

Involving younger generation in the dialogue on Sustainable Development: Vinyl 2010 Essay Competitions

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1. Introduction

Voluntary Commitments from industry are one of the most promising approaches to successfully bridge corporate and government roles and make effective progress on sustainable development.

Vinyl 2010 is the 10-year programme to improve PVC production processes and products, invest in technology, minimise emissions, reduce waste and boost collection and recycling, in the framework of the European PVC industry's commitment to sustainable development. This is the only Voluntary Commitment of its kind involving the entire upstream and downstream chain – from raw-materials to post-consumer waste – in a single industry.

But industry's commitments to sustainable development, cannot only be related to the strict improvement of processes and products. The European PVC industry's commitment to sustainable development includes research, dialogue, exchange of views and education.

The ongoing frank and open dialogue with stakeholders, third parties, institutions and organisations within technical, political and social communities is of paramount importance to Vinyl 2010 to exchange views on studies, experiences and good practices. But we also believe that it is important to address and engage the younger generation. Sustainable development concerns us all, especially younger generations who will have to live tomorrow with the consequences of decisions taken today.

2. The rationale of the Vinyl 2010 Essay Competition

The tool chosen by Vinyl 2010 in order to involve the young generations in the dialogue on sustainable development was the essay competition. The mechanism of the essay competitions is in fact the most suitable in terms of flexibility, possibility of online participation, variety of themes.

Essay competitions furthermore, not only result very attractive in terms of prizes and possibility of increase the participants visibility, but also stimulate participation, inspiration and dialogue.

To make an example, Richard Adams the British founder of the UK fair trade organisations of ethical business Tearcraft and Traidcraft, revealed in an interview that he was inspired in its initiatives by an essay competition on 'how to feed the world' while studying at Durham University.

3. The first edition: 'Are sustainable development and economic growth mutually exclusive?'



In November 2007, thus, Vinyl 2010, in partnership with a number of European universities, NGOs, student associations and media, launched its first Sustainable Development Essay Competition.

Open to 18-30 year old citizens of the European Economic Area, the first competition asked entrants to respond to the question 'Are sustainable development and economic growth mutually exclusive?' in a 1,000-word journalistic essay in English.

In early 2008, entries were judged by a panel of leading European sustainable development experts from academia, NGOs and the media under the chairmanship of Mrs. Nadine Gouzée, Head of the Sustainable Development Task Force for the Federal Planning Bureau of Belgium.

The judging panel was extremely impressed by the quality and creativity of the entries received. These showed not only a great interest from the younger generation on sustainable development themes but also a need of direct participation and contribution in the dialogue.

Collected together in a book published by Vinyl 2010, the full set of essays from the 2007/8 competition provides a fascinating insight into the views of a new generation on sustainable development issues.

The essay book has been widely distributed to stakeholders and was presented at Green Week 2008 and at the UN CSD-16 in New York providing a unique platform for young people to express their opinions.

The prize-winners of this first competition – Maja Derčar (Slovenia), Daniela Jungova (the Czech Republic) and Francesco Falcone (Italy) – were also given the opportunity to join a panel of experts in sustainable development from the worlds of academia, media and politics in a 'Café Crossfire' debate in front of an industry audience organised in conjunction with the Brussels' based think-tank Friends of Europe.

4. The essay Competition 2008/2009: 'Faced with a food and energy crisis, how can society improve its well-being?'

Building on the success of Vinyl 2010 first Sustainable Development Essay Competition, which attracted entries from 14 European Member States, a second Essay Competition was launched in October 2008.

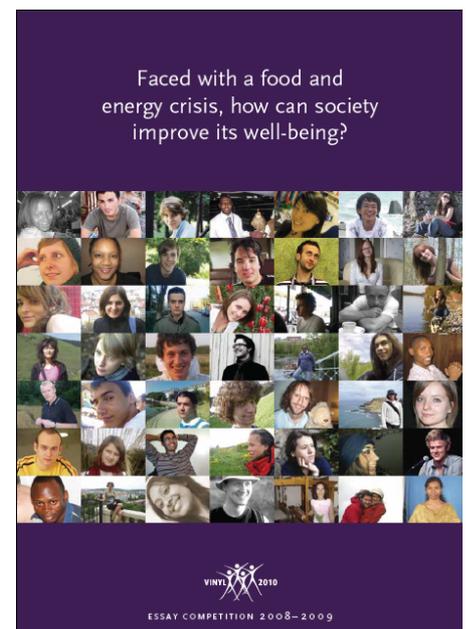
This time open to young people worldwide with Ms. Selene Biffi, coordinator of the UN Major Group Children and Youth and founder of the Youth Action for Change (YAC) organisation, joining other leading European sustainable development experts on the panel of judges.

The 2008/9 competition posed the question 'Faced with a food and energy crisis, how can society improve its well-being?'

And young people from around the globe have once again demonstrated their enthusiasm for expressing their views on sustainable development issues.

By the 1st December 2008 pre-registration deadline, 927 people representing 89 different nationalities from across Europe and around the world had signed up to take part in the Essay Competition.

Registrations were received not only from young people across 27



states in the European Economic Area (EEA), but also from 62 other countries worldwide.

By the 31st January competition submission deadline, a total of 208 essays had actually been submitted and evaluated by the Judging Panel.

Winners of the 2008/9 edition were Jon Elms, Fiona Wright, and Robert McSweeney, all from the United Kingdom, for the European Prize Category, and Christian Williams from New Zealand for the Global Prize Category. The Special Industry Prize winner is Wei Chao Zhou from Singapore.

All of the essays were of very high quality, presenting well-informed, strongly argued ideas. In the end the final winner were the ones that better presented constructive, well thought-out and realistic ideas that could make an actual impact on the debate on the food and energy crises.

5. Lesson learnt

Besides the winners, all participants demonstrated a real interest in food, energy and climate change issues, with strong backgrounds, and excellent work in term of research and analysis. It is shared view that a greater level of cooperation at all levels is needed to solve such major issues and often suggested that institutions should provide guidelines for a stronger cooperation among industrialised and developing countries. Personal responsibility, commitment and behaviours, including in everyday choices, are seen as fundamental. And consequently information and education of the larger population.

In the words of Nadine Gouzée: 'the judging panel was struck by the enthusiasm and creativity of the essays which were embodied by varied approaches ranging from weighted pragmatism to passionate idealism. The strength of this initiative by Vinyl 2010 is addressing youth, because young people are an essential social force in finding the solutions to both these critical problems with which society is faced'.

Whatever the approach, the essays have affirmed that young people are very concerned about society's common future, and that they are thinking critically about the viable solutions and questioning those provided by previous generations that can be applied to respond the aforementioned challenges. Quite often, the authors advocated an increase in innovation in tandem with a more decentralized approach to both the distribution and consumption of food and energy. Many of them also stressed that everyone must take on more individual responsibility in how they live their lives on a daily basis.

Ole Grøndhal Hansen, Chairman of the industry judges, underlines the pragmatism of the proposed solutions, largely free from ideology: essayists tended to explore the scientific and technical solutions, rather than the social responses. This was in some way surprising, but in line with the aim of the new special industry prize. Industry, in fact, felt it was important to make the point that industry can contribute to solving the problems of sustainability, rather than being perceived as part of

the problem.

6. The basis for a permanent forum on Sustainable Development

Building on the interest and enthusiasm showed by participants in the first competition, this year a special forum was created on the Essay Competition website – www.vinyl2010essaycompetition.org – where the winners and the other participants were given the opportunity to exchange views and discuss each other essays. The results are amazing and testified by the comments posted:

- 'Thank you for the comment :) I think this is the greatest part of this competition...you get the chance to share your opinion with other people and find out what they think...I am sure that this is when bright ideas come to life! ...'
- 'I think this is a wonderful idea to let young people from all over the world show their opinions and ideas by essays and then give the opportunity to discuss. I really enjoyed that and I'm going to continue that valuable discussion.'
- 'I find your essay a true revelation. I never looked at the problems of nowadays in that perspective.'

Vinyl 2010 would be delighted to maintain this platform as a permanent forum for discussion on the subject of Sustainable Development.

7. The experience of Robert McSweeney, 3rd prize for the European Prize Category

'I came across the competition from a mailing list I am a member of. I attended a 'Youth Encounter on Sustainability (YES)' course in Kenya in 2007 and the alumni from all YES courses have a mailing list to share information, thoughts and opportunities. When I saw it, I thought that it was a question I could answer, and I quite liked the challenge of putting forward practical ideas in just 1,000 words, rather than rambling on for pages and pages.

Essentially, my essay outlines the fact that we already have the necessary ideas and technology at our disposal to solve our energy and food issues. There are many new concepts being bandied around (not least carbon capture and storage), which will require substantial time and investment to implement on a commercial scale. Whereas solutions such as decentralised CHP, which are available now and have a proven track record, are continually overlooked. We have the solutions right under our noses, yet it appears that we can't see the wood for the trees (although we seem to be doing a good job of chopping them down).

There is an overriding sense of optimism that comes with this competition; here are over 200 essays from young people around the world that showcase the ideas, drive and innovation needed to make society a better place. It certainly gives fresh hope that the potential leaders of tomorrow are already debating the issues that occupy the leaders we have today; one can only hope that there will be other platforms such as Vinyl2010 for them to be heard.'