

Equity in planetary health education initiatives



The effects of climate change are being experienced around the world and should urgently be addressed. Learning from and engaging with young people is crucial for the codevelopment of suitable and effective interventions, and to equip the next generations with the necessary skills to achieve environmental sustainability and increase climate change resilience.¹ Although teaching the science and skills needed for a healthy future are important, there is growing recognition that the complexity and interconnectedness of climate change, health, sustainability, resilience, and socioeconomic drivers require transformative educational methods.² In addition, equity, justice, ethical, and human rights issues related to climate change can benefit from interactive educational methodology and codeveloped solutions.³

We present an example of youth involvement, colearning, and cocreation of educational material. In May, 2021, the Climate Change Solutions Festival took place in The Gambia.^{4,5} The festival involved the use and application of innovative educational methods, with colearning, equity, and respect as core values. The project was run by the Medical Research Council Unit The Gambia at London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine in collaboration with the Gambian Ministry of Education. The team jointly decided on the key objectives, scope, student ages, and the logistical support available. We approached students aged 16–18 years in 50 schools across The Gambia to participate in a competition to develop an interactive stall (figure)⁴ to present their local solutions to adapt to or mitigate the effects of climate change or environmental degradation. 11 schools were selected, on the basis of relevance, innovation, and engagement of their proposed solutions, to present their ideas at the festival. Ten non-governmental organisations (NGOs) linked to conservation and environmental protection were also invited to participate and present their (professional) solutions and promote colearning with students. Over 2 days, 600 schoolchildren attended the festival. Both days involved peer-to-peer learning with interactive experiments, action sketches, and a theatre play covering several climate change solutions. We highlight the successes and pitfalls of the festival.

From the beginning, we aimed to form equal partnerships between government departments, academia,

and NGOs. In practice, the project was predominantly led by the academic partners. There were several reasons why this occurred. First, the relatively short timeframe for festival organisation placed a time constraint on collaborator contributions. Second, a small budget affected accessibility and scope. Third, the budget holder being the academic institution introduced an imbalance in power.

We have identified three key leverage points on how partnerships could be strengthened in future editions of the festival and similar colearning activities.⁶ First, improving planning with longer lead-in time, communication, and transparency between all partners with a commitment to investing time to build relationships and trust. Second, discussing and agreeing on shared goals for any future programmes. Third, evaluating (and making potential adjustments) of the partnership during the collaboration.

Students who attended the festival and presented their ideas showed strong enthusiasm for further roll-out of local solutions to tackle specific environmental and climate change problems. The festival structure and layout allowed networking between students, academics, NGOs, and government stakeholders; however, no specific strategy was in place to encourage professionals to enact upon students' solutions.

Although the long-term effects of the festival cannot be assessed at this stage, the passion, enthusiasm, and



Figure: A stall explaining and showing the need to protect fresh water bodies during the Climate Change Solutions Festival, May 2021, The Gambia

ingenuity of the students suggests that there will be no shortage of potential climate leaders in the future. Despite this positive engagement, we felt there was an unequal balance between climate change adaptation solutions and climate justice, with the latter being underrepresented at the festival. Although a focus on adaptation is imperative (given how climate change is already affecting this setting),⁷ not representing climate justice might have hindered an important avenue to enact change.⁹ Without addressing the global inequality in those responsible for climate change versus those most affected by it reduces the likelihood of leveraging global action.⁹ To overcome this in future editions, a more proactive approach could be taken. For instance, by inviting NGOs with a climate justice focus; running workshops in schools on different aspects of climate adaptation and justice; or by encouraging student projects that address climate equity or justice.

Education and colearning are pivotal in addressing the climate crisis. Young people are strong supporters of action to change our current global trajectory on climate change, and it is time their voices are heeded by those in power.

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*Ana Bonell, Jainaba Badjie, Lamin B Faal, Sariba Jammeh, Zakari Ali, Muhammed Hydrara, Adesina Davies, Momodu Faal, Aliyu Nuhu Ahmed, William Hand, Andrew M Prentice, Kris A Murray, Pauline Scheelbeek
ana.bonell@lshtm.ac.uk

Medical Research Council Unit The Gambia at London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, Fajara, The Gambia (AB, JB, SJ, ZA, ANA, AMP, KAM); Centre on Climate Change and Planetary Health, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, London, UK (AB, KAM, PS); The Ministry of Basic and Secondary Education, The Gambia Government, The Gambia (LBF); GREAT Institute, Bijilo, The Gambia (MH, AD, MF); Banjul American International School, Fajara, The Gambia (WH); MRC Centre for Global Infectious Disease Analysis, School of Public Health, Imperial College London, London, UK (KAM)

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