

Engaging Youth for Sustainable Development: Field Lessons from Community Sustainability Global

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1. Introduction

Abundant empirical evidence and studies¹ tell us youth (age 15-24) have some potential to facilitate sustainable development (SD) policy and action, including awareness and activism, agenda setting, formulation, legitimation, decision-making and implementation. However, we know more about their activism and implementation role in the global north than south, especially Africa. Also, of the three basic pillars — economic, social, and environmental — of SD, youth are often reported and visibly seen to be more active on the environmental front, especially SD goal 13: climate action. While they could also foster economic and social sustainability, we know too little about that potential.

To contribute to filling these gaps, we ask what youth could do to enhance the three pillars of SD across the global north and south. We use an international project, Community Sustainability Global (CSG),² as a case study to answer the question, drawing on workshop preparation and interaction, feedback surveys and interviews. Among other findings, our results show that youth contribute not only to promoting SD policy and action but could also tell us more about knowledge mobilization on scientific and policy loopholes.

2. CSG

The Project Director of CSG brought Holistic Sustainability Development Network (HSDN) International and Human Dignity Foundation together to initiate CSG as an international collaborative project in December 2018. Reflecting the central concepts of both non-

¹ See, for example, Anam Khan, Asif Javed, Samavia Batool, Fazal Hussain, Hamid Mahmoud and Vaqar Ahmed, *The Role of Youth in Sustainable Development: Perspectives from South Asia* (Overseas Development Institute, Southern Voice on Post-MDG International Development Goals and Sustainable Development Policy Institute, 2016).

² See www.csproject.com

governmental organizations (NGOs), the objective of the project is to bring stakeholders such as experts, NGOs, social enterprises, and governments together to pursue sustainability holistically (HSDN concept) without undermining the dignity of people (HDF concept). Going by this objective, what sustainability means at one place is different from another, so implementation has been designed to fit local contexts.

Still, across the board, the project staff — consisting of sustainability experts in the natural sciences, social sciences, education and law, as well as social entrepreneurs— and several collaborators have variously organized and participated in workshops where representatives enlighten community members about sustainability, encourage them to abandon unsustainable practices (e.g. food waste, logging, overfishing, illegal excavation and mining), and supported existing sustainability initiatives.

Countries in Africa and North America have benefited from the implementation of the CSG project. To answer our research question, we focus on Nigeria and Canada within these regions, serving as microcosms of the global south and north. Our approach across these countries has been different because sustainability means different things at different places.

2.1. Africa: Nigeria

Truly reflecting the tripartite pillar, SD, especially climate change mitigation aspect of the environmental pillar, cannot happen without socio-economic sustainability in poor African communities. Many people within those communities worry about meeting their daily needs, so any SD agenda must tell them how to survive.

We therefore approach SD in Nigeria holistically to contribute to international and national sustainability targets. We employ a “give and take” strategy: we give community members a less degrading economic skill to make them desist from an unsustainable way of life. This is a reasonable approach to sustainability in poor communities in the global south.

2.2. North America: Canada

Pursuing sustainability in North America necessitates more of education and civil society mobilization as opposed to skills training. There are existing systems that promote SD within the Canadian society (e.g. recycling, efficient technologies, etc), so the challenge is more about the knowledge of consequences and the will to act.

Our workshops in Canada have been diverse, ranging across symposia, media outlets and camps. For instance, we have facilitated a workshop at the Youth Camp of the Asian Canadian Anglican Ministries involving Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and other Asian youths in Vancouver. We have also supported sustainability-promoting events. For instance, we have supported a symposium at the Liu Institute for Global Issues, University of British Columbia, which brought together academic and community members to look at the nexus of environment, education, and decision-making.

3. CSG in Nigeria: Case of Oyo State Secondary Schools

Logistically supported by the Government of Oyo State in Nigeria and funded by Human Dignity Foundation, the Nigerian team has focused more on public enlightenment and skills training. We have been active within two states: Oyo and Osun. After going to some schools

and facing administrative challenges in Oyo state, for instance where administrative personnel gave us onerous requirements before getting access to students, we decided to approach the Oyo State Government to get official access to all the secondary schools within the state. We were successful. Backed by the state government, the Oyo state workshops have largely focused on teaching the basics of SD and empowering senior secondary students by imparting tie-dye skills. We have also approached schools directly in Ogun state and have faced similar administrative challenges like those of Oyo State. To solve these problems, we also decided to partner with the Ogun state government, although this process is not yet finalized. Besides teaching youth about the basics of SD, giving hands-on practical demonstration on the management of organic and inorganic soap production to reduce the chemical footprint has been our focus within Ogun state.

Across the two states, we organize two-part workshops: classes on the basics of SD and then skills acquisition workshops. We have CSG instructors and collaborators that teach the SD classes. The classes are designed to be similar across the board. To ensure similar content and standards, we have recently decided to create a manual. However, unlike the classes, the skills acquisition workshops are based on the expertise we have on the CSG team or within the partner organizations. For instance, we have focused on chemical management in Ogun state because our Project Co-manager there is a Principal Technologist at the Bells University of Technology where she leads the chemical risk management process in the production of industrial consumables, while we have focused on tie-dye in Oyo state because our Co-Project Manager there specializes in that craft. In all cases, we carry out an assessment of the skills to ensure they promote SD.

Participants across the states found the mutual learning experience the most rewarding. For instance, our team learnt youth's SD knowledge gaps and appreciated tie-dye as a sustainable art. Being our most productive project sites so far, the three secondary schools in Oyo state serve as our case study of the CSG project in Nigeria, although we also draw on our experience from Ogun state.

3.1. Overview of youth engagement

We partnered with the technical staff of Adireseyi Enterprises, a federally registered social enterprise, to organize workshops at Abadina College in the University of Ibadan, Community Secondary School and Urban Day High School in Ibadan. These schools are all public schools in Oyo state, meaning that most of the students are those who are unable to afford private schools.

Across the schools, instructors from CSG started by teaching the students about SD. Thereafter, they encouraged the students to acquire sustainable skills and do away with unsustainable practices. After this SD workshop, staff of Adireseyi Enterprises taught the students how to make tie-dye as a sustainable skill. Tie-dye is native to Africa and promotes African culture (social sustainability), provides an economic means to replace unsustainable alternatives such as logging and illegal excavation (economic sustainability), and facilitates the redesign and re-use of fabric (environmental sustainability).

3.2. General lessons from youth engagement

Youth constitute the larger percentile in the communities housing the schools, hence hundreds of students attended our workshops and were very enthusiastic about them. We quickly realized that, for obvious socio-economic reasons, the students were more interested in learning tie-dye as an economic skill than knowing more about SD. Most of them are from poor homes. Unemployment rates are also very high, so their chance of getting gainful employment is low. They will be having secondary school qualifications from public schools, considered the least preferred in the country. As a side note, adults, including their teachers, were also interested in learning tie-dye as you would see in the pictures in the appendix. Their interest largely stems from the potential to earn money from the skill.

The workshops started with an overview of SD, introducing the three basic pillars: economic, social, and environmental. Subsequently, we introduced how tie-dye is a sustainable art, embedding the three pillars of SD. Perhaps the most compelling reason for the high turnout of the students and their teachers was the economic pillar. They saw tie-dye as a means to earn more income, especially because the tie-dye market in Ibadan has not yet matured when compared to other places such as Abeokuta and Osogbo, giving the participants an opportunity to become pioneers in the market. But more than this economic value, tie-dye also promotes social sustainability. Being indigenous to Nigeria, it advances the Yoruba culture of fabric design and impression. Clearly the most subtle pillar, environmental sustainability also thrives through tie-dye. The art involves recycling clothes, which are then redesigned for reuse.

3.3. Lessons on how youth contribute to SD

Across the schools, we learnt that youth could contribute to SD in a variety of ways. We identify two that appear to be the most significant from the CSG project. First, where they learn sustainable skills and have the means to use them, they could constitute an army of sustainability implementers. For instance, many of the students expressed the intention to start tie-dye businesses, meaning they would significantly increase the amount of clothes that are recycled and reused in the textile economy. Second, youth could propagate SD. The more they learn, the more they will likely tell their friends and family members. As such, they could increase awareness about SD across social spaces.

However, there were significant challenges. Surprisingly, the school administrative systems do not necessarily promote channels for SD knowledge dissemination, even those that are free like ours. We were surprised that some schools across the two states were not immediately receptive to our free sustainability workshops. We observed that the administrative staff across these schools seemed not to be interested because there was nothing to personally gain from the workshops. For instance, the administrative personnel at one school specifically asked us for monetary compensation for helping us navigate the administrative approval. Less surprising was the low level of awareness about SD across the schools. Being within underdeveloped communities with very limited access to internet facilities and broadcast media, most of the students had never heard of SD. We had the opportunity to tell them about SD for the first time.

To address these challenges, we suggest secondary schools across the states should introduce sustainability courses as part of the curriculum. Such school courses could complement projects like ours. Once the knowledge dissemination process is internal, there would be limited opportunities for administrative staff to influence sustainability knowledge dissemination approval processes. At the same time, the knowledge of students on sustainability will significantly increase. Just as they study other courses, student will learn more from sustainability courses.

4. CSG in Canada: Case of The Anglican Canadian Asian Ministry Youth Camp

Initially funded by the Government of Canada to commence the project and with logistical support from HSDN International, the Canadian team has focused more on public enlightenment and civic mobilization. For instance, the team taught the public about climate action and behavioural change on Vancouver Cooperative Radio (environmental and social sustainability) and discussed Agrowth (an alternative development pathway) at a Symposium of the Liu Institute for Global Issues at the University of British Columbia (economic and environmental sustainability).

Sensitizing participants about SD themes, especially the data and gaps, was the top lesson. For instance, we responded to the view of some participants on Vancouver Cooperative Radio that climate change is a conspiracy from China, while those at the Anglican Canadian Asian Ministry Youth Camp were surprised about the level of food waste in Canada. The Anglican Canadian Asian Ministry Youth Camp revealed most of the self-contained lessons on the role of youth in SD (as opposed to other workshops not focusing on youth), so we use it for our case study of the Canadian CSG project while backdropping our experience across other workshops.

4.1. Overview of youth engagement

We partnered with Munchies Foodshare to organize a workshop on food waste at the Anglican Canadian Asian Ministry Youth Camp (environmental and economic sustainability). Staff of CSG introduced SD and our project, and Munchies Foodshare taught youth about the value of food through an educational workshop exposing the environmental, economic, and social impacts of food waste. Through interactive activities the students learnt about food waste from a life-cycle perspective and explored preventative measures aimed at reducing its impact.

The workshop consisted of a series of interactive activities, some supplemented with the most recent facts and figures related to food waste, and others that were more exploratory. We started with an educational component aimed at providing insight into the food waste crisis in Canada and globally and teaching the participants about the life-cycle of food, from farm to table, and, if unconsumed, to landfill or compost. For the more exploratory activities, rather than providing the information directly, the youth were asked to explore concepts themselves. For example, the participants were asked to collectively brainstorm potential measures to prevent food from becoming waste at home.

For an educational and engaging activity, the students were split into groups, each group provided information about a different type of home composting method, including their construction instructions. The groups were given time to learn the methods themselves and prepare a presentation. They were instructed to teach the class how to construct the compost system through a silent charades presentation, followed by a verbal explanation of the pros and cons of each method.

By the end of the workshop, the participants walked away with a newfound understanding of the stages of the food life-cycle, the various outlets along the food supply chain for which food is lost or wasted, the different reasons edible food is unconsumed, lost, or discarded, which circumstances of food wastage are unnecessary or avoidable, and an idea of potential preventative measures they could pursue at home to prevent food from going to waste. In addition, the youth participants learnt the most and least preferred mechanisms of

food disposal according to the food waste hierarchy and relative to their associated environmental impacts.

An objective of the workshop was for the students to learn how the impact of food waste extends beyond the environmental consequences of end-of-life disposal practices, and how understanding the full impact of food waste requires the entire life-cycle and numerous environmental, economic, and social considerations to be taken into account.

4.2. General lessons from youth engagement

More exploratory activities, such as when the youth were asked to explore solutions themselves, leaves room for imaginative learning that extends beyond the provided material and allows the participants to learn from each other as well as the instructor. This also allowed the youth to frame the subject according to their individual perspective, helping them relate to the subject more closely. Additionally, the activities allowed the session to be iterative, adapting to the participants interests to ensure ongoing engagement.

Interactive activities seemed to make the content more digestible, allowing the participants to learn a lot in a short period of time. The students were excited about the knowledge they had gained, their new understanding of the value of food, and new perspective on food waste. The participants expressed their excitement in recognizing so many potential ways to reduce food waste at home, and also about learning the different compost methods.

We personalized the experience of the workshop participants. Having the youth consider solutions in their own lives allowed them to relate to the subject more closely, moving beyond the hypothetical. Providing tangible skills can make learning feel more concrete and allow youth to extend their learning beyond the confines of the classroom, facilitating actionable items. Rather than just absorbing information, the youth left looking to continue learning and applying what they had learnt outside of the classroom. Offering tangible action items the youth could pursue outside of the classroom provides an outlet for their newly acquired knowledge and provide them with something to look forward to. Anticipation of future implementation extends their excitement beyond the classroom, and allows them to translate their newly acquired knowledge into something actualizable.

Therefore, the impact of the workshop was not confined to the classroom. Providing skills the youth could work on prevented them from being reliant on the information offered by external entities (ie. instructors), making the entire initiative more sustainable. At the end of the various sessions, the students were asked to say one new thing they learnt. The most recurring theme in their answers was about their knowledge gaps and how the workshop filled those.

4.3. Lessons on how youth contribute to SD

Youth have an important role in SD because their habits are still being developed. Household food waste is often a result of unsustainable habits, such as buying more than necessary, going grocery shopping without a shopping list, unsustainable perceptions of food such as preferences for perfect produce, or sometimes apathy. Providing youth with an awareness about the impact of food waste can therefore help prevent apathy, adjust perceptions of food, and prevent the development of unsustainable habits, while providing tangible action items or skills can promote sustainable behaviour development.

While most of the youth had heard about SD, they knew very little about the food cycle. One participant said they "didn't know Canada was one of the biggest food wasters." Another mentioned that they "didn't know about the different ways of composting." We had the opportunity to fill these gaps in their knowledge, connecting food to broader SD issues.

Confirming this impact, a participant said "I learnt that it is very important not to waste food. We should take care of the earth"

5. Conclusion

CSG has taught us several lessons on the nuances of SD knowledge mobilization across the global south and north, emerging SD issues and barriers, and how sustainability partnership works at the grassroots. Based on our case study jurisdictions and workshops, most of these lessons are as applicable to youth.

Accordingly, our most central lesson across Nigeria and Canada is that youth could do more than promote SD policy and action, as predominantly associated with them. Beyond serving as activists and implementers, the CSG project across both countries revealed that youth could also help us identify scientific and policy knowledge gaps in economic, social, and environmental sustainability. If so, drawing on their knowledge gaps, youth experience is an additional data point for designing follow-up SD agendas. Youth could substantiate such data within their respective jurisdictions and at the international level.

Appendix

A. CSG in Nigeria







B. CSG in Canada





