

UNICEF hosts Activate Talk with youth leaders and innovators during UN Oceans Conference

7 June 2017, NEW YORK: On the margins of the UN Oceans Conference and on the eve of World Oceans Day, over 200 people gathered at UNICEF Headquarters to witness a group of seven young “wave makers” ranging from 10 to 24 years old discuss the role of children and youth in implementing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including SDG 14: Life Below Water.

Featuring a young panel and Keynote address from Young Leader for the SDGs, Karan Jerath, the “Activate Talk” highlighted the different ways in which kids are already taking action on ocean conservation through inventing, campaigning and innovating. *“UNICEF’s mandate is to advocate for every child’s right to learn about and participate in matters that affect their lives,”* explained Olav Kjørven, UNICEF Director of Public Partnerships. *“The health of the oceans is critically linked to the healthy lives of children -- and indeed – to all of us. Therefore, raising awareness on issues of environmental sustainability -- including the preservation of oceans -- is part of our responsibility in fulfilling and advocating for those rights.”*

Jerath captivated the room with his story of inventing a device during his High School Science Fair which can temporarily prevent the environmental devastation of oil spills, which happen every day. He spoke of being compelled to take action after the Deepwater Horizon disaster in the Gulf of Mexico in 2010 despite not fully recognizing the power of his young voice until acknowledged for his innovative solution which he is currently in the process of patenting. Advocating for all young people to contribute to the SDGs, Jerath stated, *“This project taught me how to use my talents to solve a problem much bigger than myself. It taught me that age does not matter when it comes to contributing to global issues.”*

Jerath was followed by the young panel which included Melati and Isabel Wijsen, sisters from Bali, Indonesia who founded a global movement called “Bye Bye Plastic Bags” to encourage kids to say “no” to plastic bags of which the majority end up in the oceans. Together they noted, *“Our oceans provide us with 70% of the air we breathe. It is time to thank them.”* Encouraging decision-makers to include young people in solutions, the sisters remarked, *“Kids may be 25% of the world’s population but we are 100% of the future.”*

The panel was full of diverse perspectives on the role of young people in ocean conservation. Local panelist Fatoumata Cisse, a 7th grader and participant in the New York City Mayor’s Junior Ambassador programme noted how learning about SDG 14 inspired her: *“I really want to spread around the word telling people how important the oceans are and how they provide us with many things.”* Sean Russell, Founder and Director of the Youth Ocean Conservation Summit, served as moderator, joined by his colleague on the panel Ben May, a high school student from Long Island. Sean and Ben reiterated how one person can make a difference. Ben noted that according to research, *“it only takes 5% of the population to have a change of mindset to change the mind of a society. So even if you’re working on this alone, don’t think you aren’t making a difference.”* The youngest panelist at 10 years of age, Emil Bilaver, talked about the advocacy him and his classmates took on by greening their school in Montreal. They were inspired to do so after learning about the oceans through the *World’s Largest Lesson*, an initiative teaching children and youth about the issues in the SDGs. Why was Emil Bilaver encouraged to speak up for SDG 14? *“We have to be the voice for the oceans,”* he said.

The dialogue was followed by the launching and signing of a Comics Uniting Nations project called *Annie Sunbeam and Friends*, illustrated by renowned DC Comics Illustrator Bernard Chang and produced by Debbie Margolis Horwitz. The superhero, Annie, takes her friends on an underwater adventure to solve ocean pollution. A reception and interactive fair invited the young audience to network with the young change makers and learn how to get involved in ocean conservation, ranging from art competitions to beach clean-up campaigns.

This was UNICEF's second SDG Activate Talk since the adoption of Agenda 2030 by Member States in September 2015. UNICEF is collaborating with young change makers from around the world on an SDG Activate Talk series with the two intentions of bringing the messages of the SDGs to the young public as well as showcasing to decision-makers the positive actions children and young people are already taking on various issues within the agenda.

"It was the voices of children and youth that inspired us to create the SDG Activate Talk series, which is both an acknowledgement and celebration of what young people are doing in their lives, their academic pursuits and their commitments to make our world a more safe, sustainable and equitable place and to help achieve the SDGs," said Shannon O'Shea, UNICEF Agenda 2030 Partnerships Manager. *"If young people are not involved, the SDGs will be doomed to fail."*

Learn more about UNICEF's work on the Sustainable Development Goals here:

<http://www.unicef.org/agenda2030/>

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Left photo: *Panelists Isabel and Melati Wijsen, Ben May, Emil Bilaver with Olav Kjørven and Shannon O'Shea from UNICEF @Dibley_09252*

Middle photo: *Karan Jerath and Isabel and Melati Wijsen @Dibley_09087*

Right photo: *Fatoumata Cisse, panelist @Dibley_09039*