

# 16 X 16 BLOG SERIES

## Youth Drive Peace Advocacy

Elisha Bano, Act It Network; 16 x 16 participant.

Amidst the coconut trees and white sandy beaches reside the custodians of the largest ocean, Pacific Islands. The Pacific people are Large Ocean State people. We may be small, developing states but our oceans define us better. We navigate the oceans on our canoes and take pride in our islands. The Pacific is known for using art to pass down history, for storytelling and to document cultures and traditions. But our islands are sinking. Climate change is affecting our islands, our communities, our people and our peace. In a world of innovation, education, easy access to information and growth it is a wonder why we are still trying to achieve peace. It is the reason why I engage in advocacy for a peaceful society together with other young people.

Act It Network is a group of artists empowering youths to address social issues using creative arts. We founded the group in 2014. For the first few years our group engaged annually in Spoken Words events and digital advocacy. The Spoken Words event was to create a safe space for youths to come and share any social issue they wanted to shed more light on.



Act It Network. Photo: Act It Network

Over the years this space has now become Thoughts Aloud and we welcome any form of oral presentation including poetry, skits, spoken words, singing and monologues.



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Some of the issues that have been shared by the various youths participating include:

- Climate change;
- Environment;
- Sexual orientation;
- Violence against women and girls;
- Mental health;
- Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs);
- Peace;
- Cyber and digital spaces;
- Generation Gap;
- Sexual, reproductive health;
- Media; and
- Addiction.

### Youth Fest

For three years now Act It Network has been hosting Youth Fest annually in the lead up to International Youth Day. During this week (6-12 August) we organise various activities for youths, by youths. It is a peer engagement space that begins with peace and concludes with celebrating youth. Some of the activities during the week include: Community outreach, advocacy workshops, Thoughts Aloud, panel discussions and seminar presentations.

The community outreach activity aims at giving back to the community, whether it is giving food to the homeless or reading books to kids with cancer while the panel discussion aims at discussing social issues and giving youths (who work in those areas) a platform to share their work. To share more about youths engaged in activism we host a seminar session. This aims to inspire and empower more youths to engage in addressing social issues.

### Advocacy for sustainable development projects

The Advocacy Workshop and the Thoughts Aloud event are the highlights of the week as they are recurrent, and more

For more information on,

- 16 x 16 participants: <https://www.youth4peace.info/node/324>
- 16 x 16 Initiative: <https://www.youth4peace.info/node/344>

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youths have shown an interest in these two events over time. The workshop focuses on four themes each year. This year our focus was on: Entrepreneurship, Cyber and digital spaces, Activism and SDGs. We begin the workshop with the topic presenters informing the participations about their work on those areas. This includes background information, challenges, opportunities and achievements. This is followed by engagement and active participation from the participants. They engage in world café to highlight and discuss opportunities and challenges and in smaller groups they work on projects and plans to address the challenges.



*Advocacy Workshop in Act It Network. Photo: Act It Network.*

For the first time this year we partnered with UNDP to host the SDG+ event where youths in Fiji could pitch their business solutions to address one of the SDGs. Most of the pitches addressed climate action and gender equality (mostly in a combination with other SDGs). Three youths won cash to further their innovative business solutions and from these three, two were aimed at climate action. The first is producing reusable diapers while the second is using biofuel stoves. Reusable diapers don't only help your pocket financially but they will also reduce rubbish for landfills. Whereas, the biofuel stoves aim to replace the firewood burning stoves very commonly found in numerous Pacific communities.

### ***A safe space for thoughts and concerns***

My favorite is the Thoughts Aloud event where the youths bring out their creativity, channel their emotions and some battle their fear (of stage). We encourage first time presenters as this is a safe space for them to share their issues and concerns.

There are many young people in our communities who have much to tell, much to share as their struggles and concerns build on a daily level. This space allows them to honestly speak their mind. It also gives other young people the space to hear about some of these social issues and engage in discussion with the presenters and others present. The culture of silence is still very prevalent across the Pacific (and

other regions). We have found that most youths don't have access to safe spaces to share their thoughts and address issues.

That is the idea behind Thoughts Aloud. We create a safe space, to engage with more youths in the community, to give youths a platform to share these issues, to generate discussion and confer solutions while ensuring that they felt comfortable and not judged. All the activities are designed to engage in peaceful means of advocacy. Five people trying to influence the billions in our world is not realistic. Five people trying to influence another five and empowering them to influence another five might be in our reach. It is our responsibility to keep up to date with information and to change the conversations we have been engaging in. Our time spent with our friends and families can be spent discussing people, gossips, entertainment OR sharing what is happening around us in the world, solutions to our global problems, research and findings on how to tackle the issues in our societies and create networks and connections for these. The latter is what we are promoting through our community workshops during Youth Fest. De-cluttering our circles and influencing change and discussions will see us becoming more productive members of our community. By involving the youths who are at the grass-roots we are working our way from the bottom up. We are working to getting this sector of our society actively involved in the wider society to address issues. Their voices and concerns are just as important towards policy making and the growth of our economies.

Together we can work towards achieving peace.

*Be creative. Inspire Innovation. Lead a Revolution.*

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