



How can a festival help build a movement?

March 2026



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Intro

Cyprus has long had passionate environmental voices, individuals and organisations who, for decades, **fought for the protection of the island's nature and environment**, often working in isolation. Compared to other European countries, the environmental movement in Cyprus developed relatively late, transitioning from limited regulatory frameworks in the 1970s and 1980s to more structured civic engagement in the following decades. The Ecological Movement Cyprus (founded in 1989) and Friends of the Earth Cyprus (founded in 1993) became key actors in national and international environmental advocacy.

Between 2000 and 2004, Cyprus adopted over 250 pieces of environmental legislation, establishing foundational frameworks for waste management, water protection and biodiversity. During this period, environmental organisations increasingly engaged in advocacy, implementation and public awareness. In the 2020s, a new wave of grassroots initiatives and community-led groups further expanded the landscape, focusing on practical sustainability actions, education and local environmental solutions.

In 2021, the realisation that the environmental challenges ahead were simply too large to face alone. Through the international [Break Free from Plastic movement](#) and Zero Waste Europe (ZWE), a growing sense of shared purpose began to **consolidate the cooperation of NGOs working on waste** across Cyprus. Inspired by a common vision of a zero waste society and the model of pan-European solidarity, four organisations, [Friends of the Earth Cyprus](#), the Ecological Movement Cyprus, [Zero Food Waste Cyprus](#), and [Let's Make Cyprus Green](#), came together to form the [Zero Waste Alliance Cyprus \(ZWAC\)](#) with the support of ZWE. Through joint forces and shared values, the alliance began working on projects in food markets to prevent waste, installing water refill stations around the island, pursuing zero waste city certification, and tackling organic waste management.

The alliance quickly found its place within a wider European story. Zero Waste Europe [worked closely with five national zero waste alliances](#), in Bulgaria, Cyprus, Germany, Spain and Ukraine, to strengthen their capacity, coordination and influence, enabling each to become a key voice for zero waste strategies in their country. This collaboration culminated in the publication of a [Blueprint for Movement Building](#) in October 2025.

In June 2025, the Zero Waste Alliance Cyprus expanded its collaboration model by opening up to a broader network of partners to co-organise the **Zero Trace Festival in Limassol**, a two-day public cultural event translating zero waste principles into visible community practice. Designed and organised collectively by the Zero Waste Alliance Cyprus, Agno Zero Waste Grocery (before joining the alliance) and [The Garage Community](#), the festival functioned as a real-life experiment in zero waste public events, bringing together workshops, panel discussions, hands-on activities, food, music, and community gatherings, all structured around zero waste principles. It was a collaborative effort to show how cultural events can be designed and delivered with significantly reduced waste. More than just an event: **it helped build a movement by**

strengthening alliances, improving relationships with public institutions, and demonstrating that real change is possible through collaboration, trust, and hands-on experimentation.

Rather than aiming for “perfect” zero waste, **the festival prioritised learning, visibility, and legitimacy.** It brought together several hundred participants, civil society organisations, artists, vendors, volunteers, and municipal actors, creating shared experiences that continue to shape cooperation beyond the event itself.



Why a Zero Trace Festival?

Prior to the festival, the Zero Waste Alliance Cyprus (ZWAC) was active through advocacy, workshops, and awareness-raising campaigns. ZWAC is a coalition of Cypriot organisations, including [Friends of the Earth Cyprus](#), [Zero Food Waste Cyprus](#), the Ecological Movement Cyprus, Let's Make Cyprus Green, [Fashion Revolution Cyprus](#), [KyklOIKOdromio](#) and [Agno Zero Waste Grocery](#), working together to promote a zero waste future through policy advocacy, community engagement, and hands-on initiatives. Rather than operating as a traditional membership organisation, ZWAC's strength lies in its organisational network, combining the expertise and reach of its members to drive systemic change across the island.

The idea for the Zero Trace Festival emerged through ongoing discussions within the Zero Waste Alliance Cyprus about the need to move beyond awareness-raising and into visible, practical demonstrations of zero waste principles in public spaces. Within the alliance **there was a shared sense that Cyprus lacked a strong, community-led example of what a low-waste festival could look like in practice.**

At the same time, Friends of the Earth Cyprus was facilitating participatory workshops with civil society representatives as part of the net-zero city [LC3 project](#), under Limassol's Municipality participation in the EU Mission for 100 climate-neutral and smart cities by 2030. During these participatory workshops, the idea of a public festival naturally emerged as a way to showcase learnings, involve young people, and give space to local initiatives working on sustainability. A key gap identified was **the limited use of public space by grassroots initiatives that offer meaningful content beyond entertainment.**

The initial goal was not to achieve "perfect" zero waste, but to create a learning space: to experiment, identify challenges, and build trust between civil society, local authorities, vendors, and the public, while demonstrating that waste reduction is possible through collaboration and community engagement.



From idea to alliance action

The earliest organisers of the Zero Trace Festival were closely connected to the Zero Waste Alliance Cyprus, particularly Agno Zero Waste Grocery and Friends of the Earth Cyprus, alongside The Garage Community, which brought experience in hosting community events and managing physical space.

The initial aim was modest but strategic: create a learning space where mistakes were acceptable, relationships could deepen, and **zero waste practices could be tested in real conditions**.

Internal organisation: building a collective muscle

As the first large-scale project delivered collectively by the Zero Waste Alliance Cyprus, the Zero Trace Festival played a crucial role in shaping internal collaboration and movement-building dynamics within the alliance. Internally, **the alliance operated without rigid hierarchies, relying instead on regular coordination meetings, shared responsibilities, and a strong culture of trust**. Different member organisations contributed according to their strengths: from waste expertise and community engagement to communications, logistics, and volunteer coordination.

Certain roles naturally aligned with organisational experience. For example, The Garage Community took the lead on spatial design, and on-the-ground coordination with market vendors drawing on their experience hosting community events and managing infrastructure. Friends of the Earth Cyprus, through the alliance, focused more strongly on coordination, site logistics, zero waste strategy, and communication with external stakeholders. Agno Zero Waste Grocery worked mainly on outreach, communication and collaboration with external communication stakeholders.

At the same time, **the collaboration deliberately mixed people across organisations where this made sense**. Individuals with strong relationships with the Municipality of Limassol, regardless of organisational affiliation, jointly handled permits, permissions, and coordination with municipal departments. Similarly, planning meetings, problem-solving, and decision-making were shared, allowing trust to build beyond formal roles.

This flexible structure allowed leadership to emerge in multiple forms, logistics, facilitation, communication, and problem-solving, reinforcing a core movement insight: **leadership does not need to be centralised to be effective**.



Challenges and turning points

This collaborative approach was not without challenges. Differences in working styles, expectations, and levels of capacity required ongoing communication and compromise. However, these tensions ultimately strengthened relationships within the alliance, helping members better understand each other's limits and capabilities. The festival became a learning process not only about waste reduction, but also about collective organising.

One of the main challenges during the planning phase was **balancing ambition with feasibility**. Partners had different levels of experience with zero waste practices and different expectations about what was “realistic” within existing timeframes, budgets, and operational constraints. This sometimes led to tension around the extent to which zero waste principles could be applied without risking the smooth delivery of the festival.

Another challenge faced was related to **the coordination between multiple actors**: the alliance members, the Garage Community, the Municipality, vendors, volunteers, and service providers. Communication was time-intensive, and responsibilities were not always clearly defined from the outset, which occasionally led to delays or confusion. For example, aligning vendors' practices with the zero waste setup required repeated engagement and explanation, especially for those unfamiliar with reusable systems or deposit-return schemes.

A key turning point was **the collective decision to focus less on “perfection” and more on piloting systems that could realistically work in the local context**. This helped reduce pressure and allowed partners to see the festival as a **learning process** rather than a final model. Regular check-ins among the alliance members and organisers helped surface concerns early, redistribute tasks, and reinforce trust. Importantly, moments of tension often became opportunities to clarify roles, strengthen collaboration, and build a shared understanding of what zero waste means in practice.



Implementation as movement practice

Zero Waste Solutions at the Festival

During the festival, **a deposit return system was introduced for reusable cups and trays**. Attendees paid a small deposit when receiving a cup (or tray), which was refunded upon return at clearly marked return points. Volunteers were present throughout the site to explain how the system worked, guide people to return stations, and support vendors when needed. Food stalls and bar areas operated exclusively with reusable items, and vendors were briefed in advance on both the practical system and the broader zero waste philosophy of the event, including expectations around minimising single-use plastics.

In parallel, the organising team conducted research to identify **existing public water refill stations** in the surrounding area and ensure they were easily accessible to festivalgoers. These refill points were highlighted through the festival's communication and [social media campaign](#), encouraging attendees to bring or borrow reusable bottles. A simple [map](#) was created to clearly flag refill locations on and around the site. On the day, volunteers actively reminded visitors about the water stations and helped collect reusable trays or cups that were left behind, returning them to the appropriate stations when needed.

Together, these measures significantly reduced the presence of single-use plastic bottles and disposable items at the event. While the systems required active support, **the combination of clear signs, volunteer presence, and communication proved effective in encouraging behaviour change**.



Collaboration with the municipality

From the get-go, **support from Limassol municipality played a decisive role in enabling the Zero Trace Festival.** The Mayor of Limassol responded very quickly and positively to the request to use the public square, giving a clear signal that the municipality was willing to support experimentation and new approaches. This early endorsement created confidence among the organisers and partners that the festival could move forward. As a newly elected mayor, his support aligned with his commitments to make Limassol a more inclusive, citizen-centred city and to explore more sustainable practices.

Zero Waste Alliance Cyprus worked closely with the municipality of Limassol to research, design, and implement reuse systems that could function not only for this event, but also for future public events in the city. Following a review of different options, the decision was made to **purchase reusable cups and trays, which remain the property of the municipality and can be reused across multiple events.** This ensured long-term value and avoided one-off solutions.

Equally important were the less visible but crucial contributions of the municipal staff. A single contact point within the municipality acted as a bridge throughout the process, facilitating permits, coordinating services, and resolving issues as they arose. This personal relationship was essential in keeping procedures manageable, especially given that organising a zero waste public event currently requires a high level of informal coordination. While this highlights the goodwill within the municipality, it also revealed the need for clearer, more structured processes to support such initiatives without relying so heavily on individual effort.

Working with vendors

The zero waste systems required significant coordination on the ground. For the Zero Trace Festival, vendors were selected based on practical compatibility with the zero waste set-up, not on prior sustainability experience. Only two food vendors and two drink providers participated, allowing for close coordination. Food vendors were chosen for offering good-quality, mostly vegetarian finger food, that could be served easily in reusable trays, avoiding dishes that required cutlery or complex packaging.

Once selected, vendors were supported to adapt to the zero waste system. The organising team held individual calls with each vendor to explain the festival's philosophy, the deposit return system, and how reusable trays and cups would work in practice. This was supported by a short written document outlining expectations and practical details. For drinks, one bar was operated by the organisers themselves (The Garage Community), while the second bar was already using glassware and was invited specifically for that reason.

Although single-use packaging is still the norm for events in Cyprus, vendors responded positively once the system was explained. Many appreciated that reusable trays and cups were provided by the organisers,

reducing both workload and costs associated with disposables. Vendors also noted the economic benefit of not needing to purchase single-use items.

Overall, feedback from vendors was encouraging. While the zero waste approach required explanation and support, it was perceived as practical, efficient, and easier to manage than expected.

Volunteers played a key role in guiding participants, explaining how the deposit system worked, and supporting vendors during peak hours.

Public engagement and informal learning

One of the most significant impacts of the Zero Trace Festival was the informal learning that occurred throughout the event. **Many participants encountered zero waste practices, such as deposit systems, refill stations, and waste separation, in a relaxed, social setting rather than a didactic one.** Volunteers often observed “aha moments”, especially among people who initially approached the systems with hesitation but later expressed surprise at how simple and effective they were.

During the festival, a number of workshops and discussions took place. **These workshops connected environmental issues with everyday practices and resonated particularly well with the public.** They attracted particularly strong engagement, reinforcing the value of hands-on, skills-based learning in movement building:

- Workshop: Transforming food waste into wonder - creative reuse of food surplus.
- Workshop: Zero waste fermentation - preservation, tradition, and waste prevention.
- Workshop: Food composting - How and why? - practical composting skills.
- Discussion: Where does my trash go and why? - systemic perspectives on waste.
- Discussion: Can fashion be sustainable? - linking consumption, identity, and impact.

Interactions at information points, conversations with alliance members, and hands-on experiences around food, waste, and reuse helped translate abstract sustainability concepts into tangible actions. For volunteers themselves, the festival was also a learning experience, strengthening skills in communication, problem-solving, and community engagement.



Post-festival: internal growth and external recognition

Internal strength and trust

Organising the Zero Trace Festival had a meaningful impact on the internal dynamics of the Zero Waste Alliance Cyprus. The festival took place shortly before Agno Zero Waste Grocery officially joined the alliance, which made the collaboration particularly interesting: it allowed them to work closely together as individuals and organisations aligned in values, before formalising the partnership. This created space for **trust-building, experimentation, and the natural blending of different working styles, thereby strengthening relationships that later became part of the alliance's formal structure.**

Internally, the festival significantly changed the alliance's understanding of its own capabilities. It was the first time ZWAC attempted a project of this scale, and the process revealed both their strengths and their limitations. Through this experience, the alliance gained clarity on what it truly takes to organise a complex, public-facing zero waste event: time, coordination, trust, and a diversity of skills. ZWAC saw clearly that such an effort requires a movement, not just a single organisation; it needs people who are skilled in communication, others who manage logistics, others who mediate tensions, and those who can tell the story. This shared learning has since informed their approach to collaboration, capacity-building, and future ambitions as an alliance.

Alliance visibility in Cyprus

In terms of national positioning, the festival did not dramatically transform the visibility of the Zero Waste Alliance Cyprus overnight. However, it clearly marked a shift in perception. While The Garage Community had organised similar events in the past, it was evident to both partners and audiences that this edition was different: the zero waste approach was more intentional, structured, and collective. **The presence of the alliance introduced a new layer of coordination, expertise, and political framing to the event.**

Externally, **the impact was more tangible in relationships with institutions, particularly the municipality.** There are early indications that the festival has influenced municipal thinking on waste and sustainability. The municipality of Limassol:

- Actively used the festival as a positive example, expressing increased trust in the alliance's capacity.
- Invested in reusable cups and trays for use in other large-scale public events.
- Began consulting the alliance on sustainability aspects of future initiatives. This included seeking advice on catering, procurement, and giveaways for major events, such as a large conference organised by Limassol Municipality, the "[Climate Neutral Blue Cities by 2030](#)" conference organised in the context of the NetZeroCities initiative.

While these changes do not yet constitute a fully embedded municipal strategy, they indicate a shift from one-off experimentation toward gradual institutional learning.

Strengthening partnerships and creating new ones

The festival strengthened existing partnerships and opened new ones. Due to limited resources, the alliance is not always able to include all interested organisations in smaller activities. However, the festival created a shared physical and symbolic space where many actors could come together at once. It became a reference point for future collaboration, “where we met”, and helped consolidate relationships across civil society, grassroots initiatives, and public institutions. Participating initiatives included [KyklOIKOdromio](#) (which later officially joined the alliance), [Cans for Kids](#) (first encountered through advocacy work), [Net Zero Cities](#), and the [LIFE IP Zero Waste Cyprus](#) project coordinated by the Department of Environment. Artistic installations, story-telling spaces, and workshops brought together local Cypriots, Russian-speaking residents, and other community members who contribute actively to local sustainability efforts.

The festival also expanded cooperation with local businesses and everyday city actors. Nearby cafés, shops, and cultural spaces engaged with the event, while municipal services, including traffic wardens, and cleaning staff, became part of the operational ecosystem. This interaction helped demystify zero waste practices and built practical understanding across different municipal departments and different groups in Limassol.



Lessons learned

For the alliance

One of the most important learnings was that the **Zero Waste Alliance Cyprus is capable of delivering complex, high-visibility events when working collectively**. It was the first project at this scale or complexity for the alliance.. Through the process, **ZWAC gained a much clearer understanding of their collective strengths, weaknesses, and internal dynamics**. The alliance also learned how much coordination, time, and trust are required to deliver a genuinely zero waste event, and how essential it is to distribute roles according to people's skills, from stakeholder engagement and problem-solving to communications, logistics, and volunteer coordination.



For the wider movement

From a movement building perspective, the festival **demonstrated that zero waste principles can be effectively applied in a real, public, urban setting, and that effective collaboration between civil society, municipalities, cultural spaces, and citizens is possible**. The event also strengthened trust with external actors, particularly the municipality, which began to see the alliance as a reliable partner rather than just an advocacy voice. Importantly, the festival created shared references and shared experiences, “this is where we met,” “this is where we worked together”, which continue to shape collaboration beyond the event itself. **Other relevant lessons were:**

- 1. Movement building is not linear:** an organic, trust-based approach allowed the alliance to grow at its own pace, learn each other's strengths, adapt to challenges, adjust to different rhythms, and support one another through change.
- 2. Change at scale is slow and trust-based:** systemic change requires time, patience, and sustained trust-building with municipalities, other institutional actors and partners.
- 3. Collective identity is built through shared experience:** strong collaboration emerged from working together on real actions rather than from formal structures alone.
- 4. Piloting ambitious actions leads to meaningful learning:** testing new approaches and actions, like this festival, even when outcomes are imperfect, helped the movement to learn together. It proved essential for identifying practical barriers and opportunities for improvement.
- 5. Visual evidence is a powerful advocacy tool:** waste audits, photographs, and on-the-ground observations helped make the scale of the problem visible and strengthened evidence-based advocacy with institutions.
- 6. Relationships are key to long-term impact:** building and maintaining strong relationships, both within the alliance and with external allies, proved central to achieving lasting influence so it is essential to invest time in this.

Finally, the process reinforced a key insight: **creating systemic change requires a movement, not just one organisation.** The festival highlighted the value of combining diverse skills, perspectives, and networks under a shared zero waste vision.

For the festival

Based on a collective reflection meeting held shortly after the festival, several improvements were identified that could significantly strengthen the impact in future editions:

- **Zero waste festivals are possible, but require early planning and clear commitments:** designing large public events around zero waste principles requires early engagement with partners, vendors, and institutions, as well as clear shared expectations.
- **Food & beverage vendors:** clearer agreements with vendors are needed, including expectations around water provision (vendors having clear indications about where to find the nearest refill station), stock planning (e.g. beer availability), and responsibilities related to reusable cups and deposits. Transparency around discrepancies and responsibilities would prevent confusion
- **Workshops & programme design:** workshops proved to attract more interest than discussion panels, so programme timing would be adjusted accordingly. Improve the registration system to avoid overlapping workshop bookings and consider introducing a small participation fee to reduce no-shows. Attendance tracking would also help improve evaluation. Clearer signs, better directions (including arrows), confirmation emails, and reminder messages would be essential.
- **Communication & promotion:** a stronger and more structured promotion strategy would be implemented, with clearer messaging about what makes the event different. Key improvements include ensuring all posters are printed and displayed, increasing reminders closer to the event, and coordinating messaging across channels.
- **Photo, video & social media:** future editions would require a clear technical brief for photographers and videographers, specifying formats (vertical/horizontal), content needs, and deliverables, supported by a simple contract. Increased use of reels, ads, and a more centralised social media system would help extend reach and visibility.
- **Deposit-return system:** the deposit-return process would be documented clearly in advance and communicated more visibly to both vendors and participants. Instructions need to be simple, repeated, and highly visible.
- **Volunteer feedback:** introducing a short volunteer feedback survey would help improve coordination, clarify roles, and strengthen volunteer engagement for future events.

Reflections

The Zero Trace Festival showed that movement building is grounded in relationships, not perfection. Leadership emerged through facilitation, care, and problem-solving rather than hierarchy. Friction was not a failure, but a natural part of collective work.

Key advice: start small but think systemically, invest in trust, accept uncertainty, and build spaces where people can learn by doing.

A moment of pride

At the end of the festival, organisers checked the bins in the square. They were almost empty. Participants were returning cups, refilling bottles, and navigating systems that once seemed unrealistic.

The festival confirmed that Zero Waste Alliance Cyprus has the capacity, credibility, and collaborative knowledge to act as a reference point for sustainable public events in Cyprus, and that this is only the beginning.



Contact



[Zero Waste Europe \(ZWE\)](#) is the European network of communities, local leaders, experts, and change agents working towards a better use of resources and the elimination of waste in our society. We advocate for sustainable systems; for the redesign of our relationship with resources; and for a global shift towards environmental justice, accelerating a just transition towards zero waste for the benefit of people and the planet.



[Zero Waste Alliance Cyprus \(ZWAC\)](#) brings together five core members: Friends of the Earth Cyprus, Ecological Movement Cyprus, Zero Food Waste Cyprus, Agno Zero Waste Grocery, KyklOIkodromio and Fashion Revolution Cyprus. Started in 2020, they are working in solidarity to ensure a zero waste future through advocacy, awareness-raising, and groundwork actions.



[Friends of the Earth Cyprus](#) is a non-profit, non-governmental environmental organisation established in 1993. With a growing network of members and supporters across Cyprus, it campaigns on local, national, and international environmental issues, advocating for systemic change that addresses both environmental and social challenges. Its vision is a sustainable, just, and peaceful world where people live in harmony with nature.



ZWE's [Blueprint for Movement Building project](#) aims to capture and analyse the patterns that lead to effective movement building for climate justice. Through this project, ZWE is collaborating with five national zero waste alliances to build and strengthen their national platform. The learnings and stories from this project turned into a manual for movement building - [the Blueprint](#) - designed to inspire and guide emerging and existing groups in becoming stronger movements. The Blueprint for Movement Building project is supported by the [UMI Fund](#).



Zero Waste Europe gratefully acknowledges financial assistance from the European Union. The sole responsibility for the content of this material lies with Zero Waste Europe. It does not necessarily reflect the opinion of the funder mentioned above. The funder cannot be held responsible for any use that may be made of the information contained therein.

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Date: March 2026

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