

Case Study

Planet Under Pressure 'Youth Voice'

Vital statistics

Commissioning bodies:

Research Councils UK (RCUK),
the Royal Society, Living With
Environmental Change (LWEC)

Duration of process:

7 months: September 2011 –
March 2012

Number of young people involved:

12

Number of stakeholders involved:

Researchers directly involved in
workshop = 5
Stakeholders involved in evaluation
interviews = 3
Stakeholders involved in conference
= more than 2,000 (approximately)

Cost of project:

£19,995 total,
Sciencewise-ERC funding = £9,997

The Planet Under Pressure 2012 (PUP) conference, held in London in March 2012, 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.

Members of the organising committee were keen to find a way to involve young people in the conference. 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 12 young people from across the UK being selected and supported to prepare and present a speech at the opening ceremony of the conference.

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. The Earth is also fragile and damage may be irreversible. Biodiversity in 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?"
- While there is growing evidence of the environmental cost of food production, there are also examples of successful conservation projects. "Will we find a solution which balances the conservation of biodiversity with feeding our growing population in the next 10 years?"

- How can all countries over the next 20 years work towards environmental targets and best practice while sustaining populations and population growth? "How can developed nations assist developing nations in achieving targets and creating sustainable infrastructure?"
- How can people be encouraged 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. Therefore, it is 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?"



Background

Planet Under Pressure (PuP) 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 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 Earth Summit and, thereby, had an opportunity to influence and inform international policy.

Energy and resources

- A greater public exchange of knowledge between science and 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 and researched, and a more public exchange of knowledge between the scientists, researchers and the industry – could this happen?"*
- There is an issue around the public's awareness of resource scarcity. An example is the shortage of helium, which will have a profound impact on healthcare. *"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 in a sustainable way. *"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 PUP Youth Voice project. However:

- A 'state of planet declaration' was produced, pulling together the key messages which emerged from the conference. This declaration included a statement from 'young people representing the voice of youth', which was developed by around 400 students who attended the conference. The views by the Youth Voice project were consistent with this statement and their contribution was acknowledged by the youth statement. This declaration was to be presented to the 2012 UN conference on Sustainable Development – Rio +20
- The young people's involvement in the conference has featured in a number of newsletters and websites.

The dialogue activities

The aim of the Youth Voice project was to ensure that the perspective of youth was presented effectively at the PuP 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 Planet Under Pressure conference in London's Excel Centre in 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/CREST resources with their Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) Club). The researchers were encouraged to continue engaging with other students and/or schools where appropriate.

The 12 young people selected to take part were aged between 14 and 18 years and were from different ethnicities and from a range of locations from Bristol to Inverness, including four 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 in November 2011. This was an opportunity to meet each other, discuss views on the environmental issues that 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 conference. The young people also 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 initial workshop was a helpful first step in preparing panel members to deliver their speech. 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
- 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
- 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 researchers allowed the process to be led by the young people – the researchers didn't dominate the discussion or use jargon
- Overall, group members found that the process of working remotely to prepare the speech between the workshop and conference worked well. Members found Facebook to be a relatively effective way to keep in touch and share documents

- The young people were very positive about the experience of presenting at the conference. Members felt it was an opportunity to step outside their comfort zones and do something new. The opportunity to practise their speech several times in the conference hall enabled them to feel confident about presenting in such a large space
- A number of conference delegates thought it was very important that members of the Youth Voice project had surveyed their fellow students, and that they presented the views of 'young people', not just their own.

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 a project where members will have to work remotely for the majority of the time, it is important to carefully structure the face-to-face activities that are provided so there is sufficient time for brainstorming ideas and planning
- Some of the young people thought it would have been helpful to have some additional face-to-face interaction or conversations after the workshop to prepare the speech. This would have ensured the momentum of work was maintained and that all members of the group participated consistently
- 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 including a more central position of the Youth Voice project stand, a more active or increased role in the conference and provision of more context of the Youth Voice project and how it was meant to feed into the Rio+20 conference
- 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
- 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 solutions.

Impacts

Policy impacts are covered on the first page of this summary. This section examines the impacts on all the participants in the process.

Impacts on Youth Voice project members

- **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. 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.
- **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 issue is their future, important for younger generations to be there to break up the hierarchy of knowledge collection. ”

Conference delegate

“ 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

“ I thought this presentation was a key highlight of the conference. ”

Conference delegate

- **Stimulating interest in environmental change:** being involved in the project had made the young people more interested in environmental change. For a few, this cemented their plans and ambitions to pursue scientific and environmental courses and careers.
- **Improved project management 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 when completing similar extra-curricular activities.

Impacts on delegates and stakeholders

Stakeholders involved in the PUP Youth Voice project and conference delegates (over 2,000 in total) saw a real value in the presence of the young people and their speech:

- A number of delegates were moved by the speech and saw the presence of the Youth Voice project as an important reminder that the consequences of decisions being made would be inherited by the next generation
- Delegates felt that it was important for young people to be involved 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 people's hope, enthusiasm and idealism were critical to the problem of sustainability
- 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
- Among conference delegates there was a range of views about the content of the Youth Voice presentation. While some

“ 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

“ I didn't realise the importance before of getting the public to know what they can do. ”

Youth Voice member

delegates disagreed, many were very interested in 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.

Contact details

Commissioning bodies

Research Councils UK, The Royal Society, Living With Environmental Change

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Reports

Full project and evaluation reports available from Sciencewise-ERC on <http://www.sciencewise-erc.org.uk/cms/planet-under-pressure-conference-youth-voice/>