Report on South Asian Youth for SDGs participation in the training “Environmental Education: Learning and Acting for a Better Future” at Europass Teacher Academy in Florence, Italy from 16th to 22nd March, 2026

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From the 16th to 22nd of March, the team of South Asian Youth for SDGs (SAYS) participated in a training program titled “Environmental Education: Learning and Acting for a Better Future" at the Europass Teacher Academy in Florence, supported by the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS).

The training brought together participants, mostly teachers from diverse countries and age groups, with most participants being in their 30s to 50s, while the SAYS team represented the younger generation. The trainer ensured an inclusive and engaging environment through various icebreakers and activities that helped everyone connect and understand each other’s cultural and social backgrounds. The course covered a wide range of topics, including systems thinking, climate change, climate science and its root causes, climate justice, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the plastic crisis, fast fashion, greenwashing, and climate actions. Alongside theoretical sessions, there were interactive group activities, school presentations, and a visit to a community garden. We also learned about differences between definitions that were already known but get mixed up sometimes, like Weather and Climate, Global Warming and Climate Change, etc.

One of the most impactful concepts explored during the training was systems thinking. It emphasizes that a system is more than the sum of its parts and that its properties belong to the whole rather than individual components. Concepts like resilience, diversity, complexity, self-organization, and emergence helped us understand that environmental issues cannot be viewed in isolation. Every action is interconnected, and attempting to solve one problem without considering the broader system often leads to new challenges. This idea was reinforced through activities that traced the lifecycle of everyday objects, making us reflect on the hidden processes and resources behind simple items we use daily.

The sessions on climate change and climate science highlighted not only the causes but also the unequal impacts across different regions. A major realization from the discussions was how geographical location significantly shapes one’s experience with climate change. While some participants from Europe spoke about power blackout in 2025, snowstorm, floods as major disruptions, the members of SAYS being from South Asia spoke more towards floods, heavier rainfall and landslides, and other extreme weather conditions as a part of lived reality being from hilly regions. One more topic was the bad air quality over the years even though the places most of us came from were far from metropolitan cities. This difference in experiences made it clear that climate change is not just an environmental issue but also a deeply social and political one, closely tied to the idea of climate justice. One realization among the participants was also on how South Asia had a lot of garment factories, where the garments are imported to the West and because of unclear management and policies, the waste often ends up in the water bodies affecting aquatic animals and also the garment workers are underpaid.

The exploration of the Sustainable Development Goals helped us understand their interconnected nature. Through an interactive activity, it became clear that no single SDG can be achieved in isolation, one SDG helps in the achievement of the other SDGs. The realisation that the environment forms the foundation for both society and the economy shifted perspectives, especially for those who initially viewed social or economic aspects as more important. This highlighted the importance of moving beyond an anthropocentric mindset and recognizing that human development is entirely dependent on a healthy planet.

Discussions on fast fashion and consumer behavior encouraged reflection on the difference between needs and wants, and how trends driven by social media and influencers contribute to environmental degradation. It also revealed generational differences in awareness and influence, as certain trends familiar to younger participants were completely new to older ones. Similarly, the concept of greenwashing exposed how companies often mislead consumers by presenting themselves as environmentally responsible while continuing harmful practices. Examples such as exaggerated sustainability claims by major corporations and misleading campaigns by global brands reinforced the need for critical thinking and informed consumption.

The concept of ecological footprint further deepened this understanding by showing how everyday choices contribute to environmental impact. It made us realize that individuals can either be ecological creditors or debtors, depending on their consumption patterns, and that many of us are unaware of the true impact of our lifestyles. This reinforced the idea that there are no simple solutions to environmental problems, only complex systems that require thoughtful and informed engagement.

The visit to the community garden was particularly interesting, as it showcased practices like vermi composting. While these were presented as innovative solutions, it was striking to see that many such methods are already common in South Asia. This created a sense of reflection on how knowledge is often contextual, and what is considered advanced in one region may already be a traditional practice in another. One useful chart was of growing different plants in the same place and how each plant helps the other grow well/helps the soil not lose its quality.

Beyond the classroom, Florence itself served as a model of certain sustainable practices. The city had clean air, with an AQI of around 20, an efficient waste management system with different segregation bins, and well-informed citizens. Each morning while walking to class, we could see trucks outside collecting the garbage. Public transportation appeared reliable and punctual, and the availability of electric rental bikes offered a convenient and eco-friendly mobility option. Although there were vehicles, the overall system seemed organized and accessible. At the same time, the city felt very walkable, though sometimes crowded due to traffic, making walking a faster option in many cases. With Florence being a major tourist hub, it clearly showed how proper planning and joint efforts the place is well maintained and sustainable.

These observations led to reflections on regions we came from. Increased exposure through social media is bringing more attention to places we come from, and while this creates opportunities and attracts more visitors, there is the need for thoughtful planning that preserves the natural flow of the environment while promoting responsible tourism and growth as can be seen through Florence. It highlighted that South Asian cities have similar, if not greater, potential, but often lack structured planning and efficient implementation. Florence appeared to have been more balanced, developed enough to meet modern needs while still preserving its traditional character. This serves as a reminder that development does not always have to be rapid industrialization, but can also involve maintaining cultural and environmental integrity. However, looking at the availability of plants around the cities across the globe, we felt that Florence has a limited number of plants. Urbanization in the city has left limited space for plants and trees that would exhale more oxygen that humans could inhale.

At the same time, the training also prompted critical reflection. For the SAYS team, some parts of the curriculum felt basic as many of the concepts discussed are already part of everyday experiences in South Asia. But through activities and active discussion we also realized that while participants from Europe often focused on overconsumption and lifestyle changes, South Asian communities are still dealing with fundamental challenges related to basic needs and environmental vulnerability. However, despite these differences, the teaching methods used during the training stood out as highly effective and hearing presentations from the other participants was also very informative on knowing what schools around Europe are doing to make their students well aware about these issues. Activities in the class such as group discussions and interactive activities provided valuable tools that can be adapted for workshops and educational initiatives back to the schools we will be working with.

SAYS team also noted the effort that Florence city has put in place to ensure that climate change and environmental policies are implemented properly in making the environment climate-neutral by 2030. In order to ensure that climate change and environmental policies have been put into action, Florence city has encouraged people to increase greener spaces like parks and gardens; construction of buildings and streets with stones to keep the city cool in summer and warm in winter; encouraging people to use public transport like trains and trams instead of personal vehicles like cars and bikes; allocating areas for parking cars and bikes in order to balance urban mobility and using technology like smoke detector and circuit breaker. Most people in that city seemed responsible for their actions, especially in issues like segregation of waste, water usage, and conservation, etc. There is a lot that people in the Southern part of the globe need to learn from Florence city. However, this does not mean that people in the global south have not achieved anything. The global south is also moving forward in terms of sustainability, though at a slower pace. Governments in the Southern part of the globe are also putting in significant effort on both ground and policy levels to address the issue of climate change and environmental concerns to achieve SDG 13: Climate Action by 2030.