

White paper SoGreen Alliance on European elections 2024: on the move towards a greener future

We want to pass on a liveable and greener world to our children and next generations

(frame) Nice to make our acquaintance:

This white paper offers recommendations on behalf of the SoGreen Alliance for the European elections and the next EU-semester 2024 - 2029. Our alliance represents the European associations of tree nurserers, landscape architects, builders of green roofs and living walls, interior greeners, landscapers and gardeners, tree care specialists, builders of natural bathing waters and green professionals at municipalities. Together they strive for a sustainable and resilient future with greenery and nature-based solutions.

Intoduction

The everyday news is most of the times about threats and conflicts in our society. It leads to all kinds of emotions. From indifference to fear. But in these challenging times perspective and hope must be the starting point in our approach. To turn threats into opportunities and to involve people in actions that are within their reach. That is the way the SoGreen Alliance, a cooperation between eight European associations of professionals in natural greening, thinks about how we are going to make the real and immediate move to the future. A green future that benefits us and the generations to come.

Yes indeed, we see the challenges in society and have thought about where we can play our role. Our professionals produce, design, create, maintain and manage greenery and nature-based solutions in the built-up urban and rural area. A place where intense use of space must be in balance with the environmental quality to live, work and recreate. Outdoors and indoors. For a long time greenery was seen as decoration. It added a nice view or covered things that we rather didn't want to see. The challenges on climate, biodiversity and public health, supported by scientific research and innovation, have changed the public opinion on greenery. Now it is appreciated as a solution to prevent damage caused by heavy rainfall, heat and drought. It is not only about financial and economic damage, but also about social cohesion and human wellbeing.

EU-ambition

The EU Green Deal, launched by the European Commission in 2019, has set a great ambition in becoming a climate-neutral continent by 2050. It is not only a dot on the horizon, but a comprehensive strategy of measures and actions that appeals to all and must leave no one behind. The SoGreen Alliance welcomed the EU Green Deal, because it also gave us a perspective in how we can reinforce our contribution into societal challenges and what it means for the development of the professionals in our sectors. We believe, that together we are on a good track but more is possible. There is no reason anymore why we should delay or hesitate the application of greenery and nature-based solutions to create a sustainable and resilient place to live. There is no reason why we shouldn't include decisions about greenery and nature-based solutions at the beginning of the policy and design process. And the same counts for the involvement of the professional in natural greening. He or she must be at the table as early as possible to have a realistic and effective green solution with growing benefits in the years to come.

New impulse

In the opinion of the SoGreen Alliance, it is time for the next step. After the elections for the European Parliament and the start of the new European Commission, there must be an even ambitious work program as there was in the past five years. In many current initiatives there are perspectives defined to reach by 2030, 2040 and 2050. We must keep these aims as a compass to work further on. Most of the initiatives of the EU Green Deal are now implemented on national, regional or local level. It also needs time to have a clear view on the effect and what is needed to reinforce actions. New layers of regulation, that will create new burdens or administrative pressure, will probably not work in effectiveness. That doesn't mean that there will be no new impulse in the approach of societal challenges. Constant monitoring, evaluation and redesigning of initiatives on EU-level will be needed. The SoGreen Alliance wants to play a proactive role in thinking about possibilities and support a successful implementation on site.

Recommendations

Looking at a possible new work program for the next European Commission, the SoGreen Alliance sees some very interesting opportunities. We would like to recommend:

- *EU Green Deal 2.0*

The SoGreen Alliance looks back with great appreciation at the diverse initiatives within the EU Green Deal. The Climate Law is not only about the reduction of CO₂-emissions in tackling climate change, but also about possibilities to absorb. This is where greenery and nature-based solutions play a vital role. In the Renovation Wave there is attention for green roofs, green facades, greenery indoors and green infrastructures as solutions to make buildings energy efficient. The EU Taxonomy has defined green investment options. We are glad that greenery and nature-based solutions are included in the list. The Skills Agenda focusses on the development of professional skills to make the green transition. The Nature Restoration Law includes aims for greening the urban area. Although these aims could have been more ambitious, we consider this as a starting point to work further on in the definition of concrete actions on national, regional and local level.

We already hear the wish to go on in a EU Green Deal 2.0. From the perspectives of climate, biodiversity and public health, we see some points of attention for a sustainable urban area that need to be addressed on European level. These points are already somewhere on the agenda, but it would be good to evaluate the current status, to combine and to look where new impulses could be given. Our plead would be, that there will be a specific chapter for the built-up/urban area in the follow up of the EU Green Deal.

In a holistic approach on the application and effectiveness of greenery and nature-based solutions in the built-up area, water and soil are vital. The availability of water during periods of heat and drought becomes an urgent topic. We need to collect rainwater and store it for different use. Greenery and nature-based solutions can be applied for that. To create an even bigger potential, we must unseal the soil in the built-up area and transform it into a fertile growing spot. Soil innovation is also important in view of the reduction of peat components in growing media. Besides water and soil, we want to elaborate further on the aspect of circularity so that green 'waste' becomes a natural source for new products or new applications.

- *Green transformation at local level*

The benefits of greenery and nature-based solutions for better climate, biodiversity and public health are experienced in ecosystem services at local level. To grow healthy plants it is sometimes, based on EU Plant Health Regulations, recommended to use protection products as a medicine.

Interdisciplinary teamwork in the design, creation and maintenance with all stakeholders is important to contribute to a successful application of green solutions. It needs careful planning, design and management of the right plant at the right place with the right maintenance and with the knowledge of why this plant is put there and what it will do. Municipalities, and citizens along with them, are in the lead of this process. The SoGreen Alliance has high esteem for the role of municipalities in defining and implementing green policies and want to seek for opportunities to support at local level. We think it would be good when the new European Commission will think further on how to facilitate municipalities in their greening ambitions and transforming actions. The new European Bauhaus is also thinking in this direction. We welcome the EU-Missions on 'Adaptation to Climate Change' and '100 climate neutral and smart cities' and plead for a larger involvement of the professionals in natural greening as a stakeholder on European and local level in these missions.

- *The built-up area as carbon sink*

Forests, peat lands and agricultural fields are indicated as places where more CO₂ is stored than emitted. The SoGreen Alliance considers the city also as a welcoming perspective as a carbon sink. Why not put further research and innovation on how we can reach a balance or even have a surplus on the absorption of CO₂ in the built-up area? Greenery and nature-based solutions can be a very important part of the solution in this approach. It would be good to elaborate further on this concept with the new European Commission, determine finance options within the Horizon program and who should be involved in bringing this topic further.

- *Biodiversity*

The protection and enhancement of biodiversity is essential for the existence of human life as well. We must be aware of this interlinkage and work proactively on this. We welcome the concrete restoration targets in the Nature Restoration Law and actions in prior EU-initiatives on this topic. Now it is time to bring them together and seek for new opportunities that can be found in the built-up area. The SoGreen Alliance wants to cooperate with the European Commission on a specific approach for nature and biodiversity in the urban area. We want to lift initiatives on nature-inclusive development in the built-up area to a higher level and want to align to EU-facilitated platforms where we can share knowledge and best practices. Cooperation with scientific institutions and regional/local policy makers is key to success.

- *Skills development*

The aim of the European Commission to leave no one behind, is also resonating at the SoGreen Alliance. Our work offers great job opportunities and career perspectives on different levels. Together with schools and universities we work on future focused vocational education in which also our mission on a green and sustainable future is intertwined. We work in coalitions, funded with EU-projects, in the further development of EQF-levels and vocational training networks. There are two groups that ask our common attention: workers on EQF-level 1 and 2. These people face difficulties on the labour market due to social status or disabilities. Especially in the production, creation and maintenance of greenery and nature-based solutions, these people have good job opportunities in our companies and are a valuable part of the team.



We plead for support from the European Commission to work further on vocational training for these groups and the facilitation of working places for these groups at companies. The visibility of our green profession is also a very important point of attention and something that we can take up as a common action on European level.

Achievement

The SoGreen Alliance wants to be partner in defining options and realizing them. With this agenda we want to inspire on new perspectives and common actions with European institutions and stakeholders. Together we make Europe greener, resilient and a better place to live. It would be wonderful, now we are standing on a historic momentum to stop climate change, that we pass on the world to the next generations in a better state as it is in now. That would be a great achievement that motivates and gives hope to all of us!

If you have questions about our proposals, you can contact Egbert Roozen by mail sogreen@onthegreenmove.com or by mobile phone +32 468 35 11 91.

The partners in the SoGreen Alliance are:

- European Arboricultural Council
- European Federation of Green Roof and Living Wall Associations
- European Interior Landscaping Organization
- European Landscape Contractors Association
- European Nurserystock Association
- IFLA Europe, International Federation of Landscape Architects
- International Organization for Natural Bathing Waters
- World Urban Parks Europe

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