Tomorrow’s World

With support from Bob Geldof, Kofi Annan and Archbishop Desmond Tutu, the One Young World summit offers a global platform for the voice of youth.

By Sheridan Winn
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If you’re under 25 and heading to London early this month, you may be on your way to the One Young World Summit (OYW, oneyoungworld.com). Fresh thinking on tough problems is expected as 1,500 young pioneers from 192 countries gather to debate at the ExCeL centre in London’s Docklands from 8-10 February. Selected for their exceptional leadership potential and engagement in social works, delegates will discuss the issues that affect our world and generate resolutions for a better future. Bob Geldof, one of OYW’s counsellors, has said he looks forward to: “A great intellectual capacity being contained in one space – and being listened to, for a change.” Media coverage of the summit will be global, live-streamed on the internet, with various segments carried on the websites of BBC Worldwide and CNN.

OYW is the brainchild of David Jones – global chief executive officer of Havas Worldwide and Euro RSCG Worldwide – and Kate Robertson, group chairman of Euro RSCG. Jones has a fundamental belief that the creative and communications industry has the power to effect positive change in the world today, saying: “It’s become my mantra that not only do we have an opportunity, but we also have an obligation.” Promoted to global chief executive at the age of 38, he was invited to take part in the Davos World Economic Forum’s group of Young Global Leaders. “I was lucky to have been promoted at a young age and was keen to find a way to give other young people a bigger voice,” says Jones. The idea was two years in gestation, and then Kate Robertson suggested the concept of creating an organisation that would bring young people together on a global scale. In July 2008, OYW was launched as a not-for-profit organisation. The inaugural summit in London was announced at Davos 2009, with the intention of holding annual summits in different world cities.

Knowledge is power

So, what does David Jones expect from the event? “We’ve seen the world leaders do a poor job at the United Nations Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen,” he says. “If the world leaders can’t get it right, maybe young people can help them.” He believes there is a dramatic difference between youngsters today and those of any previous generation – a difference that lies in knowledge. He explains: “You can be sitting in an African village at a computer terminal and have access to unbelievable knowledge, in a way that no previous generation has had. The education I received has more in common with how someone was educated 400 years ago than the education young people have today.” The second big change is the power and influence available through social media. An example, Jones cites the political activist Oscar Morales, whose Facebook website inspired 12 million people in 40 countries to protest against the FARC terrorist group in Colombia.

Supporting roles

Morales will be one of the counsellors to chair the plenary sessions of OYW. In addition to
Bob Geldof, Kofi Annan and Desmond Tutu, other members of this luminary group will include Professor Nick Haysom, United Nations director of political affairs; Zhang Deguang, first secretary-general of Shanghai Cooperation Organisation; Elio Leoni-Sceti, chief executive of EMI Music; Carole Stone, managing director of online market research agency YouGovStone; Martin Davidson, chief executive of the British Council; and Dr Santanu Das, founder of TranSwitch Corporation. Bob Geldof says of their roles: “Those of us who are conducting the workshops and seminars will probably find our own thinking dislodged.”

David Jones is keen to stress that OYW is a grassroots organisation. “It’s not for us, the organisers, to say what it is that we want to be agreed,” he says. To ensure open debate, the opinions of 30,000 young people from all over the world were polled through YouGovStone. This research identified six key issues for discussion: political leadership, global business, inter-faith dialogue, the environment, the media and the challenges surrounding global health. “The counsellors will chair the debates and resolutions will be passed,” explains Jones. “These resolutions will be passed into the global political system. For example, Bob Geldof will raise the resolutions at the G2, G10 and G20 summits, and Nick Haysom will feed them in to the United Nations. OYW will have an impact in the real world.”

Sponsorship for the summit has also been approached from a grassroots perspective. Rather than being handed three cheques of €1m apiece from three multinational ‘official sponsors’, Jones and Robertson opted for a new business model. Companies were invited to sponsor the delegates, at a cost of €3000 each. “We’ve had to work much harder, but it means we preserve objectivity,” explains Jones. Leading the way

To be selected for OYW, outstanding young people were invited to submit a video on which they talked about their ideas and aims. One of the four winners of the related YouTube competition is Opwonya Innocent, a student from Uganda. For years, Innocent has been forced to spend every night in a different place to avoid capture from the rebel army. He wants to attend the summit to use his knowledge of war to influence peace. David Jones has high hopes for OYW and its leaders of tomorrow. “There are some amazing young people attending the summit,” he says. “I believe it can become the Davos for under 25s.”

So what does success look like for Jones? “We’d like to think that in 10 years’ time, some delegates will run their countries, global companies or NGOs,” he replies. But both he and Robertson knew that OYW needed to think more broadly than expecting delegates to comprise only “smart, corporate 25-year-olds from Western multinationals”. To avoid such a skew, they decided to invite two delegates from each country in the world, plus proportionate representation from the bigger countries – so the greatest number of participants will come from China, India and Indonesia. “This is the first major event designed to reflect the world population,” Jones says.