

Case study

Planet under Pressure Youth Voice project

Vital statistics

Sponsoring bodies:

Research Councils UK (RCUK)¹, the Royal Society², Living With Environmental Change (LWEC)³ and the Sciencewise Expert Resource Centre (Sciencewise-ERC)⁴

Delivering body:

British Science Association

Project duration

September 2011 to March 2012

Number of young people involved:

12

Number of stakeholders:

5 researchers directly involved in workshop

3 stakeholders involved in evaluation interviews

More than 2,000 (approx) involved in conference

Cost of project

£11,666 (excluding VAT, evaluation and staff costs)

Introduction

The [Planet under Pressure 2012](#) (PUP) conference was held in London in late March 2012. This conference brought together people from policy-making, science, industry, non governmental organisations (NGOs), health, the media and other disciplines to develop a 'new vision for trans-disciplinary research and broader partnerships' to underpin the development of understanding and solutions to address global sustainability challenges.

During the planning stages for the conference, members of the organising committee were keen to find a way to involve young people. Together with the University of East Anglia, the British Science Association, Research Councils UK and Sciencewise-ERC, the Youth Voice project was developed to ensure the perspective and voice of young people was presented at the conference. The project involved twelve young people from across the UK being selected and supported to prepare and present a speech at the opening ceremony of the

¹ <http://www.rcuk.ac.uk/Pages/Home.aspx>

² <http://royalsociety.org/>

³ www.lwec.org.uk

⁴ <http://www.sciencewise-erc.org.uk/>

conference. They attended an initial workshop in November 2011 and then worked remotely to conduct a survey and prepare their speech for the conference.

In line with Sciencewise-ERC requirements that the projects they support must have a clear policy hook, it was intended that the young people's views would inform the recommendations arising from the conference, which were to be presented to the 2012 UN conference on Sustainable Development – Rio+20.

RCUK and Sciencewise-ERC commissioned an independent evaluation of the Planet under Pressure Youth Voice project. The evaluation assessed the public engagement processes and impacts of the project. Data was collected in the following ways:

- Observations of the initial planning workshop and the Youth Voice presentation at the PUP conference
- Surveys carried out with members of the Youth Voice project after the planning workshop and after their presentation at the conference
- The evaluators devised a question to be used by Youth Voice members, staff from the British Science Association and the evaluation team in their conversations with delegates at the PUP conference⁵. A question about the Youth Voice project was also included in a post conference questionnaire for delegates
- Qualitative telephone interviews with three young people from the Youth Voice Project and three stakeholders from the project.

Findings from the evaluation are presented in this case study.

Background

Planet Under Pressure 2012 was a major international conference focusing on solutions to the global sustainability challenge. It aimed to provide scientific leadership towards the 2012 UN Rio +20 conference and identify opportunities for enhanced partnerships between research, policy, industry and the public.

The conference was hosted by The Royal Society, the Living with Environmental Change (LWEC) programme and the Natural Environment Research Council (NERC). The conference provided a platform for both the NERC and LWEC communities to demonstrate the progress that is being made in addressing the global challenges we face. It was also intended to demonstrate the benefits of working in partnership through co-design, co-production and co-delivery to develop solutions to the problems. The conference conclusions were to be fed directly into the Rio+20 and thereby influence and inform international policy.

Key messages from the young people

The key messages from the young people and their questions to the conference were:

Environment

- The Earth is unique, full of possibilities and natural wonders, many of which are yet to be discovered. But the Earth is also fragile and damage may be irreversible. Biodiversity in

⁵ The questions were: "What most interested you in the young people's presentation?" and "Why do you think it is important for young people to be here?"

many eco-systems is being weakened to meet the demands of current lifestyles. *“What laws can be implemented to protect and promote the diversity of our eco-systems?”*

- Whilst there is growing evidence of the environmental cost of food production there are also examples of successful conservation projects, such as the tiger corridor in Bhutan. *“Do the conference delegates feel that we will find a solution which balances the conservation of biodiversity with feeding our growing population in the next 10 years?”*
- The young people asked delegates to consider how to actively encourage people to reduce their personal impact on pollution. *“What should our priorities be in the fight to reduce pollution, and how can we encourage people to exercise individual accountability?”*
- Water has more pressures on it than ever before and there is an impending shortage – by 2025 more than 66% of the world’s population won’t have enough to drink. *“How can we find sustainable ways of sourcing and providing water?”*
- There is a need for humans to find a way to live in harmony with the environment. *“Should we be looking for quick fixes or slower, more sustainable solutions?”*

Media

- Social networks and the media have a large impact on the public perception of the current environmental situation. It is therefore important to focus on the beneficial outcomes of initiatives and policies aimed at combating environmental problems. *“How can news agencies be encouraged to report on environmental success stories?”*
- How can developed and developing countries over the next 20 years, work towards environmental targets and best practice whilst sustaining populations and population growth? *“How can developed nations assist developing nations in achieving targets and creating sustainable infrastructure?”*

Energy and resources

- A greater public exchange of knowledge between scientists and researchers and the industry would help people to make informed choices about which energy sources and fuel they use, and would encourage firms to act in a more environmentally friendly way. *“We would like to see a wider variety of possible energy and fuel alternatives explored & researched and a more public exchange of knowledge between the scientists and researchers and the industry – do you think this could happen?”*
- There is an issue around the public’s awareness of resource scarcity. The shortage of Helium, which will have a profound impact on healthcare, is a great example of this. *“What can be done to ensure that our helium resources, and others like it, aren’t depleted as soon as they are forecast to be?”*
- The young people were concerned about maintaining their lifestyles and do this in a sustainable way. Their final question to delegates was: *“How can we enjoy the same attractive lifestyle that we have today, but make that life more sustainable?”*

Policy influence

It is too early to assess long term policy impacts of the Planet under Pressure Youth Voice project. However, the following activities have taken place:

- Following the conference, a ‘state of planet declaration’ was produced, pulling together the key messages which emerged from the Planet under Pressure conference. This declaration included a statement from ‘young people representing the voice of youth’,

which was developed by around 400 students who registered at the conference. This was produced by a separate delegation of young students who attended the event. The views from the presentation produced by the Youth Voice project were not inconsistent with this statement, and their contribution was acknowledged by the youth statement, but the Youth Voice presentation did not directly feed into the declaration. The declaration was presented to the 2012 UN conference on Sustainable Development – Rio+20⁶.

- Seven ‘vox pops’ with members of the Youth Voice project and the questions from their speech have been featured on the STEPs Centre (Social, Technological and Environmental Pathways to Sustainability) website⁷.
- The young people’s involvement in the conference has featured in a number of newsletters and websites. One member of the Youth Voice project has written a blog about the project, which has featured on a Chinese website. One of the questions from the project featured on the website [brave collaboration](http://bravecollaboration.tumblr.com/)⁸, under the heading: “Brave challenge from Planet under Pressure Youth Voice”.
- Publishing the Youth Voice speech on the Planet under Pressure website⁹.
- Publishing the young people’s transcript, posters, a video of the speech via YouTube and vox pops with the students on the Sciencewise-ERC website.

The dialogue activities

The aim of the Youth Voice project was to ensure that the perspective of youth was presented effectively at the Opening Ceremony of the Planet under Pressure conference, and that their voices were heard. The specific objectives of the project were:

- To select and prepare a group of 12 young people who have an interest in one or more of four relevant research areas
- To convene the group in a one-day workshop to discuss the conference topics, aided by researchers provided by the Research Councils through their cross-council theme Living with Environmental Change (LWEC)
- To support the young people to summarise, prepare and present their views at the Opening Ceremony of the Planet under Pressure conference in London’s Excel Centre on 26th March 2012
- To encourage the young people involved to find ways of involving their school, college or university in the work leading up to the conference (e.g. by surveying the student body) or after the conference (e.g. taking a school assembly about their conference trip; using Practical Action/CREST¹⁰ resources with their STEM¹¹ Club). The researchers were encouraged to continue engaging with other students and/or schools where appropriate.

⁶ <http://www.planetunderpressure2012.net/>

⁷ <http://steps-centre.org/engagement/rioplus20/>

⁸ <http://bravecollaboration.tumblr.com/>

⁹ http://www.planetunderpressure2012.net/youth_programme.asp

¹⁰ CREativity in Science and Technology

¹¹ Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths

The twelve young people selected to take part were aged between 14 and 18 years and were from a range of locations from Bristol to Inverness, including 4 young people from Scotland. Ten of the young people came from state schools and two were from fee-paying schools.

The young people attended a one day workshop at the Royal Society on 7th November 2011. This was an opportunity to meet each other, discuss views on the environmental issues which would form the basis of their speech and to agree a process and detailed timetable for preparing their speech, between the workshop and the conference. Five LWEC researchers attended this workshop to help support the young people in preparing their ideas for the speech.

Between the workshop and the conference, the young people developed their speech for the conference, developed survey questions and surveyed their schools. They communicated via an invitation-only Facebook group. During this time, the British Science Association project manager liaised with the young people using Facebook to check their progress and to ensure they were meeting the project milestones.

The young people presented their speech at the opening ceremony of the Planet under Pressure conference in March 2012. The young people had a stand at the conference which included displays summarising the project, the results of their survey and hand-outs of their speech.

Summary of good practice and innovation

- The Youth Voice project brought together young people from a diversity of backgrounds. Members of the project were from different ethnicities, a range of UK locations and school types.
- The initial workshop was a helpful first step to prepare panel members to deliver their speech at the opening ceremony of the PUP conference. Developing a clear, detailed timetable of activities and deadlines was seen as particularly useful in helping the young people to feel confident about what needed to be done to develop their speech.
- The opportunity to discuss environmental issues and to hear the views and opinions of other people with similar interests was described as the best aspect of the workshop by the majority of the young people. Discussions with the researchers were highly valued, four out of the twelve young people stated they would have liked more time to have discussions with researchers.
- The young people valued the support from the LWEC researchers in helping them to contribute to the conference. The researchers were friendly and approachable, they helped the young people to understand the issues and the young people felt they learnt from their discussions with the researchers. The young people agreed that researchers allowed the process to be led by them – the researchers didn't dominate the discussion or use jargon.

"Researchers provided valuable knowledge. They told us about real world developments, if we said 'we want this to be researched'; they could say 'this is being researched'"
(Youth Voice member)

"They didn't give us so much information or input that they gave us the answer but they guided us gently so it was all our work" (Youth Voice member)

- Overall, group members found the process of working remotely to prepare the speech between the workshop and conference worked well. Whilst members of the group

acknowledged they were slow to get started and missed some deadlines, working alone during this time wasn't viewed as stressful or as taking up more time than anticipated. During this period, the young people found the timetable they agreed with the Association project manager very helpful, because it allowed room for slippage. Her reminder calls and emails were also found helpful. Members found Facebook to be a relatively effective way to keep in touch and share documents, though there were some periods when there was a lack of activity from members.

- The young people were very positive about the experience of presenting at the conference, with 11 out of the 12 young people describing the experience as 'amazing'. Members felt it was an opportunity to step outside their comfort zones and do something new. The opportunity to practice their speech several times in the conference hall was mentioned by the young people as enabling them to feel confident about presenting in such a large space at the opening ceremony of the conference.

Lessons for future practice

- Successful operation of a project involving young people in this way requires clarity of purpose overall and of the specific purpose of the different activities in which members are involved. During the workshop, the purpose of some activities and how these related to the overall aims of the workshop were unclear to some project members. At the end of the workshop, a couple of young people were still unsure of what role they would play at the conference.
- During a project where members will have to work remotely for the majority of the project, it is important to structure face to face activities so there is sufficient time for brainstorming ideas and planning. Some of the young people felt the sessions held in the workshop were rushed and some felt there was not enough time for discussions. *"Running out of time"* was rated as the worst thing about the workshop by a third of the Youth Voice members.
- After the workshop the speech was developed entirely using online communication. Some of the young people thought it would have been helpful to have some face to face interaction after the workshop, or conversations to prepare the speech, during the period of time they were working alone. This would have ensured the momentum of work was maintained and that all members of the group participated consistently. It was suggested that this meeting could have happened via Skype or a teleconference and at the point where the young people had to combine their different sections of the speech.

"When you are doing a project like this, you need to talk to people face to face and bounce ideas. There were points when we weren't in touch, where no one said anything and then someone would say something and it was fine. Conversations are good" (Youth Voice member)

Conference delegates, stakeholders and members of the Youth Voice project suggested a number of opportunities for increasing the impact of the Youth Voice project speech:

- The Youth Voice stand in the conference hall was situated in the reception hall, away from the rest of the stands. The Youth Voice members felt their work would have generated more interest if their stand had been located with the rest.
- A few delegates, particularly those who completed the post conference questionnaire, described the Youth Voice presentation as 'gimmicky' or 'tokenistic', and were unsure what impact the speech would have on the conference or its conclusions. Providing more context to the conference audience about the Youth Voice project, including what

activities the young people had been involved in and how the presentation would feed into the conference conclusions presented to Rio+20, could have prevented this presentation seeming tokenistic.

- Conference delegates, stakeholders and members of the Youth Voice project felt the Youth Voice project could have been a bigger part of the conference. Suggestions included: a Youth Voice speech at the closing ceremony of the conference in order to leave a lasting impression on the delegates; for the young people to have a longer slot to speak at the opening ceremony; and for the young people to have a more active role throughout the conference, for example being involved in a number of sessions.

"I thought this presentation was a key highlight of the conference but was disappointed to find they were only funded to attend one day!" (Conference delegate, comment from post conference questionnaire)

- Some delegates disagreed with some of the points made in the Youth Voice presentation, for example those relating to wanting to maintain current lifestyles and the focus on bio-diversity. Providing a forum, at the PUP conference, for delegates to feedback their views of the presentation to the Youth Voice members, would have been a useful way of continuing to engage the Youth Voice members in the debate about environmental issues, whilst giving them an opportunity to respond to delegates' comments.
- Co-ordination with the other youth element of the conference, responsible for preparing the youth statement in the 'state of planet declaration', could have been a way to ensure the views of the Youth Voice project directly fed into the conference conclusions.
- Many delegates were very positive about the delivery of the Youth Voice speech. However, a few delegates, who had seen young people present at other conferences, felt that the emotional impact of the speech could have been greater by more practice and tutoring for the young people in public speaking in order to maximise the impact of the different points made in the speech.
- Some delegates felt that the Youth Voice presentation needed to be the start of a bigger piece of work, which continued to engage the public and young people and could begin to build a consensus about environmental and sustainability issues and what the solutions are.

"Am presuming this was the tip of an iceberg, should be some form of the report to accompany it, some form of keeping it going, keeping the interest going, actually doing something which encourages other students to do something similar and to get a consensus about these issues in society, which is lacking" (Stakeholder)

Impacts

This section examines all the impacts on the participants in the process.

Impacts on members of the Youth Voice project

Members of the Youth Voice project identified a number of ways in which involvement in the Youth Voice project had a positive impact on them:

- **Improved networking, communication and presentation skills:** the young people felt that presenting to such a large and prestigious audience had given them increased confidence to do this in the future, even though several of them mentioned how nerve wracking and daunting the experience was. Young people felt the experience of meeting

the other young people and researchers at the workshop and of speaking to delegates at the conference had made them more confident in approaching new people.

“When I got to the conference, I thought it was daunting, but gives you a confidence when you have done your part, gives you a lot of confidence speaking in front of that many people” (Youth Voice member)

- **Greater knowledge and understanding of environmental issues:** the young people felt that developing their speech and hearing from and speaking to delegates at the conference had vastly increased their knowledge of environmental and sustainability issues. The young people felt they were exposed to new ideas and perspectives from speaking to the researchers and delegates – for example, a couple mentioned learning about the importance of the “communication gap” between scientists and the public.

“I didn’t realise the importance before, of getting the public to know what they can do” (Youth Voice member)

- **Stimulating interest in environmental change:** the young people all stated that being involved in the project had made them more interested in environmental change. For a few, this cemented their plans and ambitions to pursue scientific and environmental courses and careers.

“It really inspired me to go in to research in this area, as it looks really promising and exciting and it definitely encouraged me to take this a lot further” (Youth Voice member)

- **Improved project development skills:** members of the project felt they had gained experience of working independently to research a topic, producing an output based on that and working with others to pull the different strands of a project together. They felt these skills would be useful in their academic careers and also when completing similar extra-curricular activities:

“Next year will do the EPQ (extended project qualification) and this is very similar to the Youth Voice project in terms of the structure, research and the presentation and this will have given me skills” (Youth Voice member)

Impact on delegates and stakeholders

Through the Youth Voice project, the young people were able to present their views to more than 2000 delegates who attended the conference or registered and participated online. Stakeholders involved in the PUP Youth Voice project and conference delegates who took part in the evaluation saw a real value in the presence of the young people and their speech for a number of reasons:

- A number of delegates described feeling moved by the speech and presence of young people at the opening ceremony. Their presence was seen as an important reminder that the consequences of decisions being made would be inherited by the next generation.

“The issue is their future, important for younger generations to be there to break up the hierarchy of knowledge collection” (Conference delegate, in conversation with a member of the evaluation team)

- Delegates felt that it was important for young people to involve them in the debate about climate change. Young people will be facing these challenges in the future and involvement now was seen as a way of equipping them with the skills and knowledge necessary. A number of delegates felt that young peoples’ hope, enthusiasm and idealism was critical to the problem of sustainability.

“It’s their generation who will face these challenges. Young people have hope & enthusiasm that is critical to the problem of sustainability” (Conference delegate, comment from post conference questionnaire)

“Wonderful to include them, a great idea. It’s up to the next generation. If you don’t include them now, then when? I hope the youth will mobilise other youth to be inspired” (Conference delegate, in conversation with an Association staff member)

- Delegates considered it important that the priorities and considerations of young people were heard by the scientific and research communities, and for these views to have the opportunity to inform the direction of research and policy. One delegate had heard the Youth Voice speech being referred to in other sessions of the conference.
- Amongst conference delegates there was a range of views about the content of the Youth Voice presentation. Whilst some delegates disagreed with the views expressed in the speech, many were very interested by, and agreed with the views expressed in the speech. Delegates described several points made by the speech which they were particularly struck by - for example, using the media to promote social messages and the impact of a helium shortage on healthcare.

“Didn’t know before about helium issue as a function of the health system, like to follow this up” (Conference delegate, in conversation with a member of the evaluation team)

“Twenty-six per cent of students thought we should focus on biodiversity – that stood out for me” (Conference delegate, in conversation with an Association staff member)

“They raised fundamental questions about natural resources” (Conference delegate, in conversation with a Youth Voice member)

- A number of delegates thought it was very important that the Youth Voice project had surveyed their fellow students, and that they presented the views of ‘young people’, not just their own.

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Contacts and links

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Research Councils UK

The Royal Society

Living With Environmental Change

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