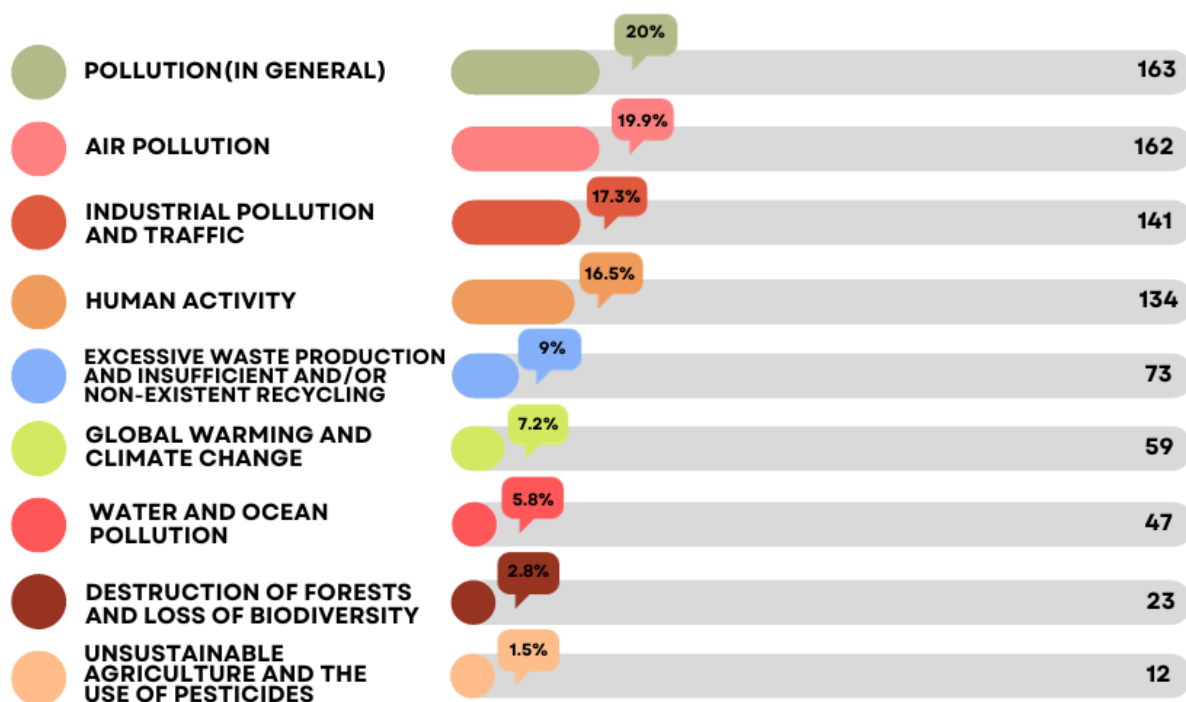


**\*Destruction of forests and loss of biodiversity: 23 responses (2.8%).** In this segment, young people recognize as dangers: deforestation and loss of natural habitats, extinction of plant and animal species, excessive exploitation of resources;

**\*Unsustainable agriculture and use of pesticides: 12 (1.5%).**

From the answers, it can be noted that the respondents recognize less specific types of dangerous environmental impacts, and more often mention those that the media reports on frequently (such as pollution as a general phenomenon).

**GRAPH 5 THE ATTITUDE OF YOUNG PEOPLE ON WHAT IS THE BIGGEST ENVIRONMENTAL HAZARD**

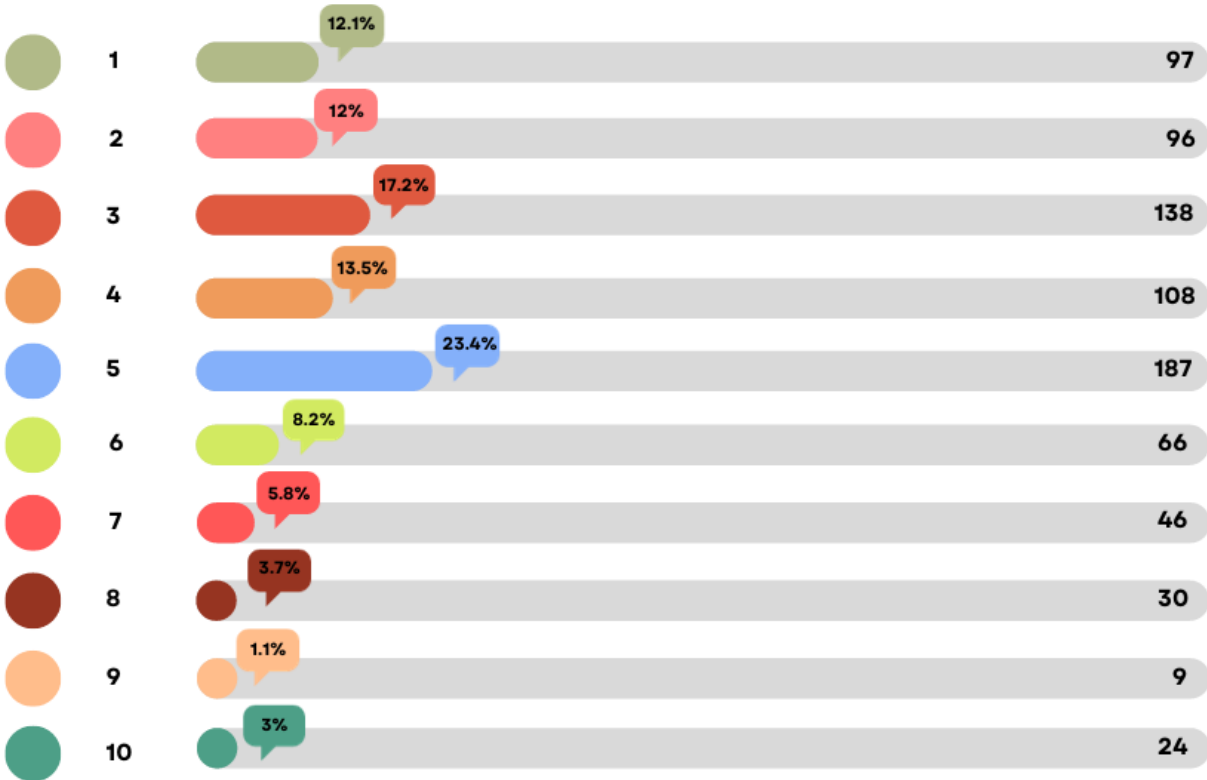


6. When asked how seriously they think their peers from their municipality take environmental problems, research participants could choose value from 1 to 10 on a scale, where 1 means "they do not take environmental protection seriously at all, they do not think that climate change is a threat, or even a reality", and 10 means "they are familiar with the dangers that climate change brings and actively advocate for environmental protection". **As many as 78.1% of participants actually believe that there is no serious understanding of environmental protection among young people (choosing answers on a scale of 1-5).** Only three percent of respondents on the scale choose a score of 10. The opinion of the majority of research participants is that young people do not take environmental protection seriously (graph no. 6).



GRAPH 6

### HOW SERIOUSLY DO YOUNG PEOPLE FROM YOUR MUNICIPALITY TAKE ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AND CLIMATE CHANGE?



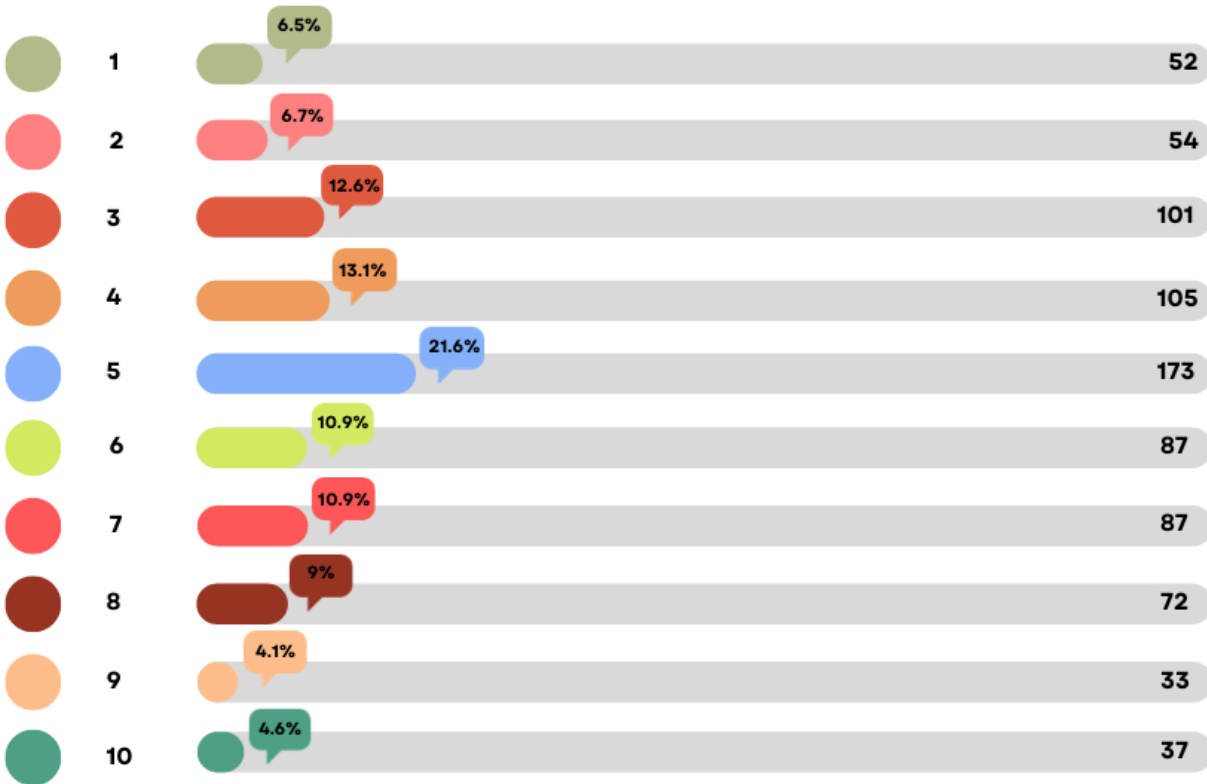
7. We asked the research participants what they think about how their adult fellow citizens perceive environmental protection. Respondents could choose from 1 to 10 on a scale, where 1 means "they do not take environmental protection seriously at all, they do not think that climate change is a threat, or even a reality", and 10 means "they are familiar with the dangers of climate change and actively advocate for environmental protection". **The largest number of answers (21.6%) refers to the choice of grade 5, which we can interpret as understanding the danger, but not enough, the overall score is again "on the side" of not understanding the seriousness of the need for environmental protection among adults, because 60.5% of respondents chose a grade of 1-5.** Only 4.6% of respondents chose a score of 10 - thus clearly showing the attitude that a very small number of adults actively advocate for environmental protection (graph no. 7).





**GRAPH 7**

## HOW SERIOUSLY DO ELDERLY CITIZENS TAKE ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION?



8. Examining eco-anxiety among young people in relation to the state of the environment and climate change, a high level of concerns about climate change can easily be noted on the attached graph (graph no. 8).

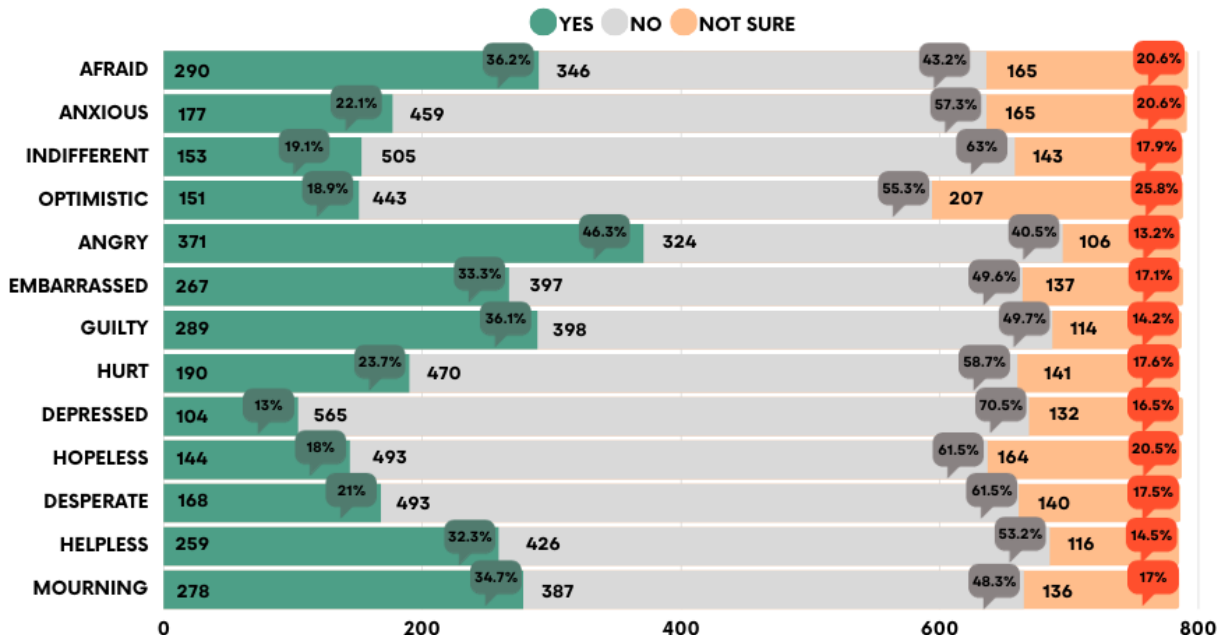
**A large number of respondents reported negative emotions; feelings of fear, sadness, anxiety, anger, despair, helplessness, guilt. As many as 371 (46.3%) respondents feel angry, and 267 (33.3%) feel ashamed.**

**This is also correlated with the next question in which 417 (52.1%) respondents believe that in terms of the quality of the environment they will not have the same opportunities as their parents (the environment will be more endangered in their opinion), and as many as 584 (72.9 %) of the participants concludes that people have failed to take care of the planet, which is why we are all facing the consequences.** Negative feelings are conspicuously present, and a large number of participants feel insecure about the environment and climate change (graph no. 9).



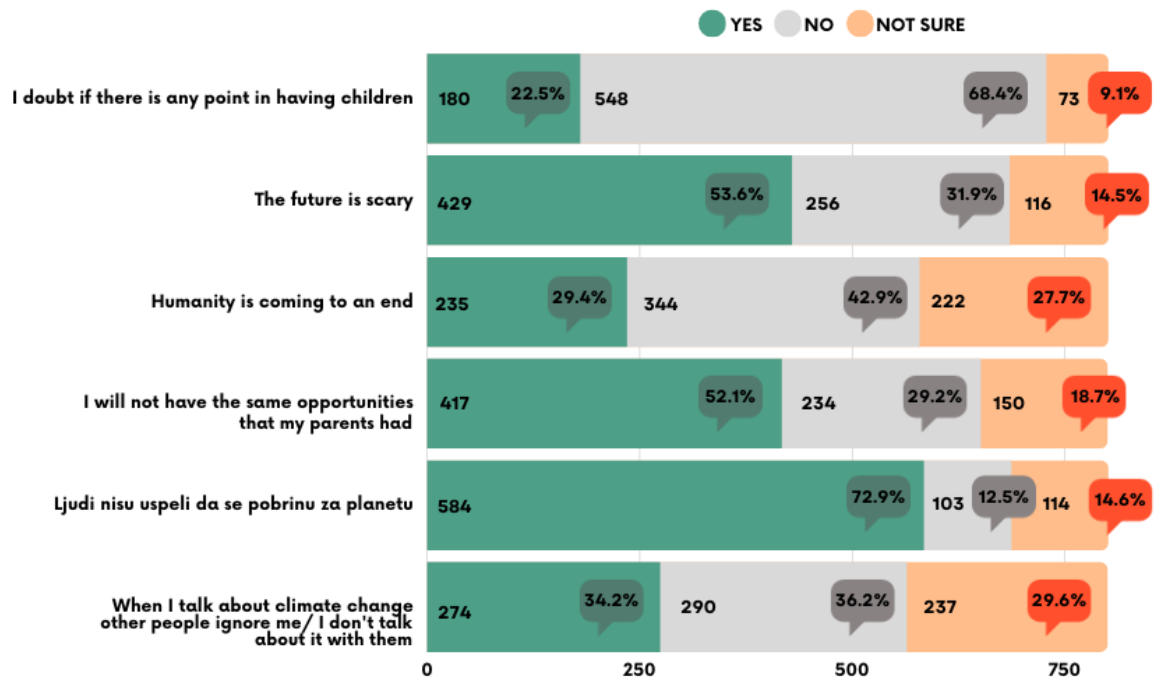
**GRAPH 8**

**HOW DO YOU FEEL ABOUT THE STATE OF THE ENVIRONMENT AND CLIMATE CHANGE?**



**GRAPH 9**

**DO YOU AGREE WITH ANY OF THE STATEMENTS?**





9. These are the statements to which the research participants could express themselves with the answers - yes, no, I'm not sure:

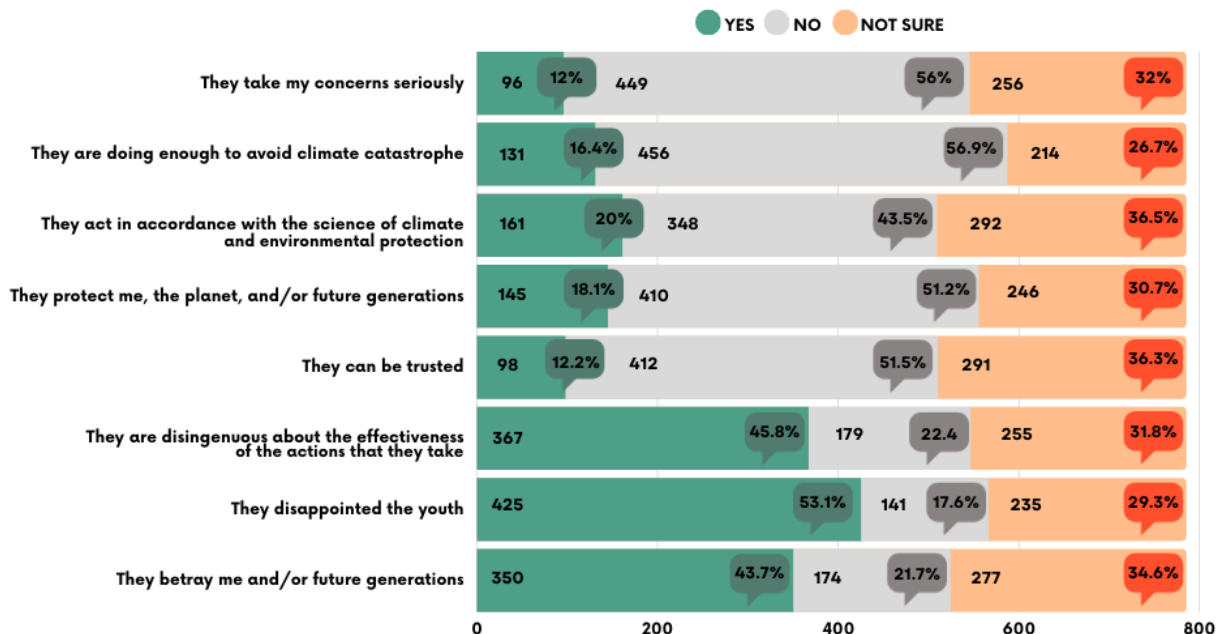
- I question whether there is any point in having children;
- The future is scary;
- Humanity is coming to an end;
- I will not have the same opportunities that my parents had;
- Humans have failed to take care of the planet;
- When I talk about climate change, other people ignore me, so I don't talk about it with them.

More than half of the respondents think that the future is scary, and almost 73% think that people have failed to take care of the planet. The overall response score is dominantly pessimistic (graph no. 9).

10. In the analysis of the attitudes of the participants about the actions of decision-makers/institutions in Serbia, and in relation to the environment, deeply negative attitudes prevail, which can be easily seen on the graph (graph no. 10). Among other things, as many as 410 (51.2%) respondents believe that decision-makers/institutions do not protect them, nor the planet, nor future generations. As many as 412 (51.5%) respondents believe that decision-makers/institutions cannot be trusted, 425 (53.1%) participants declared that they disappointed young people, and as many as 350 (43.7%) that they betrayed them and future generations. Only 98 (12.2%) respondents believe that the government/state institutions can be trusted in relation to the environment.

GRAPH 10

### ATTITUDES OF YOUNG PEOPLE ON THE ACTIONS OF DECISION MAKERS/INSTITUTIONS REGARDING ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION





**11. 227 respondents (28.3%) responded positively to the open question whether in the last six months they were disturbed by any news about an event from the world or Serbia, which is related to the state of the environment or climate change.** We classified their answers into several categories according to the main news topics that upset them.

**By far the largest number of respondents, 90 of them, are disturbed by the informations about air pollution. Some of the sample answers are reproduced in full below:**

- *In Serbia, 6000 people die annually due to air pollution;*
- *The news about the level of air pollution scared me. People are not doing anything about pollution, but are increasingly developing the industry that is the main cause of this problem;*
- *Polluted air (especially in Belgrade, which in the last few days has been one of the most polluted cities in the world);*
- *That the pollution in Serbia is the biggest in my city, Niš;*
- *I was disturbed by the news from the AirVisual website, which states that Belgrade is the third most polluted city in the world. The air was rated unhealthy with an air quality index of 169;*
- *When the air in the city is polluted, and I breathe it;*
- *The other day, Kragujevac was the most polluted city in Serbia, and Belgrade was the 3rd in the world.*

**The following groups of answers have approximate number of answers:**

**Climate change and global warming (melting glaciers, ozone holes), 26 answers (we quote some of them):**

- *In some countries, the impact of climate change is more deadly than cancer;*
- *News about melting glaciers and the impact that fresh water will have on saltwater and ocean ecosystems.*

**Natural disasters (floods, fires, hurricanes, earthquakes) 23 answers;**

**Endangered species, threat to their natural habitat, 22 answers (we cite one example):**

- *Footage of polar bears swimming in water full of garbage disturbs me.*

**Rio tinto, lithium mining, mines, 20 answers (we quote some of them):**

- *Rio Tinto and Slovakian battery manufacturer InoBat are building a factory in Serbia;*
- *Mining of lithium throughout Serbia.*

**The smallest number of answers described specific situations:**

**Industrial pollution of nature, 10 answers (we list some of them):**

- *Plastic is even found in mother's milk;*
- *Dramatic warning issued! Hazardous particles detected at 10 locations in Serbia;*



- Resumption of the heating season and news about lignite and similar things used in power plants;
- Bad coal for thermal power plants.

**Reduction of green areas, 6 answers (we list some of them):**

- Construction of factories in natural habitats, destruction of forests and arable land;
- Uncontrolled logging.

**Hazards (ammonia, oil spills) 2 answers;**

**Answers that we cannot classify, but we believe are significant to mention (we list some of):**

- Almost every day I hear some disturbing news related to our environment;
- The fact that the planet has the Black Box;
- That some people deliberately pollute the planet and don't try to help at all.

**Although this question did not necessarily require an elaborate answer, a number of respondents who answered “NO” reinforced the answer with statements such as:**

- No, nothing surprises me, nothing new...;
- No honestly, everything is fine, we can't be worse than this now, only better;
- I don't listen to the news and if I did, nothing would worry me;
- There is nothing to worry me because this topic is not talked about that often.

**12. To the following open question, in the last 6 months, have you heard any news related to environmental protection that encouraged you and gave you hope, and if yes, which one, a significantly smaller number of respondents gave an answer compared to previous question. Only 76 of them (less than 10%) could cite examples of environmental news that encouraged them and gave them hope.**

We have categorized the responses as follows:

**Most of the responses about encouraging news in the field of the environment mentioned - activism, environmental and youth associations, organizations and movements, protests, cleaning and planting actions, manifestations that promote environmental protection. A total of 36 answers (we list some of them):**

- When I heard that there are Friends of the Children of Serbia and that they have projects and workshops related to ecology and that young people actively participate in it;
- Manifestations such as Friday for future;



- *The fact that young people have started to raise awareness about global warming and the melting of ice at the poles;*
- *I was encouraged by the fact that the protests on this issue are more common and that the news reaches a larger number of people;*
- *That there are really a lot of people who initiate actions to save the planet, clear rivers, lakes, unite, etc...;*
- *Ordinary people organize themselves to defend nature;*
- *Young people are increasingly organizing to react, in Austria they sued the state to defend their right to a healthy environment;*
- *I heard how children from some schools collect bottles in the streets.*

**According to the order of representation, the following answer categories go:**

**Technological innovation and recycling, 15 answers (we quote some of them)**

- *A few months ago, in my area, we received blue containers intended exclusively for recycling;*
- *We heard about nuclear reactors based on cesium. They could really be a good opportunity to provide a good solution for the production of green electricity;*
- *Shutting down heating plants and switching to a renewable form of energy;*
- *Windmills are being installed around Serbia that will generate electricity;*
- *New ways to recycle, dispose of waste...*

**Increasing green areas, preserving forests and protecting animals, 12 answers**

**Institutions: 4 answers (we list some of them)**

- *The Banja Luka mayor and management make various acts that contribute to ecology;*
- *Kragujevac received slightly more than one million dinars from the Ministry of Environmental Protection for the removal of 14 illegal landfills, which will improve the quality of life of citizens. Another ecological project related to afforestation of green areas is planned;*
- *The Chamber of Commerce of Serbia announced that a fair was held in Belgrade in October on environmental protection, and I think that more such fairs will encourage people to think more about protecting the environment.*

**Companies: 2 answers**

**Examples on a global level, 7 responses, (we list some of)**

- *Increasing biodiversity in the canals of Venice;*
- *Greta Tumberg's speech;*
- *I saw a video clip on YouTube showing a film about the protection of the ozone layer and I liked it;*
- *Advertisement on Animal Planet (Time to act, it's not too late);*



- *Bhutan is the first country with a negative carbon footprint;*
- *Some microorganisms have adapted to feed on plastic and break it down.*

**13. A total of 485 (60.5%) respondents answered the open question "In what way do you think young people could be involved in solving environmental problems?" (graph no. 11). We categorized their answers as follows:**

**The largest number of responses refers to the need for further education, raising awareness regarding environmental problems (134 responses in total).**

- *They could be involved in solving climate problems by creating awareness about ecology and environmental preservation from a young age;*
- *To free children from anxiety and fear and to be more informed on this topic so that they can express their opinion;*
- *Through the introduction of mandatory education on environmental conservation, as well as the obligation to recycle both in school and outside, I think that awareness and knowledge about the environment would be raised. Only through education and talking about the topic can we see the problem, in order to solve it later;*
- *Education and prevention of predecessors' mistakes.*

**An equally large number of participants believe that it is primarily the responsibility of young people to change their habits, to pollute less, to recycle, not to use unnecessary electricity, etc. (112 answers in total).**

- *They should assume greater responsibility regarding the preservation of the environment;*
- *Garbage collection, recycling.*

**The next category in terms of representation are suggestions for organizing specific actions to clean rivers, green areas, and plant trees (100 responses in total).**

- *More ecological actions of cleaning public green areas, involving young people in planting trees and flowers! And what is even more important, the children would be outside and not on their mobile phones, and there would be more socializing;*
- *That schools organize some kind of day trip where they take children to polluted environments (preferably rivers/ forests) and clean up together with them.*

**More concrete, elaborated and thought-out suggestions come from 46 respondents, who believe that young people should be more active participants in environmental protection, in the form of peer and intergenerational educators, as well as advocates of public policy changes.**

- *I am sure that young people should spread the story about this with an explanation of our environmental problems. They should appear more often in the media, to spread the word in schools, streets, even kindergartens. To hold some gatherings where all people can freely come and*



*explain the situation to them and for everyone to discuss the problems and make suggestions. It should be held in all places and those proposals (concrete ones) should be forwarded to the authorities;*

*- Protest is a way of change, to make the government understand how serious the situation is since without the government we cannot make any big change even if we do everything in our power at home;*

*- I would just like them to listen to us more. Us, not adults who speak for us. We know much more than they think and can help if they would only listen to us;*

*- Young people can promote recycling in cooperation with the competent services and some green organizations;*

*- Young people should participate as advisors in the creation of educational programs dealing with environmental protection because they can provide information on how to make that content more attractive to young people, so that it is not abstract;*

*- To the National Assembly: Once a month at a session to listen to a presentation by a youth representative on the impact of the environment on young people. The government should hold regular open consultations on this topic for young people and make them open.*

**Slightly fewer, 39 respondents, believe that changes or more consistent application of laws, regulations and practices of public institutions are necessary. The majority of these proposals refer to the introduction of fines for polluters (industrial, but also individuals), as well as prescribing and enabling conditions for proper recycling in as many households and schools as possible.**

*- Many more recycling bins. In my neighborhood and school I don't see any;*

*- Construction of sidewalks, so that we can ride bicycles instead of going to school by bus. Places for our bikes at school;*

*- To force the authorities to install filters for air purification in factories and to prohibit factories from discharging toxic substances into rivers and lakes;*

*- To increase the fines for polluting public areas and to change all containers to recyclable ones.*

**A total of 36 responses describe the need for cooperation with organizations, associations and movements that deal with environmental protection, as well as with the media, to whom they propose to devote more media space to this topic, but also to open up space for young people who want to create informative content in this area.**

*- The media should give space to young people so that they address their peers as well as adults and raise the importance of this topic;*

*- Together with schools, sports clubs, eco organizations, they can organize actions to clean rivers and green areas;*

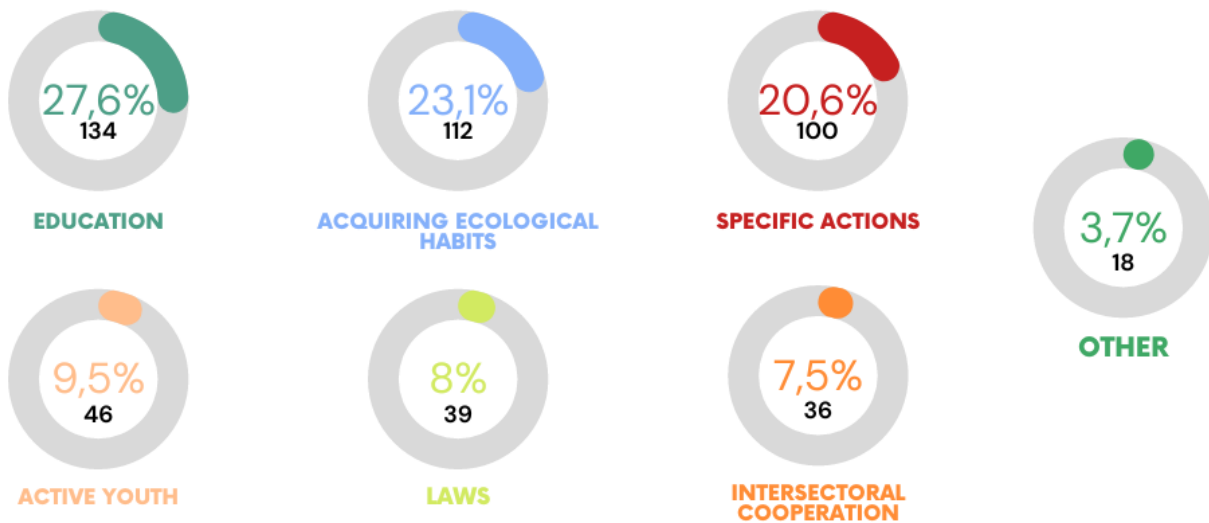




- As a personal example in their communities - many young people need the right knowledge and support to develop good habits such as recycling, composting, reducing pollution, schools and organizations dealing with that topic could help them there.
- The media should encourage young people and give them space to deal with this topic and not waste their resources on unimportant scandals. Young people have something to say and with the help of experts from, for example, environmental protection organizations, they could design some media educational programs for their peers;

**GRAPH 11**

## **YOUTH'S ATTITUDE ON HOW THEY CAN BE INVOLVED IN SOLVING ENVIRONMENTAL PROBLEMS**



### **CONCLUDING CONSIDERATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS:**

#### **CONCLUSIONS:**

- Half of the research participants (49.9%) declared that they have a good command of information in the field of climate change, from the media, school or independent research. 1.6% of respondents have never heard of climate change, and 59 of them (7.4%) have heard of the phenomenon, but do not understand what it represents;
- When analyzing environmental hazards, only 16.5% implies human activity, only 16% waste and non-existent or insufficient recycling, and only 2% on forest cutting. It is clear from the research that the young respondents are not sufficiently informed about specific forms of dangerous activities for the environment;



- As many as 78.1% of research participants believe that there is no serious understanding of environmental protection among young people, and 60.5% have such a view on the understanding of this phenomenon among adults;
- Only 76 respondents (less than 10%) could name examples of environmental news that encouraged and gave them hope;
- 52.1% of respondents believe that in terms of the quality of the environment they will not have the same opportunities as their parents (the environment will be more endangered in their opinion), and even 72.9% conclude that people have failed to take care of the planet, which is why we all face consequences;
- 371 research participants (46.3%) feel angry, and 267 (33.3%) feel ashamed in relation to the state of the environment.
- In the analysis of the attitudes of young people, research participants on the actions of decision-makers/institutions in Serbia, in relation to the environment, deeply negative attitudes prevail. As many as 410 (51.2%) respondents believe that decision-makers/institutions do not protect them, nor the planet, nor future generations, and 412 (51.5%) respondents believe that decision-makers/institutions cannot be trusted .
- 425 (53.1%) participants declared that the decision-makers disappointed young people in the field of environment, and as many as 350 (43.7%) that they betrayed them.
- Only 98 (12.2%) respondents believe that decision-makers/institutions can be trusted in relation to the environment.
- About 60% of respondents have ideas in which ways young people can and want to be involved in environmental protection. The largest number of views is that it is possible through educational programs and peer education, concrete actions, but only 5.7% of research participants recognize the participation and influence of young people through influencing public policies.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS:**

- Climate or eco anxiety and dissatisfaction are widespread among children and young people, affect their daily functioning and are directly related to their mental health;
- It is necessary to provide more comprehensive and purposeful information to children and young people about environmental protection and climate change, and it is necessary to start already in preschool age;
- It is important that the school system supports the active role of children and young people in environmental protection, both through education and information, and by initiating environmental protection activities. It is necessary for the school system to work together with the local community, and in accordance with the specific local needs;
- It is important to direct accumulated negative feelings (fear, hopelessness, apathy) in children and young people towards environmental protection activities;



- Experts in the field of mental health of children and young people should take into account the importance of eco-anxiety and be ready for an adequate response;
- It is extremely important that decision-makers accept the attitude of young people that they feel excluded and that they do not believe that they are protecting them, as well as future generations, and that in the field of environmental protection and climate change, they involve young people in solving accumulated problems;
- A far more engaged attitude of decision-makers is needed by taking responsibility and timely actions regarding climate change and sustainable development. Young people demand that decision-makers act more transparently in this area, respect the views of young people and include them in public policies in the area of sustainable development and climate change;
- There is a great need for empowering and educating young people in the area of mechanisms of influence on public policies in the area of sustainable development and environmental protection;
- There is an urgent need for further research into the emotional impact of climate change on children, in order to protect their mental health and life in general.



**Acknowledgment:**

***"We express our gratitude to the authors of the research 'Climate anxiety in children and young people and their beliefs about government responses to climate change: a global survey' (Hickman et al., [2021]), whose work served as inspiration for part of our methodology."***

Publisher: Friends of the Children of Serbia

For the publisher: Iva Eraković

PDS, 2023

[www.prijateljidece.org](http://www.prijateljidece.org)

[office@prijateljidece.org](mailto:office@prijateljidece.org)



**"Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA). Neither the European Union nor EACEA can be held responsible for them."**



@prijateljidecesrbije



@prijateljidece



@Prijatelji dece Srbije