

Last week, the Shenzhen Youth Federation in partnership with the UN Office of South-South Cooperation and UNDP and UNFPA hosted 28 young people from around the world to participate in a three-day programme on the margins of the International Youth Innovation Conference, a gathering of 5,000 young innovators. The programme gave the opportunity to our youth to pitch their initiatives and network with entrepreneurs, potential investors, partners and others.

We were fortunate to have youth from three of UNDP's regional youth programmes, including Africa's Youth Connekt, Arab States' Youth Leadership Programme, and Asia Pacific's Youth Co:Lab. To open the pitch competition, Moneera Yassien, one of our young changemakers from Sudan, made a speech to share her experience of being a young entrepreneur. Below are her remarks (*delivered on 15 November 2019*).

Good morning vibrant souls!

Sbah Alkhair "good morning in Arabic" My name is Moneera Yassien, I am 23 years old Sudanese social entrepreneur, women rights activist and a researcher!

I have been in Shenzhen for the past three days and yesterday while looking at all these marvelous booths and listening to my fellow young innovators and change makers sharing their projects, ideas and passion to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals. I started to wonder why young people- including myself- would travel for many hours, suffer from jet lag most likely, leaving their comfy beds at home to stand on stage, pitch their innovation and be challenged with questions and feedback? Why in the world would we do that? Why do we want to be innovators?

Then I started to look at my own journey trying to answer this question. And I managed to come up with four reasons why young people like myself invest their time, effort and energy to innovate and make the world a better place.

1. **Young people are curious and have that impulsive need to explore more of the world and come up with new ways of doing things.**

When I was 18 I found an online call for application for the Youth Leadership Program by UNDP Regional Hub for Arab States, calling on young people to participate in a 5-day long workshop about sustainable development and leadership and I was like "wow big words which I can't wait to learn about!" so my **curiosity and my impulsive need to explore more of the world** made me take the time to apply, go through an interview and challenge many traditions and beliefs about how women should not travel alone! And this is what made me travel to date to over 25 countries around the world to learn and discover new things.

2. **Young people are passionate. Let me show you how!**

In 2017 I wrote a Facebook post about Violence Against Women (VAW) in Sudan as part of the 16 Days to End VAW campaign, and I asked women to voice their experiences with violence using an anonymous chat engine. After that I went to bed, to wake up with over 20 messages from women sharing all horrible and terrific experiences with violence; by the end of the 16 days I had over 400 stories, and

during these 16 days I was just full of anger, I told myself “girl you better do something” and because **I am young and passionate** I actually did do something, I started the first youth-led organization in Sudan working on ending violence against women using innovation tools to tackle the challenge from the grassroots. Started in December 2017, AMNA organization is now running with over 150,000 USD funding in 2019 with plans to expand and use our methodology in Africa and Middle East.

3. **Young people can't stand and watch only, we take actions to make a positive difference!**

Just ask yourself how many roles you play in your life. Personally at this moment I work in four different fields and in every field I am playing a different role. I live and work in Djibouti currently as a consultant for UNDP on Youth and Innovation. I run my own organization working to end VAW. I conduct research and explore solutions for entrepreneurs through my work with IECRC (Innovation and Entrepreneurship Community Research Chapter) in Sudan. Also I travel around East Africa as a workshop associate for Nesta and the British Council working on creative economy to empower young African creative entrepreneurs. And between all these different roles there is one thing in common which is **“Making a difference”**

4. **Young people need to be heard.**

Am I comfortable standing here in Shenzhen and sharing with you my thoughts? I might look like it... maybe?

But the feeling of responsibility toward making my own voice and the voices of young women and men heard makes me and make every young person in this room get out of their comfort zone and start random conversations with people whom we may never meet again, but at least we know now they have taken a piece of our voice, experiences and stories with them.

On that note, I hope that you have taken a piece of my voice, experiences and story with you. It was an absolute pleasure and honor to give the opening speech, thank you for being you and thank you for listening!

Have a good International Youth Innovation Conference and don't stop innovating!

See you around 😊

Thank you to Shenzhen Youth Federation and the UNOSSC for their support of young changemakers across UNDP's regional youth programmes!