

# The Voices of the Future Being Heard Now

## British Council's Youth Climate Champions in South and Central Asia raise awareness for climate change and positive action

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The youth are the hope of the world and the voices of the future. Climate change will figure prominently in this future, as it challenges the ability of people to survive, and demands far-reaching and wide-ranging adjustments in the way we live. The barriers to appropriate and effective response are many on all levels, from individual to institutional, and range from conquering ignorance to making the leap forward to individual and collective action. Although ramifications are already being felt, it is the youth and generations down the line who will inherit this future and bear the brunt of the uncertain backlash of climate change.

This realisation propelled the British Council, the UK's international organisation for cultural relations and educational opportunities, to establish 'International Youth Climate Champions'. This initiative, under the British Council's climate change programme, helps young people across the globe to work together to develop projects that can help tackle climate change at community level and to voice their concerns to decision makers. It creatively engages young people who wish to take positive action on climate change in relevant local, national, and international fora.

Three countries in Central and South Asia are participating in the programme: Bangladesh, Nepal, and Uzbekistan. Altogether, 40 champions for climate change were chosen in 2009/2010, from these three countries.

Climate Champions are young people who

- are communicators,
- show leadership potential,
- have access to networks and demonstrate the ability to act as influencers, and
- demonstrate a sound knowledge and understanding of climate change issues.

The South and Central Asian champions are turning innovative ideas into positive actions in their communities and spheres of influence, armed with pragmatism and an ability to persuade and engage others. The champions are in a variety of influential fields such as mass media, theatre, and the arts; some are future lawyers and budding, enlightened entrepreneurs, others are young university professors.

In Nepal, the champions engaged in 10 interesting social action projects which varied from composing songs to working with Buddhist monks and religious gurus to raise awareness about climate change. One project measured the carbon footprints of the monks and motivated them to live a carbon-neutral life.

As part of the awareness campaign, Rojesh Shrestha launched the song 'Jagou' ('Wake Up') at a concert organised by the network of champions in Kathmandu. The concert assembled 15 bands popular with young people to perform live in front of a mass audience, and the entertainers communicated climate change messages through their music. This is perhaps the single largest

crowd (estimates 50,000) that has attended a climate change awareness-raising campaign in Kathmandu to date. Another champion, Sushila Pandit, launched a website [www.thegreenwatch.net](http://www.thegreenwatch.net).

Some champions are using the powerful media of theatre and radio, like Abhimanyu Magrati who will be producing radio dramas using radio talent to tackle the issue in ways that ordinary people can understand. Ram Babu Regmi has begun introducing climate change themes through what he calls 'forum theatre' which tackles issues through 'kachahari natak' (street drama) and provides a forum for people to devise solutions of their own. Some young media practitioners are making short films and written clips to penetrate a media often dominated by big business and politics.

In Uzbekistan, the champions are focussing on radio programmes and popular media such as cartoons and animation, and using web pages and social networking. In Bangladesh, one champion, Proggna Paromita Majumder, believes in starting young and is creating awareness among primary school children in Dhaka, including awareness of the need for behavioural change. She is showing them concrete examples of actions, such as conserving energy and recycling toys and old newspapers, and encouraging them to pass on what they learn to their parents and friends.

Some champions are organising green clubs, creating 'green man' and 'green woman' characters, promoting green technologies, and making a pitch in the business and private sectors. British Council supports these young partners for climate change by helping them access the training, knowledge, and information that they need to ignite discussion in their communities. Recently, the champions went through a series of training sessions at ICIMOD on various aspects of climate change, and had an opportunity to interact with local community forest user groups to learn first-hand about the impacts of climate change on community forests and the livelihoods of local communities, and their adaptation strategies. They used the participatory rural appraisal methodology that they had learned to capture local knowledge, and were also able to see at first-hand low-cost agricultural and renewable energy technologies that can be used by farmers and rural households as adaptation measures. The project also links them to other networks of young people and offers them opportunities to devise proposals and projects that will help them realise their vision.

The Champions will want to do things locally, but they will also be open to learning about the challenges affecting other young people around the world. Some

have perspectives on climate justice and issues of equity that surround climate change, and as they follow their projects, they will have stories to share about the ways in which changes are affecting everyday lives.

The intercultural discussions and storytelling not only explore the question, 'How has climate change affected your communities?', but also why they think this has happened. By bringing a network of Climate Change Champions together in conversation, the initiative hopes that they will discover how behaviour in different countries has affected the vulnerable communities from which they come. By capturing their stories in written work, photography, and film, we will help young people in Central and South Asia to tell their stories and have their voices heard.

It is hoped that some projects, will have the scope to span a number of communities and the potential over time to grow into national campaigns. Thus it will help the power of young people's voices to build relationships for mutual benefit worldwide. The British Council sees the potential of these champions to progress from networkers to global ambassadors. The idea is to backstop the champions with knowledge, tools, and methodologies so that they can apply them in their



day-to-day work; as well as to establish a platform for exchange of case studies, good practices, and lessons learned. The platform will not only be a virtual meeting place for climate champions, but also a crucible for generating and testing ideas, developing proposals, sharing experiences, and building solidarity. In the end a global network will emerge of enthusiastic young people with knowledge, contacts, and resources to take the initiative to a whole other level and usher in a more climate-resilient, not to mention climate-friendly, future.