

Youth Representatives as Multipliers of Education for Sustainable Development

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Abstract

The regional youth workshop on Sustainable Development (SD), in July 2003 involved a variety of NGOs in Suriname. Monique Pool, with Conservation International Suriname, the Suriname CARICOM Youth Ambassadors, and the youth representatives of Suriname worked to develop and initiate the workshop. An itinerary of four themes was covered: biodiversity, water and sanitation, energy, and poverty alleviation. Each theme was discussed in a different, appropriate field location that also allowed for a variety of hands-on experiences during the day, followed by talks and other activities in the evening. The final product was the development of a consensus-based action plan, which each participant was to implement upon his/her return home. Evaluations at the end of the workshop and sixteen months later indicate that it was a success in initiating a network of youth representatives with positive attitudes toward being environmentally active.

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Introduction

Broadly speaking, environmental problems are addressed reactively. A problem occurs and then we react. Policies are written, laws are passed and perhaps even, information is provided to the public. A proactive, preventive approach involves providing information and education. The education of young people changes the perspectives of development for a generation. These are the leaders who will soon be making environmental decisions. For that reason, the request to hold this workshop was timely. Our organisation fully ascribes to the ideas presented in *My Community, Our Earth*: “The foundation of sustainable development is built on one simple idea: that what you do has consequences not just for your family and friends, but your neighbors, and their neighbors, and their neighbors, across state lines and national boundaries— and not simply for people, but for animals, plants, mountains, microorganisms, forests, glaciers, the oceans, and the thin blanket of air that surrounds our planet. These consequences can be good or bad. It’s largely up to us. But since consequences are hard to forecast, we need to study and explore the way our world works.” (Foresman, 2002).

Conservation International Suriname (CIS) believes that "As more resources are being spent on poverty elimination and sustainable development, Conservation International wants to ensure that conservation is integrated into these efforts, for in our view biodiversity is the actual wealth of the world. CI’s goal is to conserve biodiversity and demonstrate that human societies can live harmoniously with nature. One of the most productive ways to achieve our goal is by forging productive alliances, especially with young people. We sincerely hope that this regional workshop will make young people of the Caribbean more aware of the importance of sustainable development and the conservation of biodiversity, and thus help to ensure environmental sustainability" (Belfor, 2003).

Workshop

The idea for this workshop was generated by Sergio Belfor, CARICOM Youth Ambassador (CYA) for Suriname, who had also attended the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) in South Africa, as an official youth delegate for Suriname. Participation at the CARICOM Youth Ambassadors Regional Workshop on Sustainable Development (henceforth called the Youth Workshop) included 29 participants; Youth Ambassadors and Youth Representatives from 9 Caribbean countries and 19 local participants, including both CARICOM Youth Ambassadors for Suriname, all Youth Officers of the Youth Council, and others. .

Based on the concept of testing theory in practice, a preliminary itinerary of four themes was planned: biodiversity, water and sanitation, energy, and poverty alleviation. A field location was chosen for the first three subjects, while the fourth subject would be discussed in town along with the concepts of SD, agriculture and fisheries. Discussions for each theme were held in relevant locations. Biodiversity was covered both in the Marowijne and Brokopondo locations so that marine and terrestrial issues could be presented. Water and sanitation was discussed in the villages of Langamankondre and Christiaankondre, which

have specific problems with water and sanitation. In addition, biodiversity of the marine ecosystem, particularly sea turtles, were treated. Energy was discussed at the hydropower dam at Afobakka in the district of Brokopondo, where we also dealt with issues of preservation and conservation at the nearby Brownsberg Nature Park, also in the district of Brokopondo. Poverty Alleviation was as you might expect talked about in the city (see Fig. 1).

Objectives

The objectives of the workshop were to increase awareness and knowledge among the Caribbean youth about the importance of solving environmental problems in a sustainable context, and environmental conservation.

Goals

The specific goals of the workshop were to

1. Provide the CYAs information about the importance of
 - biodiversity and biodiversity conservation
 - water and sanitation
 - energy in relation to SD
 - poverty alleviation
 - the rich natural resources of Suriname
2. Develop alternative awareness methods to transfer information and awaken an interest in nature in the youth, so that these methods can be disseminated throughout the CARICOM member states and the Caribbean countries for youth activities.
3. Promote awareness of the general public regarding the issues discussed at the workshop.

Expected results

The project profile listed the following expected results

- Increased awareness among the CARICOM Youth ambassadors, regional youth participants and local participants of Suriname on biodiversity, biodiversity conservation, water and sanitation, energy, poverty alleviation and SD.
- Development and testing of alternative methods for increasing youth awareness of environmental issues.
 - Increased awareness of the general public about the issues discussed at the workshop.

Products

The products were

- An action plan to promote awareness and knowledge among youth about the importance of SD and environmental preservation.
- A final report on project implementation.

Methodology

The workshop was conducted over a seven day period and included both travel days and field days, where the youth were provided with hands-on experiences in each of the four themes. At each of the four field locations, participants were taught how to gather systematized information on the physical environment. They were exposed to Geographic Information System. They kept journals of their experiences (Nature Journaling Conservation International, 2003) and learned how to analyse data, form their own reasoned interpretations, present and discuss issues on the basis of their observations, and present and report their findings in a plenary session every evening. At the end of the workshop, all the recommendations resulting from the plenary session were compiled into an action plan that was submitted to CARICOM and which each participant was expected to develop and implement in the upcoming months and year.

The pattern of each evening's activities was

- Presentation by relevant expert(s).
- Discussion in plenary.
- Discussion in working groups (of approx. eight participants) and recording of recommendations.

For the purpose of evaluation, the participants filled out a questionnaire at the end of the workshop, and 16 months later responded via email to a short set of questions.

The media received press releases, was invited to the closing session, and was given the opportunity to interview participants.

Resources

A variety of resources were used for the workshop, many of which can be obtained on-line. Because of its clear and cogent explanations of environmental methodology, we found the student project guide from *My Community, Our Earth* (Foresman 2002) to be a crucial resource in the pre-workshop preparation and activities.¹ We adapted an assignment from this and used part of another in its entirety. Both were sent to the participants as pre-workshop assignments, and were used in conjunction with two simple Global Positioning Systems II (GPS) instruments to teach the participants to take the coordinates of the locations where they recorded their observations.

¹ "Systematized information on the physical environment helps people assess and use their natural resources without depleting them or placing them at risk. And thanks to timely and accurate information, communities increasingly can reduce the uncertainties of human–environment interdependence and of lives dominated by chance. Today, society requires and demands ample information at national, regional, and local levels before decisions are made about the use of natural resources. With objective, timely, and clearly intelligible information, individuals may form their own reasoned opinions, which is one of the necessary conditions of an effective democracy. In this sense, the use of geographic information is a task of the greatest political significance. Geographic information systems can be extraordinarily useful in the democratic development of communities and of nations. Information on natural resources, labor and unemployment, health, education, public safety, and housing, all within their specific geographical contexts, helps communities to assess both challenges and opportunities. This, in turn, aids the implementation of policies that foster the well being of the population." (Foresman, 2002).

The nature journaling activity was based on a pilot of a Conservation International Washington, DC, education department activity. My experience is that one of the most useful activities to teach students is to teach them to sit still, observe and record, an 'activity' that stresses inactivity.

In addition to local literature on sea turtles (Schulz, 1980), the Sea Turtle Conservation Guide from the Caribbean Conservation Corporation (Sea Turtle Survival League, 1999) was used, as was the teacher's guide to the Sea Turtle Migration- Tracking & Coastal Habitat Education Program (Sea Turtle Survival League, 1999).

The BBC documentary *Deep Trouble* in the series "The Blue Planet—Seas of Life" (BBC/Discovery Channel, 2001) was used to provide the participants with a perspective on sustainable fisheries.

Lessons learned

The organizers of the workshop, the CARICOM Youth Ambassadors and Suriname Youth Officers, listed five lessons learned from their perspective. Notable is that four of the lessons learned focused on logistical matters such as time-keeping, visa procedures, availability of medical care and only one dealt with the content of the workshop. That lesson is to reduce the number of closely scheduled presentations, and recognize that youth learn in a variety of ways (not just by being talked to), especially through direct interaction between the youth and the presenter, e.g. an active learning approach (FIRST, 2002).

As a participating organizer I learned some additional lessons. I learned the need for additional preparation, for instance, to properly evaluate this activity. Because I did not have the time to draw up the questionnaires, I could not establish indicators of success and a baseline at the beginning and then measure again at the end of the workshop. The evaluation that was done was drawn up at the last minute on the last day of the conference and mainly contained questions on logistics and did not focus much on the content of the workshop. I learned that planning and organizing needs to begin much earlier. We started talking about organizing this workshop several months in advance. However, the actual preparations and organization started six weeks prior to the workshop. I learned that funding needs to be secured and that the final project proposal has to be finished before implementation begins. If we had started earlier we would have been able to achieve everything we said we would. Finally, I learned that the planning of the follow-up, particularly with regard to the assessment of long-term changes and even keeping in touch, is as important as the workshop itself, particularly for international participants.

Follow-up

As follow-up, I tried to stay in contact with as many participants (international and local) as possible through email, to point them towards opportunities that would help them develop and implement the action plan. Because I was in closer contact with the local participants, I was better able to assist them in thinking about some of their follow-up actions.

Problems in the follow-up

One important problem encountered in the follow-up was the fact that CARICOM was dissuading the CARICOM Youth Ambassadors from concentrating their focus on this issue. They wanted them to concentrate only on the CARICOM Court of Justice and AIDS

and youth. Although we offered to provide the technical assistance if invited, we never received an invitation, although the CARICOM Youth Ambassadors kept pressing for Environmental Preservation and Sustainable Development as one of their priorities, it was never encouraged by the CARICOM official concerned.

Post-workshop evaluation

Any conclusion on this workshop would not be complete if it did not include a post-workshop evaluation. The four questions that follow were asked of and responses received from the participants in November 2004, 16 months after the workshop was held. Approximately twenty-five percent of the participants responded (8 of 29); two email addresses no longer seem to be valid. Both the quantity and quality of the responses received necessitate a very positive outlook on the impact of this workshop. Eight responses were received in total and all were from local participants. No foreign participant responded and this suggests the benefit of face-to-face contact with the workshop participants as crucial to maintain the effects of the workshop. However, further studies would need to be done to ascertain that as a fact.

- What have you done to follow up on the action plan?

In response to the first question two respondents said that they had not done anything, one had left for studies abroad, the other said that there was no concrete follow-up. Three respondents have joined in a working group to make a documentary about water and sanitation, which was one of the activities of the action plan. One respondent started making TV programs on the environment and has informed other youth about littering and the beauty of nature. He has now planned to make a documentary about the Brownsberg Nature Park. One respondent is writing an undergraduate paper on standards to ensure a better quality of life, and also organizes trips to the interior for his fellow students. One respondent invited a specialist to talk about the environment for a youth group of his political party.

- How has the workshop changed your life?

All respondents felt that it changed their lives. One respondent said he feels more confident about doing what is right to preserve nature, another looks more consciously at how certain issues may form a problem for future generations. Another said it was a real wake-up call for him with regard to conserving nature and finding a balance between nature conservation and economic development.

- How has the workshop changed your outlook on the development of your country? Most respondents felt the workshop had changed their outlook on development, and made them realize that there are alternative development paths, that are less destructive and more sustainable and that value the conservation of nature. The need to involve local communities in the development of their areas, as well as informing them about preserving nature was seen by one respondent as a priority and a precondition to attain sustainable, ecologically sound development. One respondent said he felt his outlook on development for his country had not changed; he said he felt left out.

- Give at most 4 concrete things you did as a result of the workshop.

Here, several really showed how they have been multipliers of this educational experience. Among the examples are: making a documentary about water and sanitation; making

television programmes for youth about the environment; making visits to the interior more often; organizing a presentation on the environment; starting up a regional activity; lobbying for the environment as a priority topic for the CARICOM Youth Ambassadors; and making a television programme for the upcoming elections in which SD will be one of the hot issues.

Conclusion

In general, I believe this workshop was a success. We achieved most of our goals. We were able to provide the participants with information about the importance of biodiversity and biodiversity conservation, water and sanitation, and energy in relation to SD, poverty alleviation, and the rich nature of Suriname. Although we used alternative awareness methods to transfer information and awaken an interest in nature in the youth, we were unable to measure effects accurately enough to develop a product. The workshop and the way it was set up can be seen as an alternative, though expensive, awareness method. We were able to promote awareness of the general public of the issues discussed at the workshop through media coverage. In addition, the fact that the President of Suriname opened the workshop, also helped increase visibility of the workshop.

In addition, the planned workshop outcomes that were to give direction to any kind of follow-up, were also realized. The action plan to promote awareness and knowledge among youth about the importance of SD and environmental preservation was drawn up and adopted by the participants on the last day of the workshop. The final project report, which gave a very detailed outline of the workshop, was also drawn up. Both documents were distributed to all participants, donors and presenters.

A participant's response made at the end of the workshop suggested that it had been successful. We had definitely reached one participant: "This seminar was very appropriate/relevant and timely. It has definitely influenced me to look at my community, country, world in a new light and has made me realize the importance of my role in effecting change so as to have a better world/life" (Belfor, 2003). In light of the post-workshop evaluation, we can definitely say this workshop and the approach we used had a more long-lasting effect than just while it was going on.

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