

Good afternoon.

Distinguished guests, I am deeply honoured and humbled to be chosen as the recipient of this year's International Children's Peace Prize. When I began my journey eight years ago I never imagined that one day I would be standing in the Hall of Knights in the Hague to receive the Children's Peace Prize. Thank you KidsRights and the Expert Committee for giving me this opportunity. It vindicates my belief that children have the power and ability to achieve whatever they set their sights on. All we need is a fair opportunity.

I represent the future generations and we have a right to live in a clean environment, the same as our forefathers. I do not want to grow up wearing a gas mask or drink polluted water or live in a world depleted of its glorious flora and fauna. Long ago, I came across a quote from Robert Swan, who said "The greatest threat to our planet is the belief that someone else will save it". This general lack of concern for our environment is the root cause of the current state of degradation that the world faces.

There are more children and young people in the world than ever before. The future belongs to us, but we are helpless to change or influence the way we live now. Our dignity, or rather indignity, is determined by the never-ending demands of industries which turn virgin rainforests into ugly mining pits and pollute the pristine water of our rivers with toxic chemicals, pushing thousands of species to the brink of extinction. This is the harsh reality that stares us in the face, but many of us choose to either look away or shrug helplessly thinking it is someone else's problem.

As a 16 year old, I am dismayed by the shortsightedness that most adults demonstrate in relation to our environment, ignoring its paramount importance to our well-being. Thirty years ago, when my dad was in school, his geography text book proclaimed the Aral Sea as the fourth largest inland water body in the world. In the three decades since then, this water body has almost ceased to exist – my geography book calls it a desert. This environmental catastrophe took place over thirty long years, right in front of our eyes, yet no one cared enough to stop it.

This was not acceptable to me - I decided to be the change and my first small step was planting a tree on my eighth birthday. There has been no looking back since then and my work took me the global stage when, at the age of 12, I found myself amongst thousands of adults at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, championing the cause of environmental conservation. On my return from Brazil, I founded Green Hope to provide young people a platform to learn about the challenges that our environment faces and take actions to mitigate them. Green Hope is run "by youth – for youth", because we feel that the message is most powerful when peers work together. We organize environmental academies, which are tailor-made workshops, varying from two-hour sessions to full day events that target children and youth from across the region. Participants learn to calculate their carbon footprint, means of stopping land degradation, understand the concepts of sustainable consumption, climate change impacts, biodiversity conservation and the need for future justice.

From our humble beginnings four years ago, Green Hope has now over 1000 member volunteers working to make a difference in many countries across the globe. My battle is far from over but I am confident that the world is now listening. The fact that I am standing before you all today is, in itself, an acknowledgement of this.

That said, there needs to be a far greater level of empowerment and engagement for us, children, since our future that is at stake. With the global population crossing 7 billion, the earth's finite

natural resources are under tremendous strain and it is of immense concern to us, the future generations. Thousands of us die every day drinking contaminated water and from pollution related causes. This escalating environmental degradation has given rise to a new phenomenon –“climate refugees”. Millions are forced to migrate from their homes and countries devastated by floods, droughts and rising sea levels as a consequence of climate change and a large portion of these migrants are, unfortunately, children. Climate change is driving us out of our homes and villages into cities where we face a bleak future, which we have no control upon.

Every day, every minute we are writing an obituary for a lake, or a wetland or a forest. The impacts of environmental degradation are being felt worldwide – every region, every country is at threat. The river Ganges which once flowed, pristine and pure, from the Himalayas to the Bay of Bengal, is now a cesspool of filth. The Yangste River has forgotten its original trail thanks to the numerous dams and barrages which it encounters. The Himalayas, shorn of their glacial cover, look like dull pieces of chalk. The historic Dodo is now rejoicing at the thought that it may soon have tigers, lions and pandas for company. Thousands of children walk miles in the scorching heat to collect a bucket of brackish water because the world does not take note while the rivers dry up. We, children, are bearing the brunt of this current unbridled so called “economic progress” which is happening at the cost of environment .

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) adopted at the UN last September and the 2015 Paris Climate accord have finally merged the two pathways of climate change and developmental goals, cementing the fact that they cannot be pursued separately. Additionally, a sustainable future can't be realized unless we have equal rights for all children. The task at hand is monumental but it is not daunting. We have an obligation to protect our natural resources and ensure that we leave the natural and human environment in at least the same good condition as it was received. Environmental apathy must be done away with. We, children, have a leadership role to play and mold the future the way we want it. For example, planting trees is the simplest yet most effective way of diminishing climate change. So plant your first tree today, talk about it to your peers, spread the message and stop this ecocide!

I would like to thank my parents for being the source of my strength and inspiration and I am blessed to have them always by my side. I would also like to thank the awesome Green Hope team for their unstinting passion in facing adversity and standing shoulder to shoulder in our fight to save the planet.

Finally, I would like to remind you, time is not on our side. We are at the edge of a cliff and yet continue to turn a blind eye to the looming catastrophe that is threatening the future of humanity. The time to act is now. I beg you to shake off the indifference towards our environment before it is too late. This is one battle we cannot afford to lose and to win, we need to do it together, adults and children. Let us turn back the clock and create a future that is just, sustainable and equitable.