

Children fight for their future

DURBAN, South Africa (5 January 2012)___ The bespectacled boy sat at the back of the hall, eyes glued to the speakers on stage. His leg twitched as if in perpetual excitement. When he walked with me ahead of being interviewed, he seemed like a cute yet ordinary 14 year-old.

Then Felix Finkbeiner started talking, and a surge of energy shot out from him.

“We children, we are fighting for our future,” said Felix, founder of the Plant-for-the-Planet movement (see the video below), speaking at Forest Day 5 on the sidelines of the UN climate change summit in Durban, South Africa, last month. “We decided to plant trees because everyone can plant trees. Every child all over the world can do it, and it helps against many things. It helps for more rain, for food, and against the climate crisis.”

It was during research for a school project on climate change that Felix found Wangari Maathai, the Nobel Peace laureate who initiated a movement to plant 30 million trees across Africa. He ended his school presentation in front of fellow fourth graders in Germany with a challenge to plant 1 million trees in every country. Two months later, on 28 March 2007, Felix put the first seedling in the ground.

Less than five years later, about 100,000 children from over 100 nations have enrolled in the movement and millions of trees have been planted. Thirteen other children from eight countries have joined Felix to make Plant-for-the-Planet’s global board to keep pushing the initiative forward.

“If we work all together worldwide, we will give the real importance that the world deserves,” Carolina, a girl from Mexico who loves observing insects and climbing trees, said on the organization’s website.

In their campaign, these youth symbolically shut the adults up to nudge them into action. In pictures, they put their hands over the mouths of leaders including Prince Albert II of Monaco, leading scientist David Suzuki, and Nobel Peace laureate Muhammad Yusuf as well as celebrities like box office actor Harrison Ford and supermodel Gisele Bündchen — for some people, that alone will be a lifetime achievement.

Plant-for-the-Planet hit another milestone when the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) handed over the management of



Felix and Carolin from Plant-for-the-Planet went to Durban to urge delegates to plant trees (Neil Palmer/CIAI/CIFOR)

its “Billion Tree Campaign” during the Durban talks. This effectively boosted the number of trees under the children’s care to over 12.5 billion.

With the goal of 1 million trees per country reached – within 3 years in Germany – and UN support, the organization sets a much bolder target (which at first looks like a typo): 1,000 billion trees by 2020, or 150 trees for every person on Earth. These trees would absorb 10 billion tons of carbon every year, according to Plant-for-the-Planet’s website. That’s about one-third of the world’s total emissions currently.

For these children, it’s a practical approach preferable to the prolonged climate talks. “If all these delegates would have come outside and planted trees during these two weeks, then there would have definitely been bigger results” from the annual climate summit, said Felix.

The children know that more than planting trees will need to be done to ensure that global temperature increase does not exceed 2 degrees Celsius by 2050, when they will only hit their early 50s. In the New Year message to its supporters, Plant-for-the-Planet also said it wanted to start its vision of sustainability, a concept that is still being debated in the global arena 25 years after the term was coined.

“Many people seem to have no idea what to do with this term actively, but for us children this is the only chance to have a real future,” they said on the website.