



Text of Margit Fischer's speech delivered the Planet Under Pressure (PuP) conference, *High-level responses from policy, major groups and society*, 29 March 2012, 10:15 GMT, London, UK. [www.planetunderpressure2012.net](http://www.planetunderpressure2012.net)

Distinguished participants,

Ladies and gentlemen,

One hundred years ago, the Austrian Hungarian Empire was under pressure, but the necessary actions were too weak, too late and too slow. These unsolved problems led directly into World War I.

Our whole planet is now under pressure, but for different reasons, and once again the necessary actions have been too weak, too late and too slow – in a word insufficient.

The general public must to be aware of the issues, understand the interrelatedness of science, economy and society and consider what role they can play.

The science of sustainable development is complex. Science centres, as public institutions, are ideally suited for conveying scientific complexity in an inspiring, understandable way to people of all ages.

I am speaking today not primarily as wife of the Austrian president and Chairwoman of the Austrian ScienceCenter-Network, but mainly on behalf of the international science centre community. Our common goal is to strengthen the position of science centres as active and successful players in the Rio+20 process and beyond.

Science centres are unique in that they convey information in a hands-on, memorable, and social way. They are places to be curious, pose questions and use scientific reasoning to grasp difficult concepts. They are safe places in which to have the difficult discussions this conference is grappling with. These are venues where we don't confuse opinion with fact.



Science – like music – is a global language. It’s a language that is spoken in 3.000 science centres and museums, actively engaging over 300 million people per year in over 90 countries.

These people are:

Children and teenagers – we help them to map a sustainable future. They are growing up in a rapidly changing world and will be the critical “agents of change”.

Teachers – we complement and enrich their approach in the classroom.

Adults – we equip them to grasp the many dimensions of science on topics such as climate change, health, renewable energies, water shortages and HIV/AIDS.

Visitors to science centres become better informed, responsible citizens, who actively contribute to solutions and understand the relationship between science and society.

And science centres are not limited by their four walls. In many parts of the world, they reach out to rural and underserved communities.

Let me illustrate the diversity of our science centre community and its activities:

One example I personally witnessed during a school workshop in Vienna was that of a thirteen year old boy experimenting with the effects of melting ice cubes on water levels. Afterwards, he concluded, through his own reasoning, that climate change will lead to more migration, even in the middle of Europe, as cities such as Berlin might become flooded.

Can we assess the impact of the science centre community? Absolutely. Studies from around the world show significant evidence that:

- Interactive science exhibitions increase visitors’ knowledge and understanding of science;



- Science centres provide memorable learning experiences which have a lasting impact on attitudes and behaviour.

And the evidence shows that:

- Science centres have wide-ranging personal and social impacts and promote inter-generational learning;
- Science centres promote trust and understanding between the public and the scientific community.

The success of the Earth Summit in Rio in June later this year depends on collaboration among institutions, the public and private sectors, policymakers and scientists. This cooperation is urgently needed.

The UN High-Level Panel on Global Sustainability, during its first session in September 2010, stressed the need for the average citizen – particularly young people – to understand the risks and implications of a planet under pressure.

As the UN Committee for Sustainable Development Education Group acknowledges, the majority of environmental education occurs outside the classroom. Science centres are at the very heart of this and it is why we want to work with you, the delegates of this conference. Together, we can ensure that education finds its rightful place in the Rio+20 process.

This map demonstrates our powerful support for the scientific community gathered here. You can see hundreds of science centres in most parts of the world engaging with millions of people on the issues that put our "planet under pressure", under the banner of this conference. This is a special effort and happening as I speak.

As this map shows, the worldwide science centre and museum community is powerful and ready for action.



Success, to us, would look like this: a plan to harness this momentum and be a partner in advancing the agenda that will emerge from this conference and from Rio in June.

We all hope for a powerful plan of action, but even the most ambitious program will need to be complemented by effective public engagement.

In order to achieve this, we propose that science centres and museums be created, developed and supported worldwide as vital resources – particularly in areas where they are currently missing, such as in much of Africa.

We call for a strategic plan that channels the energy of science centres and museums to advance a UN outreach strategy.

Let me conclude by saying that our vision is to move toward a sustainable world. This will only be achieved with the support of an informed public. This is what science centres bring to the table.