



Photo credit: Kelvin Paulino, June 2017

ORGANIZING A YOUTH ACTIVATE TALK

Methodology for Engaging Children, Adolescents and Youth as Local Change-Makers

BACKGROUND

In 2016, UNICEF initiated the *Youth Activate Talk Series*, with two primary intentions: 1) to create a space for young people (children, adolescents and youth) to network and hear from other young people regarding ideas and actions being taken to create positive social, economic or environmental change; and 2) to showcase to decision-makers that young people can and must be engaged as positive “agents of change” in order to create more peaceful, healthy, equal, prosperous and sustainable communities.

Youth Activate Talks were originally a concept developed by UNICEF’s Division of Communication and were adapted by the Public Partner Advocacy and Visibility Hub in the Public Partnerships Division, specifically to demonstrate how young people were taking action in support of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The benefit of the *Youth Activate Talks* methodology is that it can be used for any subject young people want to engage on, and in any location. It is a simple and effective means for promoting community-level engagement among children, adolescents and youth.

The Public Partner Advocacy and Visibility Hub, as the authors of this methodology, encourage colleagues in and outside of UNICEF to use or adapt this approach as needed. Examples referred to in this document, however, are taken from *Youth Activate Talks* specifically focused on the SDGs.

WHY ACTIVATE TALKS ARE USED FOR ENGAGING YOUNG PEOPLE ON THE SDGS

UNICEF’s messaging around the role of children, adolescents and youth in achieving the SDGs can be summed up as three “A’s” -- raising **awareness**, taking **action** and holding governments and other stakeholders **accountable** on progress or lack thereof. As a way to highlight the role of young people in the SDGs, UNICEF offices and partners, including schools and youth groups, can utilize the *Youth Activate Talk* methodology so that a young audience has the platform to inspire and activate each other.

The fundamental idea is to look at a topic where young people have shown a strong interest, and then engage local change-makers who are making progress on this topic in their personal, professional or academic lives in a moderated discussion, open publicly to young people in the community. It is also to make these topics – which can often seem abstract or overwhelming – more relatable to young people, demonstrating that they can do things individually or in partnership that will make progress towards social, economic or environmental progress in their schools, communities and countries.

For the first *SDG Youth Activate Talk* (November 2016), UNICEF and partners co-organized a discussion focused on [SDG 12: sustainable production and consumption](#) issues, targeting young people in the NYC metro area. The topic was inspired by the mass voices of young people who expressed a strong commitment to preserving the planet



SDG-Activate Talk online flyer, professionally designed for free by a volunteer.

during consultations that took place during the SDG negotiations. The event was titled [From Trashing to Treasuring: Community Change Makers for a More Sustainable World](#).

The second *SDG Youth Activate Talk* was held on the margins of the first UN Oceans Conference (June 2017) and took a more expansive approach with young speakers from NYC, Bali, Texas, Florida and Canada. The young panelists demonstrated that ocean conservation is important in every geographic location and can take place through various means including through scientific invention, political campaigning, community organizing and peer-to-peer learning. The event was titled [Young Change Makers go Under the Sea](#).

In November 2017, the third *SDG Youth Activate Talk* -- [Youth Power the Planet: an SDG Activate Talk](#) -- took place on the road – at the COP 23 meeting in Bonn Germany. Here an international group of young environmentalists and climate change activists presented their work and ideas to delegates and other stakeholders attending COP 23, including the Prime Minister of Fiji (who served as the President of COP in 2017).

Subsequent *Youth Activate Talks* have been used to [launch the winning entry of UNICEF's first ever Climate Comic Contest](#) and the methodology has been taken up by several UNICEF Offices around the world.

Given the successful results of the *Youth Activate Talks* to date, the Advocacy Hub and partners are continuing host SDG-focused Activate Talks and believe the methodology can be easily transferable to other UNICEF offices and partners for engaging and showcasing actions of children and youth in their respective communities.

Please see below for some tips for organizing a *Youth Activate Talk*. You can also contact [Shannon O'Shea and Callie King-Guffey](#) in the UNICEF Public Partnerships Division for any questions or potential support with child-friendly materials. For child-friendly content on the SDGs, see also the [World's Largest Lesson](#) and [Comics Uniting Nations](#) websites.

DESCRIPTION

A *Youth Activate Talk* is an open house that includes a panel of local dynamic change-makers – some, if not all, preferably children, adolescents or youth. The idea is to reach a young public that may or may not (necessarily) be interested in the inner-workings of the United Nations but are interested in hearing from “unexpected” community leaders, that knowingly or not are working on issues that are also a key focus of the UN or other development actors. Depending on the topic chosen, the panel could include innovators, inventors, campaigners, entrepreneurs, activists, designers and other change makers. These panelists would ideally present their work in hopes of *activating* others.

The event would run approximately 2 hours and be comprised of four core elements: 1) Introductory remarks/keynote (10 minutes); 2) A moderated “talk show” with panelists (30 minutes); 3) Q&A with audience (20 mins); 4) A networking fair with refreshments (60 minutes).

1. **Introductory Remarks and/or a Key Note Address** can either feature a decision maker (i.e. government official or UN representative), a young leader, or both. Ideally, the remarks would provide context as to why the discussion is addressing a certain topic and give a brief outline on what the Youth Activate Talk is and aims to achieve. Afterwards, the moderator can either immediately introduce the panel or conduct a transition activity that engages the audience. *See text box below for inspiration.*

A Youth Activate Talk run-of-show is meant to be **flexible** so that hosts can add interactive activities to engage the audience depending on context. For instance, during *Young Change Makers go Under the Sea*, the run-of-show added a few elements:

- **Introductory Remarks** by UNICEF official who briefly described SDG 14
- **Keynote Address** by a SDG Young Leader who briefly discussed his recent invention to cap oil spills
- Before introducing the panel, the moderator interacted with the audience with a **Trivia Game** on the importance of oceans and a World's Largest Lesson [Video](#) on what young people can do to achieve the SDGs.
- After the interactive panel discussion, a UNICEF Partner, Comics Uniting Nations took the stage **to launch a new comic** on SDG 14 and invited the audience to get a signed copy during the networking fair.

2. The main focus of the Youth Activate Talk is the **talk-show style panel discussion** with 4-5 “change maker” speakers. For the *Trashing to Treasuring Talk*, the moderator asked each panelist to introduce themselves and their work in 1 minute and finished with the question “Did you know what the SDGs were before this Activate Talk?” Additional questions can be discussed and agreed to in advance with participants (see text box below for examples). Interventions should be brief and more of a discussion than a lecture.

Panel Questions were given to each speaker in advance of the *Young Change Makers go Under the Sea* who were told they have 1 minute to respond to the following:

- What inspired you to care about our oceans?
- How have you or your community been impacted by oceans?
- What actions are you taking to protect oceans?
- Many people question how much their individual choices can affect the environment. Can the actions of one person make a difference?
- What actions can the people here today do to protect their oceans?

3. After the interactive discussion with panelists and the host/moderator, there would be a period of **Q&A** from the floor and, potentially, from an online audience if the event is webcast.
4. Following the panel, a **networking fair with refreshments** would invite the attendants to socialize and learn about each other’s interests and work. This can be facilitated by a Science-fair style portion of the Open House in which local organizations, schools, companies and individuals are invited to have a “booth” to showcase their causes and projects to the attendees.

The overall message behind the Open House would be shaped by the participants and the work they present but could center on the notion that it is individual actions, big or small, that will help achieve lasting positive change in the community and that young people are already taking action.

PLANNING STEPS

Step 1: Select theme. For instance, the first *SDG Youth Activate Talk* at UNICEF HQ featured the topic of sustainable production and consumption and care for the planet. This was informed by consultations with children and youth whereby concerns for wildlife and preservation of the earth and its natural resources were repeatedly highlighted as areas of interest.



YouTube recording of SDG-Activate Talk:
From Trashing to Treasuring: Community Change-Makers for a More Sustainable World.

Step 2: Select date and time. It is important to organize the event at a time when children and youth can most likely participate (e.g. outside of school hours) but also convenient for parents -- for example from 4-6 PM. Offering light refreshments is also a nice feature and a means to encourage young people to attend. If you do organize the event during normal school hours, work with local schools to make the event into an educational field trip.

Step 3: Confirm and prep 4-5 panelists. The panel could be moderated by either a young person or a UN/UNICEF staff member, but the panelists themselves should come from outside of the UN system, representing external fields and practice areas and thereby demonstrating how making social, economic or environmental change requires the involvement

of a wide array of industries and traverse both the public and the private sectors. Strong emphasis should be placed on having a good balance of child/youth panelists as well as gender and racial identity to the extent possible. Once confirmed, send the panelists: 1) information about each other; and 2) a list of questions for the discussion, asking them to provide you with any additional questions they would like to be asked.

Step 4: Invite relevant local organizations/initiatives to hold a booth in the Science-Fair portion of the Open House.

The idea is for participating booths is to have something for the attendees to learn about, take home or be specifically inspired to take action on. For example, at the *From Trashing to Treasuring* event, the inventor of the [My Conscience, My Choice](#) smartphone app presented her invention, which is a resource for finding and buying eco-friendly, cruelty-free and natural alternatives to mainstream products. At *Young Change Makers go Under the Sea*, the New York Aquarium had a booth with information on how young people can get involved in local ocean and wildlife conservation efforts.

The confirmation of the NY *SDG Youth Activate Talks* involved a lot of cold-calling over the course of a few months after learning of different, interesting individuals through: **the media; online, co-workers; local academic institutions; local government entities; partner organizations; and networking.**

Examples of how panelists were identified and invited

Media

- [Lauren Singer](#), a young New Yorker who lives a zero-trash life-style was contacted after a UNICEF staff member saw a [CNN feature on her](#).

Online

- With a simple google search, the team found a local organization who runs an [ocean art contest for children](#). Not only did they agree to attend the networking fair, the organization put the team in touch with a prominent ocean activist who founded a [Youth Ocean Summit](#) and moderated the panel.

Co-workers

- [Melissa O'Young](#), community director of Airbnb, was a connection from a UNICEF staff member who had formerly worked on sustainable production and consumption issues at UNEP.
- A co-worker's 10-year-old son who had used the [World's Largest Lesson](#) participated as a panelist.

Local Academic Institutions

- Reaching out to the New School in NYC, the program director recommended [Andrea Burgeño](#), a recent graduate who had implemented an award-winning community project

Government Entities

- The team reached out to and met with the [NYC Junior Ambassador Program of the NYC Mayor's Office](#) who recommended a 7th grade participant as a panelist.

Partner Organizations

- [Sean Southey](#) is the CEO of PCI Media, an NGO that works with UNICEF on behavior change communications and has also partnered with the Agenda 2030 Unit on [Comics Uniting Nations](#).
- [Melati and Isabel](#) collaborated with the [World's Largest Lesson](#) and were featured in the animated video. The WLL introduced the sisters to the team upon learning they would be at the UN Oceans Conference.
- The Youth Envoy's Office introduced the [SDG Young Leader](#), Karan Jerath, who gave the Key Note Address.

Networking

- During a panel to present *Comics Uniting Nations* at the New York City ComicCon, the Agenda 2030 Team met [Ovie Mughelli](#), a former American football player for the NFL, who now runs a non-profit that engages youth through sports to educate about sustainable energy practices and climate change.

Step 5: Invite audience members of young people to attend through schools, youth groups, universities and other channels. Try to focus on reaching children, adolescents and youth that might not otherwise have a chance to be involved with something at the United Nations as well as children and youth from underserved areas, children with disabilities and other marginalized groups.

Make the event publicly open if possible but take the proper measures for security and room capacity constraints. For example, using a free event-planning tool like [Eventbrite](#), can ensure that all attendees are registered and also allows you to limit the number of seats/tickets available.

Remember that people who sign up for free events do not always show up. A general rule of thumb is that about 25-30% of registrants will actually come to the event – so you may want to make more tickets available accordingly!

If possible, try to either webcast or record the event so that those not able to attend in-person can still benefit or participate remotely. If the event is webcast live, a dedicated social media focal point could take questions from the online audience during the Q&A.

Step 6: Find young volunteers! Many young people were willing to help in organizing the event – for example: taking pictures, checking in guests, designing flyers or setting up booths and refreshments. Engaging volunteers can give young people a sense of purpose in making the event a success and can also help you to keep costs down. For the *From Trashing to Treasuring* event, the US Fund for UNICEF helped to coordinate volunteers who are members of UNICEF clubs in local high schools and colleges to participate.

Step 7: Coordinate media outcomes. Write up a press release to be shared shortly after the event and invite local media and bloggers to cover. Encourage people to live tweet the event using a specific hashtag.

COSTS

Organizing an activate talk will have some costs but should be relatively inexpensive. Here are some tips:

- 1) **Venue:** Try to secure a space where you would not have to pay a rental or booking fee -- e.g. an event space at your local UNICEF or UN compound or your school.
- 2) **Event management:** There are great online tools for managing invitations and communicating with people who register that are free and simple to use. We recommend [Eventbrite](#).
- 3) **Panelists:** Most panelists are excited to be recognized for their good work and are willing to share their experience/participate for free. Look for panelists that do not charge speaking fees. Where applicable, you may need to cover costs for travel and transportation but those should be minimal, especially if the panelists are local.
- 4) **Volunteers and Partners:** As noted above, volunteers can help with tasks that might otherwise cost money – make a list of activities that need to be done either in advance of or during the event and see if you can find people willing to help with those items for free. You can also ask local child-focused partners (e.g. NGOs) to help you plan and execute the event, serving as a co-host/organizer.
- 5) **Refreshments:** This is likely to be a cost unless you can find a local vendor willing to donate. Focus on healthy food and beverage choices and try and limit the use of packaged foods, plastic bottles and disposable utensils. Make the refreshments a source of learning on how to create less trash and food waste!
- 6) **Video recording, photography or webcasting:** This will likely be a cost unless you can engage a volunteer or have in-house capacity. However, it is an important element to involve people not able to attend in-person. Having a video that can be archived and accessible is great for preserving the discussion and action items resulting from the event. Having photos to promote the talk visually engages those who were not able to attend.



Three panelists from *Young Change Makers go Under the Sea* holding up the *Annie Sunbeam and Friends* comic. Photo captured by volunteer professional photographer.

CONTACT US!

We hope this short guide has inspired you to host a *Youth Activate Talk* in your community! If you have any questions or are looking for lessons learned, tips or tricks for a successful event, please [contact us!](#)

Produced by: The Public Partner Advocacy
and Visibility Hub

UNICEF Public Partnerships Division

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