



## **INFORMATION RELEASE**

### **It's our world, our future too: Young people's voices on Environment and Health priorities**

*This is the title of a video produced by the European Public Health Alliance Environment Network aimed at making children's voices heard. The video is used as a medium to involve children in policy making.*

#### **Young speak on video about the environments that are failing them**

**Brussels, 29 October 2004** - Tomorrow's adults have a new channel through which to air their views thanks to a video project produced the European Public Health Alliance Environment Network (EEN).

The short film, entitled "It's our world, our future too: Young people's voices on environment and health priorities", is made up of the excited but sometimes deeply concerned faces and voices of children in Russia, Belgium, Hungary and the UK. They describe how the deprived physical surroundings in which they find themselves are affecting their health. Many of them make valuable suggestions on what politicians - and they themselves - should be doing to improve the situation.

"The idea was based on an innovative project by young people in the UK supported by the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine. We then expanded it to include three more countries as a way for young people to influence the thinking of governments across Europe," says Génon Jensen, EEN.

"Using video gave more children an opportunity to express themselves in a way that allows them to be spontaneous, creative and to have fun," Ms Jensen continues. "Showing the film to others afterwards gives their voices an impact in a wide range of situations." It was first shown at the Fourth Ministerial Conference on Environment and Health in Budapest in June 2004 attended by over 1,000 representatives from 52 European countries. Since then, it has been shown to several key meetings of European environment and health politicians and policy makers in Brussels and elsewhere.

The concerns expressed by the 30 or more children featured vary from country to country. In Hungary and Russia, the main problems are air pollution, traffic noise and dumping of waste. In Belgium, a class of school children focus on the smells from factories and crop spraying. In the UK, most complaints relate to drugs, violence and graffiti.

All the children are forthright in expressing their views. On the Gascoigne Estate near Barking, UK, a freckled boy with red hair says he is fed up with the lack of care given to his high-rise surroundings. "They should fix up the place," he says. "There's loads of fights and loads of knives and people that do drugs and stuff. As you can see there's graffiti all around us. We don't like it very much."

A young woman from the Romani (formerly known as Gypsy) community in Hungary expresses her unhappiness about poor waste disposal. "In our village, there are several places where rubbish is dumped illegally," she says. A male student at her school in Pécs, southern Hungary, proposes a solution. "The Ministry of Environment could start an initiative to reduce the cost of removing rubbish," he says, "This would help stop illegal dumping."

Many of the young contributors suggest other ideas for making improvements. In Russia, Polina Starygina believes that efforts should begin by changing attitudes. The shameful state of the environment is affecting people's mental health, she says, which is creating a vicious cycle: "Our problems affect our mental state, and as our mental state deteriorates, people become indifferent, and the environment also deteriorates because of that."

The UK school children say they want a bigger role in making changes. Jonathan Truong, one of the UK participants says he thinks children should be seen "as pioneers, in plays to educate the young, speakers at social conferences to express their views and to make politicians listen to them rather than be told."

Some of the children appearing in the video were able to attend the Budapest conference. During a side event, they had an opportunity to speak to the EU Environment Commissioner, Margot Wallström. Helen Michael from the UK asked her whether the video would make any difference to her. "It makes an impression on me to meet with you," she said, "and I'll think about it when I next have to think of a proposal or implement a plan." Since then, she has shown the video to a meeting of Europe Union's 25 environment ministers, whom she says, "were all quite touched and impressed by this very special production."

During their stay in Budapest, the video participants had an opportunity to meet Hungarians of their own age, and to talk to them about local problems and to film the young people. Since the conference, an additional section has been added to the video presenting what the young Hungarians had to say.

The theme of the Budapest conference, which was designed by the World Health Organization, was "The future of our children". Dr Roberto Bertollini, Director of Health Determinants Division, WHO Regional Office for Europe considers the video to have made a useful contribution to the event. "It is often difficult to involve children from a wide range of backgrounds and languages and to promote their participation in complex matters such as environment and health. This video allowed children from deprived European communities to convey their messages directly to politicians and policy makers attending the conference."

Now that the video has proved its value in increasing children's input into a policy making arena, the next step is to make it widely available to policy makers, NGOs and others working with young people. Copies are available free of charge from the EEN secretariat. A booklet to accompany the video is currently being produced to help promote video use with children in schools and other community settings. (Available early 2005)

\* Coordinated by the Soros Foundation-Hungary.

**Illustrations and photographs:** The brightly-coloured DVD cover; and, Génon Jensen, Director EEN who coordinated the video project, in Budapest with Russian student Alina Bezenhar. Both are available from Monica Guarinoni, email: [monica@env-health.org](mailto:monica@env-health.org) Tel: +32 2 233 3875

The full DVD version of the video is available free of charge to policy makers, NGOs and schools by e-mailing your request and full contact details to Monica Guarinoni, EEN secretariat, [monica@env-health.org](mailto:monica@env-health.org) A shortened version of the video is available on line at [www.env-health.org](http://www.env-health.org)

For an outline of the contents of the main video, quotes and information about illustrations to accompany written texts, see the attached "Notes and quotes" file.

We would like to thank support from the European Commission and UK Health Protection Agency for making the video and its free distribution possible.

## Notes and quotes

### **It's our world, our future too: Young people's voices on Environment and Health priorities**

*A video produced by the European Public Health Alliance Environment Network aimed at making children's voices heard by using video as a medium to involve children in policy making.*

The following text provides:

- **Video contents, with quotations from each section**
- **Outline of the shortened version of the video**

## video contents

### **1. Introduction**

Voice over explaining that this short film brings the voices and concerns of young people living in disadvantaged communities in four countries across the European region. It aims to provide an insight into what young people expect and what politicians should be listening to and taking into account.

### **2. RUSSIA: Air pollution, radiation and mental health**

Victoria Elias from the environmental NGO Eco Accord spoke with students at the Moscow Physical-Mathematical School No. 1511. They talk about the effects of factory fumes and the many problems associated with road traffic. Another concern is that the worsening environment is affecting mental health.

*"With all the factories in Moscow, children are already ill when they are born - even if their parents are healthy. I am in this category of children and have a permanent cold because I live in the Moscow district."*

*Alina Bezenhar*

*"We face a never-ending circle: Our problems affect our mental state, and as our mental state deteriorates, people become indifferent, and the environment also deteriorates because of that."*

*Polina Starygina*

### **3. BELGIUM: Smells from factories and farming, and noise**

Génon Jensen, Director of the European Public Health Alliance Environmental Network (EEN) coordinated the project. It features 16-17 year-olds at the Vrij Technical Institute in Beringen, a rural area in northeastern Belgium in which there are clusters of industrial development. The students' main complaint is the smell of chemicals from factories and from farms rearing pigs and spraying crops.

*"Opposite our house is a pig farm that sometimes smells so bad that we all have to shut our windows. When the farmer fertilizes his land, it sinks."*

*Andy Bleyen*

*"When the farmer in the surrounding area is enriching his field, it smells awful."*

*Rob Debacker*

*"I live nearby Tessenderlo Chemie (chemical factory) and sometimes the smell is awful. I also believe that they do a lot of waste disposal in the canal."*

*Nicky Haegdorens*

#### **4. HUNGARY: Smoke, fumes and illegal dumping**

Katalin Szoke from Soros Foundation-Hungary coordinated the inclusion of Roma young people in the video. Young people from the UK and Russia spoke with young people at the Gandhi Secondary School in southern Hungarian town of Pécs. The students here are concerned about factory smoke, heavy traffic and the dumping of waste. They want their politicians to take the problems more seriously.

“In our village, there are several places where rubbish is dumped illegally.”

*Erika Mecseki, a young woman from Hungary’s Romani community*

“The Ministry of the Environment could start an initiative to reduce the cost of removing rubbish. It is very expensive and we would like to see cost come down. This would help stop illegal dumping.”

*Zsolt Kolompar*

Near to our living area there’s a cement factory where used tyres were burned to generate energy. Fortunately, a filter system was installed recently... and they planted trees around the site, too. It’s a great improvement... I noticed that the wildlife in our area revived.”

*Ern Balogh*

“We would like the politicians to come out of their offices and see the environmental problems personally.”

*Birgitta Kertész*

#### **5. UNITED KINGDOM: Violence, drugs and graffiti**

Carolyn Stephens from the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine spoke with children in deprived settings in Barking and Dagenham to the east of London. The children interviewed are mainly talking about the problems associated with drugs and violence and the importance of space to play. The section begins with the young people describing their role in the present and the future.

It was Nelson Sivalingam from Eastbury High School, in Barking, London whose idea sparked the whole European filming project and who directed and filmed in the UK and in Hungary.

“A common threads runs through their life – the aspiration for a better future.”

*Gladys Coleman Eastbury High School, Barking*

(Children should be seen) as pioneers, in plays to educate the young, speakers at social conferences to express their views and to make politicians listen to them rather than to be told.”

*Jonathan Truong, Eastbury High School,*

“There’s too many gangs around here and they destroy everything.”

*James interviewed on the Gascoigne housing estate*

“What I like best about the Gascoigne Estate is the football area where everyone can play.”

*A second boy*

#### **6. Budapest Diary: Coverage of a side event at the Ministerial Conference in which the young participants in the video take centre stage**

Some of the young people featured in the video came to the Budapest conference where they had an opportunity to meet Margot Wallström, European environment commissioner. They also heard from Professor Pat Troop from the UK Health Protection Agency and Tomislav Tomasevic, a representative from TUNZA, the youth group of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP).

Iram Zahid from the UK asked Margot Wallström: “In the long-run, did all our work (on the video) make any difference?”

Margot Wallström replied: “It makes an impression on me to meet with you and I will always

remember that – and that is what influences the decision making. The next time I have to decide a proposal and think about what to do and to implement, I will think about it and this is important.”

“I think communication is a large part of any action because most people are not aware. If more people were made aware, it would be easier to help the environment.”  
Jonathan Truong, Eastbury High School, Barking

## **7. Interview with Margot Wallström, European Commissioner, DG Environment**

Margot Wallström says:

“It is easy to sum it up – what is good for children is good for society as a whole. This has always been my motto as a politician.”

“Children are best at expressing (what they need) in clear and simple language.”

### **Shortened version of the video**

(available on the EEN website at [www.env-health.org](http://www.env-health.org))

This seven-minute video contains the voices of young people from Russia, UK and Belgium, and it explains why listening to them is important. The children and students describe how the environment is affecting their health, and what they think can be done for a better future. Three themes are highlighted: Urban environment and mental health; Water, chemicals and air quality; and, Crosscutting issues, such as racism, drugs and violence. The film ends with Margot Wallström saying why the needs of children have always been her priority as a politician.

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