

# FieldNotes

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## Youth and the Environment

**A**s environmental concerns escalate around the globe, young people are taking action like never before. How can youth-serving organizations best support the needs of today's young environmental change makers? What lessons can be learned from young people at the forefront of today's youth environmental movement?

Presented here are the experiences of International Youth Foundation (IYF) partners in Belgium, Nigeria, Poland, and Russia in supporting youth-led environmental projects. Each is engaged in a global youth development initiative of IYF and Nokia. Also highlighted are the strategies and accomplishments of young environmental activists across the globe.

Young people employ a variety of creative tactics in their environmental advocacy — from theatre arts to hip hop music, from painting murals to riding bicycles, from building websites to developing small enterprises. Their efforts range from local initiatives to clean up neighborhoods and parks to national and international campaigns designed to influence the policies and priorities of business and political leaders.

“The environment is something today's youth are passionate about, making it a great issue for stimulating their broader civic engagement,” says Johanna Jokinen, Senior Manager of Environmental Communications at Nokia. “Young people bring a fresh perspective, energy, drive, and a sense of what is possible. There's much we can do to learn from and support their efforts.”

# Is Your Project Sustainable?\*

Below are 12 questions aimed at helping youth assess the extent to which their community projects are sustainable.

1. **Human resource management** — Are all members of the team empowered to contribute toward the project's goals? Are responsibilities and tasks shared equally?
2. **Organization** — Does the project have clear goals and objectives and a plan for evaluating its effectiveness?
3. **Financial management** — Does the project have a comprehensive budget and a realistic sense of where it will acquire the resources it needs?
4. **Personal enrichment** — Has the project considered how team members will benefit (e.g., through developing life skills, gaining valuable experience)? Are activities designed to be fun and engaging?
5. **Creativity** — Is the project pursuing innovative approaches to achieve its goals?
6. **Communication** — Has the project identified those audiences it needs to reach and developed a strategy for doing so? Is its focus on sustainable development clearly articulated in its outreach materials so as to reinforce public education efforts?
7. **Networking** — Has the project identified potential partners (e.g., school administrators, local businesses, government authorities) it can collaborate with to achieve shared goals?
8. **Ethics** — Has the project analyzed all of its activities and where it sources products in order to ensure they are produced ethically?
9. **Accessibility** — Has the project taken the necessary steps to ensure its activities are accessible to all those with an interest in participating? Are materials available in multiple languages, if needed? Have accommodations been made for those with disabilities?
10. **Environmental impact** — Is the project being carried out with sensitivity to its environmental impact? Has every effort been made to ensure the use of recycled, recyclable, organic, and/or fair trade materials?
11. **Cooperation** — Has the project done everything possible to integrate diverse populations? Is there an intergenerational component? Are diverse socio-economic, racial, and ethnic groups included?
12. **Sustainability** — Does the project have a plan for sustaining its impact into the future?

\* Developed by Future Smile, Belgium, [www.futuresmile.be](http://www.futuresmile.be)

## Pursuing Comprehensive Approaches

Kurt Peleman, Manager of the Future Smile program in Belgium, is quick to point out that viewing today's planetary crisis through a strictly environmental lens is not enough. Rather, Future Smile, a program of the Foundation for Future Generations, helps young people incorporate sustainable development thinking into their existing community activities.

"A lot of attention is being focused on the environment," says Peleman, "but in our view the problems go beyond ecology. It's about sustainable development and the need to embrace north-south imbalances, poverty issues, and equity. It's easy to talk about the environment — you win the lottery," he adds. "When your focus is on sustainable development it's harder to get your message across."

Since 2006, Future Smile, with support from Nokia, has provided more than forty youth groups with training and small grants to integrate sustainable development principles and practices into their community projects. One example is a group of university students who hold an annual circus on their campus. With help from Future Smile, they reinvented the event — serving organic food and drinks in biodegradable containers, recycling waste, selling t-shirts made out of organic cotton, and waiving the admission fee for a portion of the day to entice families from neighboring towns.

Other Future Smile participants have turned used cooking oil into biodiesel fuel for their school's vehicle, produced an environmental hip hop CD, and launched a website that tells consumers what local produce is in season and the impact of their purchasing decisions on greenhouse gas emissions.

At the outset of the nine-month program, participants attend a weekend training during which they gain feedback from experts on how to incorporate sustainable development concepts into their projects. Each project team fills out a self-evaluation form enabling them to analyze and refine their approaches based on 12 key indicators (see box on left).

Participants review their progress against these indicators after three months, and again at the program's conclusion, with technical assistance provided by Future Smile staff along the way. The program culminates in a festival highlighting each project and raising public awareness of sustainable development issues — and solutions.

The knowledge participants gain has been found to influence their choices and behaviors well beyond their volunteer activities. "Our goal is that these young people take what they learn through Future Smile and apply it in their own lives and throughout their careers," says Peleman.





■ **To make their event sustainable, young volunteers in Belgium prepare dishes made from organic tomatoes and serve beverages in containers made of corn plastic.**

### Engaging the Community

To be successful, most environmental youth groups need support from the wider community. This can be challenging, with youth groups citing lack of public will as a major obstacle to their efforts.

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In Nigeria, for example, participants in LEAP Africa’s Youth Leadership Program have demonstrated an increased interest in launching environmental projects; yet resistance among community members and lack of government support can pose barriers.

“Because of the challenges we face as a nation, we’ve noticed a significant increase in youth environmental projects,” says Oje Ivagba, LEAP Program Coordinator, adding that projects tend to focus on clean up efforts, recycling, and public health hazards like unsafe drinking water and improper sanitation. Since 2005, more than 1,200 Nigerian youth have participated in LEAP’s leadership program, which is carried out in six areas of the country.

One LEAP participant put up signs in his community asking people to refrain from dumping their trash near the shore to avoid health risks. “People started threatening him. They didn’t want to

## SUPPORTING YOUTH ADVOCACY EFFORTS

Below are tips designed to help youth initiate public awareness campaigns:

- **Research your issue.** It’s important to know as much about your issue as possible in order to make the most persuasive argument. Be prepared to back up what you say with credible facts and figures.
- **Be clear about your goals and objectives.** What attitudes, behaviors, and/or policies do you seek to change?
- **Develop your message.** Focus on the core ideas you want to get across. Make it relevant and accessible to those you seek to reach.
- **Identify your audience and get to know them.** Concentrate on a specific segment of the population and understand the knowledge and attitudes they bring.
- **Get important people on your side.** Engage prominent individuals in the community (e.g., journalists, government officials, business and NGO leaders) as advisors and spokespeople.
- **Use the media to spread your message.** Develop a plan for reaching out to the media and be creative in getting their attention.
- **Match your medium to your message.** Find a link between your message and the medium you use to get it across. For example if your goal is to reduce carbon emissions, organize bike trips.
- **Focus on the positive.** While it’s important to educate the public about the severity of today’s environmental ills, people are more apt to resonate with positive solutions.
- **Be creative.** Youth-led projects benefit from injecting fun into their activities, whether they use street theatre, arts activities, contests, or cartoons in their approach.

walk to the incinerator,” says Ivagba. “Sometimes the community can be a negative factor.”

Bartosz Sulek, Program Manager of the Polish Children and Youth Foundation (PCYF), agrees. “There is a generation gap,” he says. “Older people don’t always understand environmental projects.” Since 2004, PCYF has supported more than 600 youth-led projects as part of the *Przyłącz Się* program.

“When it comes to changing environmentally destructive behaviors, people tend to do so only when it’s urgent,” says Sulek. “In Poland, there’s a problem with trash being left around. When you go to the forest it’s hard to find a place to put trash. People think it’s okay to leave it.” As part of the training it provides, PCYF coaches youth groups in how to partner with local authorities to address such issues.

In the rural Kenyan community of Nyakach, 28-year-old Zablon Wagalla has carefully enlisted the support of community members in his “Trees for Clean Energy” (TCEN) project. Through the project, Wagalla introduced the cultivation of *jatropha curcas*, a clean energy biofuel. More than 1,000 farmers now grow *jatropha*, which provides much-needed income in this impoverished region, while reducing greenhouse gas emissions from the burning of kerosene. In Wagalla’s case, generating community buy-in was made easier through a local tradition known as a *baraza*.

During a *baraza*, divisional officers, chiefs, assistant chiefs, and community development leaders meet to assess local needs and the impact of specific development initiatives. TCEN holds such meetings every three months. The *baraza* has proven to be a critical forum for surfacing challenges and opportunities related to TCEN’s work — for example, teaching school children about the importance of clean energy and brainstorming ways of increasing local access to *jatropha* seedlings.

The principles of a *baraza* can be applied anywhere, notes Wagalla, who emphasizes the need to work with local leaders and demonstrate the long-term benefits of environmental activities.

## Mobilizing Public Will

What effective strategies have youth used to mobilize public will to support their efforts? IYF partners emphasize the importance of youth first generating enthusiasm among their peers. While adults can prove a challenging target group, young people generally excel at engaging their peers in sustainable development activities, explains Future Smile’s Peleman.

Victoria Davrukova, Program Manager of the New Perspectives Foundation (NPF), in Russia agrees. “We believe that the role youth play in advocating for the environment is unique due to



■ One out of five youth volunteer projects supported through the Make a Connection program in Russia focuses on the environment.

the fact it’s easier for young people to influence the thinking of their peers. They are better at this than adults.”

Since 2004, NPF has supported more than 5,500 young volunteers through the Make a Connection program in Russia. Roughly 20 percent of those youth projects supported focus on the environment. When youth are well organized and build in incentives for government and businesses to help, they have a greater chance of success, Davrukova affirms. For example, Make a Connection volunteers have received donations of seeds from businesses to carry out gardening projects, with businesses benefiting from public acknowledgment. Municipal authorities provided vehicles for transporting garbage, in part, because the youth’s efforts make the job of government easier.

Those environmental projects supported by the Polish Children and Youth Foundation often take the form of youth-led campaigns. Young people begin by engaging their peers and then work toward influencing the attitudes and behaviors of the wider community. One youth project developed a more planet-friendly alternative to the plastic bags grocery stores give their customers. The project first targeted primary school students — educating them about environmental issues and launching a contest for who could paint the best picture illustrating an environmental theme. Afterward, the youth reproduced the winning image on recycled bags made of paper or used clothing. In all, more than 4,000 bags were created with the support of local donors whose logos were featured. The group then worked with shops to distribute the bags and convinced officials to promote the campaign on the local government website.

# SUPPORTING YOUTH-LED ENVIRONMENTAL CHANGE: QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

In supporting youth-led environmental activities, consider the following:

- *Is there a natural fit between the youth work you are currently doing and support of youth-led environmental projects? A number of those programs supported by Nokia and IYF promote youth volunteerism, thereby creating a natural outlet for youth to explore their interest in the environment.*
- *Have you considered how you might integrate sustainable development thinking into the training and support you offer to youth groups? If so, how well does your own organization live up to sustainable development principles?*
- *Does the training you provide include information on how youth can mobilize their peers, generate publicity for their work, and create win-win partnerships?*
- *Does the support you offer youth include information and examples of how young people can engage parents and the wider community in their environmental change efforts? These skills are especially important to young environmental change makers.*
- *Do members of your staff have expertise related to the environment and if not, are there local experts you can tap as mentors or trainers? Most of the IYF partners cited here did not feel additional expertise was necessary; however, in Belgium, Future Smile enlists sustainable development experts to serve as trainers, who provide individual counseling to program participants.*
- *Have you given thought to how the youth environmental projects you support can best network with each other and similar groups working nationally and/or internationally?*

## Placing a Premium on Creativity — and Fun

A key to mobilizing public will is incorporating an element of fun into community projects — something that comes naturally to most young people, according to Peleman. Many of the projects Future Smile supports are event-based, allowing visitors to enjoy



■ **Through the Hunab Theme Park in Mexico, young people teach their peers — and adults — to appreciate and protect their natural environment.**



themselves (e.g., at a concert or circus) while educating them about sustainable living.

The Otesha Project in Canada, started in 2002 by two college students, excels at injecting fun into its message of living sustainably. Otesha pursues a theatre-based approach to reaching high school students throughout Canada. The Otesha skit, “Morning Choices,” dramatizes simple actions people can take to protect the planet (e.g., use less water, buy used clothing, drink fair trade coffee). In delivering its message, Otesha staff and volunteers organize bike tours in different regions of the country. To date, Otesha has reached more than 72,000 young people.

Similarly, Maritza Morales, 23, developed the Hunab Theme Park in X'matkuil, Mexico with the goal of educating young and old alike about urgent environmental issues. “The park promotes the concept of taking care of nature through games,” says Morales, who began working on environmental issues at the age of ten.

Covering an area the size of a football field, the park consists of 12 zones where interactive exhibits teach visitors about natural resource challenges (e.g., water scarcity, deforestation, and endangered species) and solutions. Morales’ strategy is paying off with more than 13,000 people visiting the park each year during an annual fair held in X'matkuil.

And in the Philippines, Laiden Pedriña uses art as a vehicle for nurturing young people’s interest in the environment. At 23, Pedriña founded the Young Artists Fellowship for the Environment (YAFE) to promote environmental advocacy through artistic self-expression.

Through YAFE's Enviro-Art Workshop young people communicate serious issues such as water and air pollution, illegal logging, declining fisheries, and the impact of mining through plays, literary activities, or the visual arts. Since 2004, more than 11,000 youth have participated in the workshops.

### Pursuing Win-win Solutions

Youth champions of the environment emphasize the importance of developing solutions with built-in incentives for people to modify their actions and behaviors.

In Nigeria, for example, one youth leader supported by LEAP Africa provided young people who sift through garbage for items they can sell — with protective clothing to protect their health and safety. Through the project, these young scavengers joined with other youth and together they pick up litter and sell the plastics and metal they collect in bulk at a higher price. What was once an ad hoc activity now provides these youth with a safe means of generating income, while cleaning up the local environment.

In Kenya, Trees for Clean Energy also pursues a win-win approach. Farmers who cultivate jatropha curcas with support from TCEN benefit from increased incomes, while reducing greenhouse gas emissions from the burning of kerosene. "My community has never had a cash crop," says Wagalla. "Now people are busy working toward the development of their society and investing their energy in conserving the environment."

For Wagalla and others, mobilizing people to act in their own self-interest has proven a valuable strategy.

## LESSONS LEARNED

IYF partners offer the following lessons learned when it comes to supporting youth-led environmental initiatives:

- *Youth-serving NGOs have much to learn from the approaches of young environmentalists and are being called upon to "walk their talk" when it comes to carrying out their work in more sustainable ways.* Today's environmental crisis has inspired youth to take their development into their own hands as they teach themselves how to organize campaigns, raise funds, and advocate for their cause. The burgeoning environmental movement also offers new avenues for active youth-adult partnerships.
- *Youth-led environmental projects benefit in particular from communications and resource mobilization training.* "Given the popularity of environmental issues, young people need to know how to attract local media," says PCYF's Sulek, adding that youth also benefit from training in how to enlist the support of local businesses and government.
- *Supporting youth in pursuing a sustainable development approach can take additional time, resources, and expertise.* Helping young people explore issues such as the ethical implications of how and where they source products involves added layers of complexity. While this is the ideal, it can also lead to delays as young people search for truly sustainable solutions.

## Additional Resources

### Publications

- Kinkade, Sheila; Macy, Christy. *Our Time is Now: Young People Changing the World*. Pearson Foundation, © 2005.
- ProEurope. "Environmental Education: The Path to Sustainable Development." Brochure available at: [www.pro-e.org/files/environmental\\_education.pdf](http://www.pro-e.org/files/environmental_education.pdf)
- *Tunza Magazine for Youth*. United Nations Environmental Programme. Available at: <http://hqweb.unep.org/Publications/Tunza.asp>
- World Wildlife Fund; Center for a New American Dream. *Community Action Guide*. Available at: [www.ibuydifferent.org/takeaction/community\\_action\\_guide.pdf](http://www.ibuydifferent.org/takeaction/community_action_guide.pdf)

### Web Sites:

- Australian Youth Climate Coalition, [www.aycc.org](http://www.aycc.org)
- Connect2Earth, [www.connect2earth.org](http://www.connect2earth.org)
- Foundation for Future Generations, [www.foundationfuturegenerations.org](http://www.foundationfuturegenerations.org)
- Green Media Toolshed, [www.greenmediatoolshed.org](http://www.greenmediatoolshed.org)
- Hunab Theme Park, [www.hunab.org.mx](http://www.hunab.org.mx)
- The Otesha Project, [www.otesha.ca](http://www.otesha.ca)
- Polish Children and Youth Foundation, [www.pcyf.or.pl](http://www.pcyf.or.pl)
- World Resources Institute, [www.wri.org](http://www.wri.org)
- YouthActionNet®, [www.youthactionnet.org](http://www.youthactionnet.org)

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