

NGO funding and the EU's LIFE Programme

Questions and Answers

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What is the LIFE Programme, and how much money are NGOs getting from it?

The **LIFE Programme** is the European Union's flagship funding instrument for environmental and climate action. For the 2021-2027 funding period, the programme will provide €5.4 billion (approximately €771 million annually) to support projects that protect the environment and combat climate change. This accounts for just **0.3% of the EU's total budget** for the period.

- **Main Focus of budget:** The majority of LIFE funding is directed towards on-the-ground initiatives, particularly in nature conservation and climate action. This includes significant support for **Natura 2000**, the EU's network of protected areas.
- **NGOs and Civil Society:** A smaller share of the funding—€15.6 million annually—is allocated to **operating grants** for environmental NGOs and civil society organisations. This represents only **0.006% of the EU's total annual budget**.

Putting it in Perspective:

To contextualise, the financial resources available to NGOs through LIFE are modest compared to those of industry lobby groups. Lobbying the EU institutions has never been as sophisticated and well-funded as it is today.

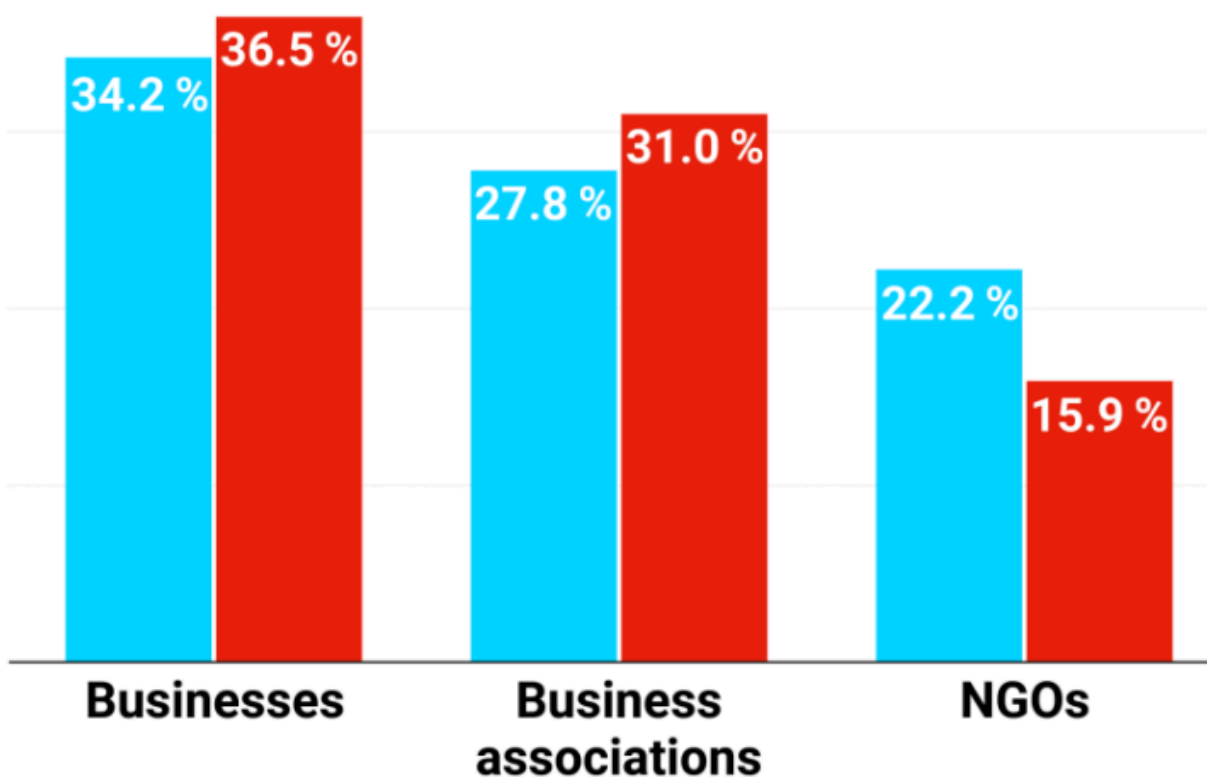
- In **2024**, the **50 corporations with the largest lobbying budgets** collectively spent almost **€200 million** on EU lobbying—two-thirds more than in 2015.
- Over **two-thirds of entries** in the EU Transparency Register **represent commercial interests**, far outnumbering and outspending other societal sectors.

For instance, the **chemical industry association CEFIC** operates with an annual budget of **€44 million** and employs **160 staff**. Such vast resources give business lobby groups a significant advantage in shaping political debates and influence over policies. This imbalance

can occur at the expense of broader societal priorities, including **social justice, a healthy environment, and other public interest concerns**. See [EU Lobby Report](#).

Distribution of meetings between stakeholders and Commission representatives at cabinet level by stakeholder category

■ Von der Leyen Commission ■ Juncker Commission



 www.Table.Media

Source: EU Commission, as of 02.12.2024

Are environmental NGOs funded by the European Commission to lobby the European Parliament on the Commission's behalf?

No.

Environmental NGOs are entirely independent of the European Commission's priorities or interests. Our organisations operate under annual work programmes approved by our members,

boards of directors, executive committees, and/or national offices. This ensures that **our activities reflect the priorities of our communities, not those of any external institution.**

The funding received, including from the European Commission (co-financed with other sources - this is a mandatory requirement), supports civil society's critical role in:

- **Fostering democratic participation in the development and implementation of EU policies** by amplifying the voices of citizens, including researchers, academia, small businesses, farmers, and local communities.
- Being a **watchdog on the implementation of EU laws** and legislative gaps, canvassing our members' expertise from the ground.
- Providing **evidence-based solutions** and sharing good practices from across the EU.
- **Counterbalancing well-funded influence** from corporate and foreign governmental lobbying that defends private interests.

The Commission neither sets the political priorities for grantees nor dictates their activities or positions on specific policy files. This independence is rooted in EU law:

- **EU Treaties** mandate support for civil society to strengthen democratic governance (e.g., the Treaty on the European Union and the Aarhus Convention).
- **The LIFE Regulation**, adopted by EU co-legislators, enshrines operating grants as essential for ensuring democratic legitimacy.

Recipients of these grants adhere to strict **accountability and transparency standards**, ensuring full compliance with EU regulations. Civil society funding is, and always has been, both legal and essential to the democratic process.

Why do environmental NGOs receive funding from the European Commission?

Civil society engagement is a cornerstone of participatory democracy, enshrined in the **Treaty on European Union (TEU)** and the **Aarhus Convention**.

Civil society organisations are the backbone of European democracy, essential for bridging the gap between EU policymakers and citizens, safeguarding transparency, nurturing trust, and driving solutions to urgent challenges like the triple climate, biodiversity and pollution crises. Their active involvement is critical to maintaining the EU's democratic legitimacy and its connection to the very people the EU serves.

Unlike resource-rich actors such as foreign governments, multinational corporations, and business associations, European citizens and their civil society organisations often lack the means to consistently participate in public dialogue at the European level. To address this imbalance, the EU provides support to NGOs through operating grants and access to

EU-funded projects. This helps level the playing field and ensures that diverse voices contribute to the decision-making process.

One such mechanism is the [LIFE Operating Grant](#), which allows environmental organisations to operate effectively at the EU level. This grant, established under the “[LIFE Regulation](#),” was approved with broad political support from both the European Parliament and the Council of Ministers.

Key Points:

- **Transparency and Accountability:** All funding is fully transparent, with recipients publicly disclosed and held accountable for their activities.
- **Democratic Values:** Supporting civil society is profoundly democratic. Without this funding, only well-resourced corporate interests would dominate the EU policy space, leaving critical societal issues—such as environmental degradation, pollution, and climate change—underrepresented.

Even with this support, [NGOs cannot match the financial and lobbying resources of corporate actors](#). Recent research by **Transparency International** highlights this disparity: corporate lobbyists account for [65% of all meetings with the European Commission](#), demonstrating the significant imbalance in access and influence.

Investing in operating grants for civil society ensures that the voices of citizens and diverse stakeholders are heard, safeguarding democratic participation and fostering a more balanced policymaking process at the EU level.

Is this all a secret?

No.

Information about LIFE funding for NGOs is publicly accessible through the **Transparency Register**.

Key Points:

- **Rigorous evaluation:** Operating grants are awarded through a competitive, thorough, and independent evaluation process based on the objectives and criteria outlined in the **LIFE Regulation**, the **Financial Regulation**, and the specific calls for proposals.
- **Cost-effectiveness:** Recipients strive to ensure the most cost-effective use of public funds, often attracting additional co-financing to maximise the added value of EU funding.

Accountability and Transparency:

- **Strict oversight:** NGOs receiving EU funding are bound by rigorous accountability principles. They engage in regular **monitoring, reporting, and auditing** to demonstrate the transparent and responsible use of public funds.
- **Audits and compliance:** NGOs undergo annual external audits, regular monitoring visits, and also additional external audits to ensure full compliance with EU regulations.

Publicly Available Information:

All recipients are listed in the [Transparency Register](#), and their work, funding sources, and relevant activities are disclosed on their websites. This ensures full public visibility into their operations and objectives.

In short, the process is fully transparent, with multiple layers of oversight ensuring the responsible use of EU funding.

A list of all NGOs receiving a LIFE operating grant is [available here](#).

Why are some MEPs targeting eNGOs and the LIFE Programme?

Civil society is facing unprecedented attacks on its role and space within the European project—despite the European Commission’s own [Political Guidelines](#) highlighting the need “*to step up [the European Union]’s engagement with civil society organisations [and to] ensure civil society is better protected in its work,*” and Commissioner McGrath’s [Mission Letter](#) (for democracy, justice, rule of law and consumer protection) which stipulates that “*you will step up engagement with civil society on democracy, rule of law and related issues*” and set up a **Civil Society Platform** “*to support more systematic civil dialogue and work to strengthen protection of civil society, activists and human rights defenders in their work.*” ...

This targeting coincides with disinformation waves and mounting resistance to the **European Green Deal** from powerful vested interests.. Some EU lawmakers, prompted by these corporate interests or short-sighted political gains, are actively seeking to dismantle or revise Green Deal policies, which environmental NGOs have strongly supported and advocated for. (for example the leaked EPP Draft EC work programme).

A [recent analysis by Transparency International](#) revealed that **MEP Monika Hohlmeier**, who raised the question of NGO funding in the European Parliament plenary, [is on the payroll of a major corporate holding company](#). The EPP MEP makes a striking **€75,000 per year**, on top of her MEP salary, for serving on the Supervisory Board of BayWa, an international corporation active in sectors such as agriculture, construction, and energy.

Does DG ENVI fund environmental NGOs to lobby to stop the EU-Mercosur trade agreement?

No.

The European Commission operates with a single, unified position. Its various **Directorates-General (DGs)**, are responsible for developing, implementing, and managing EU policies, laws, and funding programmes. These activities are carried out under the strategic direction of the **College of Commissioners**, led by the President. Importantly, **departments cannot lobby one another**.

Regarding the **EU-Mercosur trade deal**, the European Parliament has taken an official stance against its ratification. In its resolution of **7 October 2020**, the Parliament stated that “the EU-Mercosur agreement cannot be ratified as it stands.” This position has also been echoed by several national parliaments, reflecting widespread opposition from a broad coalition that includes **civil society groups, farmers’ unions, and social movements** across Europe.

Environmental NGOs engaged in the EU-Mercosur trade deal aim to uphold **civil society representation and engagement**, which is enshrined in the **Treaty on European Union** and the **Aarhus Convention** as cornerstones of participatory democracy. Their work ensures that diverse societal voices are included in negotiations and decision-making processes related to the agreement.