

## Youth Aspirations & Climate Urgency

11<sup>th</sup> July, Commonwealth Joint Office, New York

The side event - Youth aspirations & Climate Urgency - took place on the 11th of July, 2019, at the Commonwealth Joint Office in New York. It was jointly organised by Don Bosco Green Alliance, Salesian Missions, Misesan Cara and Don Bosco Network.

It was a part of the High Level Political Forum (HLPF 2019). The meeting of the high-level political forum on sustainable development in 2019 was built around the theme of empowering people and ensuring inclusiveness and equality. HLPF 2019 was aimed at reviewing Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 4, 8, 10, 13, 16 & 17.

Organized by the youth, this side event was provided a platform for the youth from various parts of the world to discuss how climate change is adversely affecting their hopes and dreams. Grassroots activists from different regions of the world came together and shared how they are responding to the current climate crisis, physically, emotionally and economically.

The session began with a welcome address by H.E. Mr. Ali'ioaiga Feturi Elisaia, Ambassador, Permanent Mission of Samoa. He spoke with great passion about climate change, and how it is affecting the youth. He recognized that Samoa, and other small islands with developing economies are particularly vulnerable to the wrath of climate change, and whilst they develop ways to mitigate, adapt and build resilience to the changing weather conditions, he also recognized that the small islands were on the frontlines of the destruction caused by climate change. He also elucidated that it is imperial to include youth in the conversations about climate change and sustainable development goals, not just as advocates, but also as 'actioners'.

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*Youth is our today and our future. The fight against climate change is a joint fight for our now and our tomorrow.*

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H.E. The Most Reverend Bernardito Auza, Permanent Observer of the Holy See to the United States, delivered the keynote address. He spoke about the various conferences he has attended over the years, where he observed the young people outside the negotiating rooms, pushing & pressuring their nations delegations to make the right choices. He invoked the encyclical Laudato Si' and expressed the need for intergenerational solidarity while taking care of our common home.

This was followed by the central session of the event, a panel discussion among the 4 youth activists, moderated by Fr. Savio Silveira SDB, Founder, Don Bosco Green Alliance

- September Kelokelo, Papua New Guinea
- Santiago Corrales, Panama
- Abigail Gyabaa, Ghana

- Rebecca Petz, Germany

The opening salvo was provided by Ms. September, who spoke of her personal experiences with climate change. She spoke of a friend, who suddenly passed away, directly due to climate change, and how her coastal village has been trapped, no longer being able to move out due to climate change and rampant habitat destruction.

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*Many of the young people from my country dream of having better education, health services, travelling the world, but now, it is very hard. all our dreams are going down the drain*

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The next panellist to speak was Santiago Corrales, from Panama, representing the region of Latin America. He spoke about how climate change has adversely affected rainfall patterns, citing the example of Haiti in 2016, where it received a years' worth of rainfall in just 3 weeks, or his own city, a few days prior, where the city was flooded due to excessive rain. He closed on a more hopeful note, believing that small changes matter and that it isn't about one person doing one thing, and if seven billion people do one little thing, change can occur.

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*When we talk about the environment we are not talking about plants and animals, but our brothers and sisters.*

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Next up was Abigail Gyabaa, from Ghana. She illustrated the impact of climate change of the youth in Ghana. The unstable weather patterns have adversely affected farming practices, leading to a food shortage. The water bodies are drying and the illnesses are on the rise. She believes that the amount of talk about climate change is disproportionate the action being taken, and we should take more action.

The last panellist for the day for Rebecca Petz, from Germany. She provided various examples of how climate change has affected the youth, and how it has replaced their aspirations with disappointments. She believes that protection of the climate is a part of our human rights. She discussed the European heat wave, how the effect of climate change is becoming felt and visible, and hopes that this can provide incentive to the politicians to make a change. She also expressed despondence at the 'half-hearted, lethargic' response of the international organization to the ongoing climate crisis

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*Climate change is real. The ongoing rampant and chaotic destruction of the environment is unfair to the future of the planet and its inhabitants.*

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Post this, the panel was an open forum, wherein the microphones was – Literally and metaphorically – passed to the young people in the audience. While we can discuss and pore over what is said, it is necessary to look beyond that.

When we discuss climate change, it is often in extremely broad terms. Yes, temperatures are rising, and sure, we have to do something, but we still tend to view it as an abstract, outside force. We need to recognize the climate change is a malevolent force of our creation. And when we discuss youth aspirations, we view them as something in the far flung future, without remembering that the youth is facing these challenges now, their impact immediate. Climate change, and the surrounding

inaction isn't just affecting their future with respect to jobs, homes and livelihood, but also their social and societal future, and present. When a panellist discussed the death of a friend, she isn't speaking of a broad, abstract evil that is affecting someone, somewhere, she is speaking of a real, tangible trauma.

We need to remember that climate change is causing a real impact in the lives of real people. We should never lose sight of the fact that while we delay discussions, and defer action, real hopes and dreams are circling the drain. Our inaction is colonizing the youth, trapping them in spaces where even the dream of visiting a particular city may become too tenuous to achieve. We have to take concrete steps, if we don't, we are being horrifically, cruelly unfair to the youth, who haven't done anything to deserve it.

It is easy to give into cynicism, however there are organizations across the world which are vying to provide a platform for the youth to make sure their voices are heard. Through the Don Bosco Green Alliance, we are creating a platform that aims to put young people on the forefront of the climate action. We are creating a network of Salesian organizations, and our objective is to take the members of these organizations, especially the youth, to the forefront of the climate movement, and increase their capacity for climate action.

To know more about the alliance, visit [www.donboscoogreen.org](http://www.donboscoogreen.org) or write to us at [communications@donboscoogreen.org](mailto:communications@donboscoogreen.org) or [alliance@donboscoogreen.org](mailto:alliance@donboscoogreen.org)

