

## Chapter 5

# Making a difference

### THE IMPORTANCE OF HOPE

Hope lies now in the millions and millions of us who say: No, no. We will not accept, we will not accept your destruction of the world and your guns and your wars...

We break away from the totality of capital death in a million different ways. We commonise. We force cracks in the system. We fight for our earth, the earth of people and other forms of life, before the capitalist system destroys it completely. We fight to open a gap between the future of capitalism, which can only be death, and the future of humanity, which can still be life. (John Holloway)

Education for sustainability can sometimes appear to be about “messages of doom”. While it is of course important that young people understand the full scale of the crisis facing the planet, this message can be dispiriting and disempowering. Education for sustainability also needs to inspire young people with hope, empower them to act, and give them reason to think that it is still possible to make a difference!

This chapter is about making a difference. It is about actions or activities beyond the educational setting of the youth group, perhaps involving the wider community, but most importantly, with the purpose of leading to an improvement in sustainability – however small. This improvement might be at the individual level – for example, a personal review by each of your young people of their own environmental impact, and a resolution to make some changes; it might be at the level of the youth group – for example, starting to grow vegetables at the youth centre; or it might be at the local, national or even global level – for example, lobbying the government for changes in energy policy or campaigning against a new coal-fired or nuclear energy plant.

It is important to note that while these actions may take place outside the traditional learning environment, and while they are not normally classed as “educational”, in fact taking action in this way can be one of the most rewarding and effective learning experiences for young people. Participants learn essential skills, such as co-operation, consensus building, planning and creativity; they take part in practical research, thus deepening their interest in and understanding of the issues; and they are likely to be emotionally engaged and motivated, thereby helping to clarify values and attitudes.



There is no need for any special expertise or skills to take action for sustainability. When young people feel concerned about an issue, they will want to do something, and the process of trying things out, reflecting, adapting and trying again is itself a process of learning – and a success in itself. The task for youth workers and educators is to provide support in this process, to offer information, if necessary, and to create space for young people to explore the issues and exchange ideas and views.

Use this chapter as a source of ideas and suggestions in order to guide the group's discussions. You could also look at the list of possible actions provided in Chapter 6, "Sustainability checklist".

Sustainability covers a multitude of issues, many of which are covered in the activities. You should allow your group to select the issues they are most troubled by, or interested in, or where they feel they can have an impact.

### Figure 14. Sustainability issues



## Scale and scope of an action

It is useful, when thinking about taking action, to begin by identifying its possible scale and scope. This will depend both on the group's interests and on practical considerations, such as whether there are others it can link up with, whether there are local issues or groups, and how much time and investment the group can make. We can think about taking action at a number of different levels:

- ▶ the personal level: making changes in our own lives;
- ▶ the local level: acting on local issues or with local groups;
- ▶ the global level: acting globally, perhaps in an online community, or taking on a global issue.

## Making a difference in your own life

Young people could start by asking themselves: what can I do to make changes in my life that support sustainability? This is the level of personal change, and many youth work sustainability projects begin at this level. The changes can be small and participants should not feel they have to aim for perfection, or change everything at once. Even the process of reviewing habits and becoming aware of any wasteful or damaging consequences of their actions can be useful.

- ▶ You could begin with an inspirational message or a film, or invite an activist or someone who lives in a way that consciously defends the environment to speak to the group. Explore what the group and what people individually are inspired to do and support them to find actions that they can incorporate into their everyday lives. Make individual plans together, share them, and check back regularly to see how people are doing. Let others know what the group is doing!

You could also start with one of the activities as a lead-in, for example "How big is my foot?", "Chicken sandwich", "Chain reactions", or any of the others. The first activity explores some of the daily routines that damage the environment.



### Examples of individual actions

- ▶ refuse to accept plastic bags and take your mug with you when buying drinks away from home;
- ▶ take an interest in where the products you consume are made and how they are made and try to use products which cause less damage to the environment;
- ▶ shop at the farmers' or local markets;
- ▶ compost your green waste: make a compost bin or take your kitchen waste to a local composting site;
- ▶ where possible, travel by train or coach instead of flying, as flying is the single most climate-harming personal action;
- ▶ start a "50-kilometre diet" to eat only local and seasonal food;
- ▶ eat less meat: meat production greatly contributes to greenhouse gases;
- ▶ think before you print and use both sides of the paper;
- ▶ make handmade presents for family and friends;
- ▶ reduce the number of new items you purchase;
- ▶ turn off the lights when they are not needed;
- ▶ turn off TVs and computers while not being used;
- ▶ take shorter showers;
- ▶ reflect on the way you speak to friends: does it promote consumerism?;
- ▶ change your life: live in an eco-village or a local sustainable community;
- ▶ look for local issues which raise concerns about sustainability.

## Making a difference at local level

### Incredible edible

Incredible edible groups started in 2007, with a group of like-minded individuals wanting to work together to improve their own community. They started with small herb gardens and community plots. They now grow produce and work together, provide training from field to classroom to kitchen, and support local commerce.

[www.incredibleediblenetwork.org.uk](http://www.incredibleediblenetwork.org.uk)

While individual actions are important, they need to be supported by systemic change if we are to tackle the serious problems related to sustainability. “Thinking global, acting local” can be a step beyond individual change, but still with manageable objectives.

You can encourage your group members not only to take action in their individual lives, but also together, in their local context. Local actions can be about raising awareness, attracting others to the cause of sustainability, getting the media to talk about a problem, and showing those in power that citizens are watching and are concerned about a problem.

Use activities such as “Climate superhero auditions”, “Nature journalists” or “Our futures” to spark participants’ interest and inspire them to take action at a local level.



#### Examples of local actions to take with your group

- ▶ plant trees in your neighbourhood;
- ▶ start a guerrilla gardening group, create edible gardens in the city or on unused ground;
- ▶ volunteer at a local organisation that works for sustainability;
- ▶ organise spaces for discussion with other young people, e.g. in schools;
- ▶ organise green lifestyle study circles where you can learn together with friends about sustainable lifestyles;
- ▶ organise local events to raise awareness about sustainability among the population;
- ▶ share information about advocacy or campaigns with young people and encourage them to get involved;
- ▶ start using a local currency;
- ▶ get engaged in social movements.

### Buying local

The Shopping Bag Community in Budapest is a great example of a local initiative to promote sustainability. A group of young people got in touch with local farmers and organised a system where people could buy food from local farms, to be collected from a central location. The whole system was run by a group of enthusiastic volunteers, who gave up several hours a week of their time to co-ordinate with the farmers, collect the orders, and organise the collection and distribution of vegetables, dairy and meat products, preserves, bakery items, etc.

## Making a difference globally

### Earth Hour

Earth Hour takes place on the last Saturday of March every year. It aims at raising environmental awareness and getting people to do small things in their daily lives that together can have a huge impact. It asks people to turn off their lights for an hour, earth’s hour. Earth Hour is a highly “visible” symbolic act that millions of people can easily join in with and send their message of caring for the planet. Find out more at: [www.earthhour.org](http://www.earthhour.org)

This is the level at which we try to have an impact on sustainability concerns by acting globally. Sometimes these issues may feel distant to your young people: they may find it hard to see how they are related to people in China, or rainforests in Brazil, or plastic waste islands in the Pacific Ocean.

However, it is not difficult to see the connection of most of the global issues with young people's lives – and many of the activities are designed to do this. Most of what we eat, wear and use in our everyday lives connects us to people around the world and has an environmental “footprint”. Our daily habits are nearly always a step away from one or more of the most urgent environmental and social problems. As a youth worker or educator, you can encourage and support young people to see these connections and to seek out responses from them to some of these problems.

Nearly all the activities highlight the connection between our lives and global issues. For example, “The cost of fashion” looks at the social and environmental costs of the clothes we wear; “Take a step forward” looks at the impact of climate change and environmental degradation on children around the world; “Fishing game” looks at industrial fishing practices. Use these activities to alert your group to the way behaviour in their country affects people in other parts of the globe.



#### Examples of actions with a global dimension

- ▶ join a global campaign or groups working for a sustainability issue;
- ▶ form a local section of a global movement and get active;
- ▶ raise funds for global causes;
- ▶ distribute the results of your action via social media to friends around the world;
- ▶ research, understand, learn and share what is going on around the world;
- ▶ ask your local or national politicians to present your views at international gatherings;
- ▶ show solidarity with people who are fighting for the protection of the natural environment in other parts of the world, e.g. by signing a petition online, making information available in your language, sharing it with your networks, or joining protests or civil disobedience actions;
- ▶ join protests related to supporting sustainability. Protests can also be creative actions!

#### Greenpeace: inspiring change for over 50 years

Greenpeace campaigns have pushed for companies and governments to change their ways so that steps are taken to secure a green and peaceful future for all humanity. Greenpeace activists are ordinary people willing to do extraordinary things to protect the environment. As a result of their activism, companies have been forced to reconsider actions, governments have shifted position – and the environment has benefited. For example, Greenpeace's actions have led to victories in stopping coal mines, phasing out toxic chemicals, banning radioactive waste dumping at sea, and an end to commercial whaling, among many other victories.

Find out more about the victories of Greenpeace campaigns for the environment: [www.greenpeace.org/international/history/](http://www.greenpeace.org/international/history/)

## CAMPAIGNING AND ADVOCACY

Most of the actions in the previous section can be undertaken – or at least prepared for – in a single session. A campaign can take longer, and requires persistency and often a variety of tactics. The aims may be more ambitious, and may include changes in policy or even changes at the system level. It is often useful – though not essential – to engage the support of more experienced organisations, or to begin by taking part in an existing campaign in order to build confidence and skills.

If young people are motivated to make a longer-term difference, they can very easily be engaged in such actions. For example:

- ▶ a campaign to persuade schools to ban vending machines selling products of unethical corporations;
- ▶ working with local organisations to demand that the city council provide a budget for cycle routes in the city;
- ▶ gathering evidence about air quality and using the information gathered to persuade the municipality not to build a car park close to the youth club;

- ▶ co-operating with environmental organisations to lobby for education for sustainability to be included in the formal curriculum;
- ▶ collaborating with other European youth organisations to ensure that international trade agreements support sustainability goals.

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### **Science for Change Kosovo Movement**

Kosovo<sup>1</sup> is one of the most polluted regions in Europe. As a response to this, in June 2014, internet.artizans, UNICEF Innovations Lab Kosovo, Transitions, and the Peer Educators Network, supported by the Transition Promotion Program of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic, teamed up to launch the first-ever citizen science initiative: Science for Change. Until April 2016, Science for Change functioned as a pilot project, building the skills of young people to monitor air quality, and running air pollution measurements in three locations across Kosovo.

In 2016, Science for Change transformed itself into a youth-led environmental movement, and it has expanded its scope of work to include non-formal environmental education, air quality monitoring, mobilisation and campaigning. The Science for Change Kosovo Movement has had a number of successes, including helping to change the public narrative on air pollution as a result of its campaign “Save your children from the invisible killer”.

In 2017, the Science for Change Kosovo Movement, together with local NGO Peer Educators Network, set up the first Green School Community, at the primary school Faik Konica. One of the aims was to educate teachers, pupils and parents in how to monitor air quality in their environment.

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## **PLANNING AN ACTION**

Any action, however small, needs planning, and you should make sure that the young people are involved in this planning process from start to finish. It is an important principle of youth work that young people should be at the heart of decisions affecting them: it leads to greater ownership and responsibility.

This section introduces some practical steps to assist with planning an action for sustainability. They will help to keep your group focused and will make it more likely that it achieves its objectives.

### **Which problem do you want to address?**

In approaching the problem you want to address:

- ▶ decide with the group which issue most concerns them, or where they feel they can most make a difference;
- ▶ brainstorm some ideas together. You could take a vote at the end, but it would be better if you could get the whole group to reach consensus on a single choice;
- ▶ the issue chosen by the group might be a global issue, such as climate change, or it might be an issue at the level of the youth group, such as how much energy is used by the youth centre. Whatever the issue, you will find it useful, once the initial choice has been made, to give the group the task of drawing a problem tree to break it down further. This will give participants a clearer understanding of the problem and help in the next stages of planning.

### **Where do you want to get to?**

Once you decide on your issue:

- ▶ think about what the action will achieve, and what success will look like. Be realistic, and think about what you expect as a specific result of your action – not the final change you hope to obtain. For example, in a heavily polluted area, if you organise an awareness-raising event, you may be able to generate interest and concern about pollution among local people, which may then lead them to reconsider whether they should use their car on a daily basis, but you may not immediately improve the air quality;

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1. All references to Kosovo, whether to the territory, institutions or population, in this text shall be understood in full compliance with United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244 and without prejudice to the status of Kosovo.



- ▶ possible results for the group might be things like:
  - getting 50 signatures for a petition;
  - handing out 150 stickers or information leaflets;
  - recruiting new members to the group;
  - securing a meeting with a local politician.

## Who is your target audience?

Your action is likely to be a step towards making the change you want to see. It will certainly influence people, even though it may not immediately reach those who can take the final decision on your issue.

There may be more than one target audience. It is important to identify the groups or individuals that you are trying to reach, and the effect you hope your action will have on them.

For example, the group might identify one or more of the following target audiences.

| <i>Target audience</i>       | <i>Intended effect</i>                      |
|------------------------------|---|
| Local residents of this town | Sign our petition                           |
| Shoppers at the supermarket  | Agree not to buy Brand X                    |
| Local newspapers             | Publish our press release about the action  |
| The Mayor                    | Agree to a meeting to discuss air pollution |

## What will you do to influence your audience?

This is where you can identify what the group will actually do. The action selected might fall into one of the following categories:

- ▶ demonstrating solutions – for example, speaking about sustainable growing methods or alternative energy sources;
- ▶ awareness raising – for example, handing out leaflets or speaking to members of the public;
- ▶ educating, running lessons or workshops, writing blogs or articles;
- ▶ lobbying, by trying to influence politicians or those in power, for example by writing letters, trying to arrange meetings or going to constituency meetings;
- ▶ protest and public actions, for example involving a demonstration, march, street theatre, occupation or die-in.

## Check: how is the change expected to come about?

Before you go on to plan the action, spend a little time to make sure that the method you have chosen will serve the purpose you want it to. For example, if leaflets are supposed to persuade people to stop buying Brand X:

- ▶ where is the right place to stand, so people have time (and their hands free) to take the leaflets and maybe chat to the group?
- ▶ how can you make sure people read the text?
- ▶ how can you convey the urgency of the issue without being too pushy or making people feel bad?
- ▶ what should the design look like so that the important words stand out?
- ▶ how can you make it clear what people need to do after reading the leaflet?
- ▶ can you test out the text and design on someone outside the group?

## Practical issues

Before you put your action into practice, think about the practical tasks which will need to be done beforehand, and on the day:

- ▶ make a list of all the materials you will need (and how you will source them);

- ▶ make a list of tasks such as sourcing materials, making banners, designing leaflets, raising funds, etc.;
- ▶ allocate people to each task, so that each task has at least one person responsible for making it happen;
- ▶ agree on timings;
- ▶ make sure everyone is happy with their role, and agree to check in with each other regularly.

### **Evaluation and debriefing**

After any action, it is important to sit down together and discuss how things went. Ask the group what went well, what they think they achieved, and what could have been done better. Allow plenty of time and give participants the space to share their feelings. This will help reinforce the team spirit and can be used as a springboard for planning any future actions.

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Seeds for Change is a workers' co-op of experienced campaigners and co-operators that offers support to groups that confront injustice and build alternatives. It offers training, facilitation, online resources and other support for campaigns, community groups and co-operatives. Seeds for Change has developed several guides to support organisations and groups for sustainability, including guides for direct action.

[www.seedsforchange.org.uk](http://www.seedsforchange.org.uk)

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