

Young people of the world meet to save the environment

Children and youths from across the world have gathered together in an international conference organized by the United Nations Environmental Program (UNEP) in collaboration with the Indonesian Forestry Ministry in Bandung, West Java. The biennium international conference, Tunza, a Kiswahili word for "treat with care or affection", brings together 1,042 children and youths from 188 countries, with 605 of them aged between 10 and 14 years old.

In the five-day conference, the youths will engage in sustainable development projects such as geothermal electricity generation, integrated farming and tree planting. Speaking before the audience during the opening of the conference on Tuesday, UNEP executive director Achim Steiner highlighted the importance of children's and youths' involvement in saving the environment and sustainable development.

"I have an impression that the older we get, the more reasons we find for why things cannot be done. This brings a big loss to the future of humanity. So, it is in the people such as you, young people who intuitively ... already understand what sustainable development is all about. We don't need big textbooks to understand that as humans we are part of a larger system," he said.

Achim Steiner told The Jakarta Post on the sidelines of the conference that the idea of young people being powerless in the environmental-related movement was a misconception.

"What we are trying to do with the UN environmental program in the Tunza network is to address the lack of interaction between the enormous energy that young people can have and our international negotiation between governments, which can get very complicated because of differences," he said.

He added that young people looked at environmental issues from a common humanity because they had a shared understanding of the issues, and therefore the conference provided a space for them to listen to and learn from each other's experiences.

Achim said that by the end of the conference children and youth would formulate a declaration, to be called the Bandung declaration, which would be presented next year in Rio de Janeiro at the United Nations' Earth Summit 2012, also known as the Rio+20 conference.

Eunice Wanjiku, a senior high student from Kenya, told the Post that she had never considered young people as agents of change for the environment until she participated in the conference.

"I'm in an environmental club at school but the clearer idea that we, young people, can actually positively contribute to the environment just crossed my mind today as I listened to stories and experiences from peers from different countries," she said.

Eunice, who is participating in such a conference for the first time, said further that she would like to transfer the knowledge and ideas she gained during the conference to her peers at home, particularly those in her club.

"I believe that I will get more ideas as the conference goes on, but at the moment I already have the idea of inviting my friends to join hands to clean up this terrible dump site near the neighborhood where I live as soon as I return to Kenya," she said.

Adeline Tiffanie from Indonesia said that such a conference was really important to provide space for children and youth to explore more ideas on the environment in their countries.

The 14-year-old high school student has been organizing a youth community in North Jakarta, known as Sahabat Alam (Friends of the Nature), for four years in an attempt to protect the environment.

"I am often judged as being preachy when I share the dangers that our environment is dealing with. The conference assures me that I must continue to remind people that the environment can no longer wait to be saved," she said. (msa)

