INTRODUCTION

During the 9th meeting of the Brussels-based science promotion network organised by Innoviris (the public funding administration for research and innovation in the Brussels-Capital Region), we invited our science promotion actors to explore the link between science and society (topic of the 2022 STEM CALL). We talked to teachers, associations, youth organisations, fab labs, academic actors etc. from the Brussels Capital Region. By means of four round-table discussions, we explored the role that science promotion can play in response to 3 societal challenges. This meeting took place at the premises of Brussels science promotion actor, Gluon, the platform for art, science and technology.

RESULTS

The main results of the discussions have been summarised in the SWOT table on the right. The threats and opportunities in the table refer to the societal challenges and opportunities that have been identified for science in society. The strengths and weaknesses relate specifically to the role that science promotion can play in this regard, in the opinion of the actors.

The results for the three themes were aggregated because there were many parallels to be drawn between the discussions. The results described emerge from a cross-fertilisation between the scientific insights discussed and the actors’ own experiences when promoting science.

Threats

- The image of the scientist has suffered as a result of the recent busy times.
- Scientists have become better at communicating because they see that not everyone understands science.
- The production of scientific knowledge and thereby also in pupae in the form of policy.
- Producers often choose certain scientific statements.
- Science and research institutions can only communicate with a minority of society.
- Researchers and communicators are increasingly being asked to communicate science.
- Mary, young people do not trust “the media”, yet they are a net source of information and influence themselves.
- Young people are increasingly being asked to reflect critically on science.
- Science is sometimes seen as a poor communicator.
- Scientists are often not able to convey science in a more nuanced manner.
- Scientists do not necessarily know what young people are interested in.

Opportunities

- Despite the COVID-19 crisis, most of the people that science promotion actors work with have managed to continue their work.
- Figure also demonstrates that the public has less trust in the scientific community.
- Young people are not always positive about science (engineer, teacher, researcher, and house).
- Young people are often pessimistic about some topics and consider themselves capable of changing the future for the better.
- Young people open up to science and see the value of their hands-on experiences.
- Science promotion actors can contribute to the rehabilitation of science.
- Open innovation approaches contribute to a greater trust in science.
- Science promotion actors can help to make science accessible and understandable, especially science works.

Weaknesses

- Too little time is available for science promotion actors to make up the necessary time to pursue their goals.
- Too little time is available for science promotion actors to spend on the necessary time to pursue their goals.
- Too little time is available for science promotion actors to undertake the necessary time to pursue their goals.
- Too little time is available for science promotion actors to engage in the necessary time to pursue their goals.

Strengths

- Scientists: science promotion actors work with a passion for science.
- Scientists: science promotion actors are motivated to work with science.
- Scientists: science promotion actors are able to explain how science works.
- Scientists: science promotion actors can explain how science works.
- Scientists: science promotion actors can explain how science works.

Good Practices

- What role can science promotion actors now play with regard to these challenges? Based on the discussions, the actors arrived at the following list of good practices.

In general:

- Science promotion actors can take actions to respond to the credibility of scientists and ensure that science is valued.
- Science promotion actors can have an important role in explaining to citizens, and more specifically to young people, how the scientific method works and what the difference is between science and policy. Rather than ready-made answers, they can explain how a particular scientific insight or protocol came to be and what unsuccessful experiments preceded it. Participatory research and citizen science are useful vehicles that can be used to introduce citizens to the scientific method.
- Science promotion actors can make citizens, and more specifically young people, media savvy so that they can learn to distinguish between different sources and to cross-reference sources for themselves.
- Science promotion actors can instil in citizens, and more specifically in young people, a more critical mindset so that they do not simply focus on what they want to hear and shut themselves off from what they do not want to hear, but also seek out new hypotheses themselves. A critical mindset protects individuals against the blind scientific optimism and helps to look critically at the consequences of science and technology.
- In awareness-raising and scientific communication, science should not exist separately from ‘society’ and there should be room for ethics and for ideological debate.

Specifically for young people:

- Science promotion actors can teach young people that it is okay not to know everything, to be wrong and to make mistakes by searching for answers together.
- Science promotion actors can empower young people by involving them in choosing topics or research questions that are currently under-researched.
- By carrying out scientific experiments at home or in the garden, science promotion actors can teach young people to experiment and look for answers themselves.
- Actors can use social media as an appropriate channel to convey the scientific method, such as by means of the format of the experiment.
- Actors can educate young people on the mechanisms behind science denial.