

REACTION AND ACTION

How science and art can inspire behavior change

How can we translate knowledge into action?
The IIASA Science and Art Project uses
immersive performances to inspire action among
policymakers and the wider public

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Recent projects by the IIASA Science and Art Project tackled two urgent issues – migration and resource depletion – under the guiding premise that to reach people, science needs a new language.

Project leader, Gloria Benedikt explains: “Technically we can advise people on how to solve climate change, but we will only create a cultural shift by internalizing sustainable thinking.”

Dancing with the Future, performed in New York during the UN General Assembly week, focused on achieving the Sustainable Development Goals by asking how we should cooperate with the future.

Benedikt worked with Martin Nowak, director of the Harvard Program for Evolutionary Dynamics, to create a multi-layered interactive performance combining text, dance, music, visuals, and interactivity, into an experience that is very different from listening to a lecture or reading an article.

“Humans are not psychologically wired to care about future generations,” says Benedikt. “To overcome this, action was provoked by an interactive game designed by IIASA researcher Piotr Magnuszewski. During the performance, the audience became active participants, answering questions on how many resources we should use, versus leaving them behind for future generations. The performance was influenced by the audience’s choices, so they could see, through the dancers representing future generations, how their decisions would impact real people.”

According to Benedikt, using many levels of communication engages more parts of the brain, and gives a deeper and longer lasting learning experience. The interactive method leads people to derive

meaning for themselves. They are left asking, ‘what can I do about this in the real world?’

Another performance, Migraspectives, addressed the migrant crisis, and aimed to help participants solve problems by exposing them to opposing world views.

Developed in collaboration with the IIASA Risk and Resilience Program, Migraspectives was performed at the IIASA-JRC Summer School on Evidence for Policy in September 2018. Over 75 researchers and policymakers from 40 countries came together as part of an open-air interactive performance.

Policymakers were brought face to face with a crisis – deciding how to deal with a boat full of refugees (enacted by IIASA scientists) calling for immediate attention. Artists presented different worldviews, before the audience was asked to pick the one they associated with most.

It was obvious that there was no solution everyone would be entirely happy with. However, by negotiating according to a viewpoint potentially opposed to their own, participants reached a sustainable solution within 45 minutes. “There are no perfect solutions but what we must strive for is one everyone can live with,” says Benedikt.

In addressing some of the world’s most complex and pressing issues, there is often a gap between understanding and action, cooperation and compromise. Filling this gap requires speaking a new language. “This innovative method of engagement works. Now we need more of it,” concludes Benedikt.

