

## Adolescents take action; adults listen

By Liz Pick, Communications Specialist



The adolescents of Oeletsala village, Kupang, gained new confidence to speak up and voice their ideas through the 'adolescent circle' © UNICEF Indonesia/2017/Liz Pick

“It’s definitely never happened before. I never thought adults would ever listen to children’s ideas. But the head of the village did listen to us and now we have an easier life.”

So says 17-year-old Ina who lives in Oeletsala village near Kupang, a city in the western end of Timor Island in Eastern Indonesia. She and about 40 others from three nearby villages are part of a pilot programme to help adolescents learn to recognise risks in their environment and identify potential solutions using UNICEF’s Adolescent Kit for Expression and Innovation.

The adolescent kit is a set of tools and supplies for a series of facilitated learning sessions, known locally as *adolescent circles*, which lead groups of young people through activities that stimulate team-work, leadership skills, creative-thinking and problem-solving. It has been used all over the world to provide constructive learning and age appropriate activities for young people in the aftermath of natural disasters and conflict.

Here in Indonesia, the kit is being piloted in 35 villages to empower adolescents to prepare for and respond to emergencies and disasters. With the support of implementing partner ChildFund and its network of local community organisations, adolescent circles in Kupang, Ende, Lampung and Boyolali have explored climate change and disaster-related issues affecting their local communities ranging from drought and flood to fires and volcanic eruptions.

In Kupang, the long annual dry season led all groups to focus on how to improve the year-round water supply. However, while each circle identified the same overarching issue, they came up with slightly different solutions tailored to their specific local concerns.

“Once we had chosen to focus on the water supply issue, we decided to survey adolescents at the water point to find out what they thought. It turned out that we all had the same problem,” says 15-year-old Willie, a member of the Oeletsala village adolescent circle.

Collecting water is generally done by older children each morning and evening. The distance of the water supply point from the village meant children were waking up as early as 4am to collect water for their family before school. They were often late to school and had little free time to play with friends.

After considering the feasibility of several different ideas, such as rainwater tanks and a water truck, the Oeletsala group settled on their preferred solution – installing a water pump at the centre of the village.

They started plotting out the requirements, drawing diagrams and maps of the project area and creating a simple prototype from cardboard to help visualise it. They later approached their parents to present the idea at the annual village planning meeting.

“Some people told us: ‘You’re only children, what do you know about this? Don’t try to give advice about things you know nothing about’,” says 18-year-old Devi. “But we didn’t let that discourage us. Eventually some adults stopped and listened to what we had to say and that gave us the confidence to continue.”

Ayub Meto, the village chief said he could not recall a time when children had ever taken an active role in village affairs before this. “I was so surprised to receive the proposal from the children through their parents. I thought to myself, ‘these young people are not children anymore.’ They can now express their ideas and are thinking about the village’s wellbeing through the activities in this adolescent circle.”



*Oeletsala village chief Ayub Meto transformed the adolescent circle's vision for a water pump into reality © UNICEF Indonesia/2017/Liz Pick*

He was so impressed by the children’s initiative that he agreed to allocate Village Funds to complete the project. A pump house was built in a central location and now supplies the village with water for drinking, washing and farming without the need for a long walk.

The overwhelmingly positive results convinced the village leadership to commit additional funds for two more water pumps this year.

“I was really moved to find that the children in our village have so much potential and ability. We need this young generation in this village but we tend to underestimate children and their ideas.”

Pak Meto says he plans to make sure their voices are heard in future by formalising the involvement of children at various stages of the village planning process to contribute through information gathering and the Child Forum.

Aside from increased water availability and access, there have been other less tangible but no less obvious benefits for the adolescent circle participants. Most group members say they were very shy before taking part but have acquired new confidence in themselves and expressing their ideas.

“In the sessions, we have discussions and learn how to respect each other and other people’s ideas,” says Chris. “This circle has really given me advantages for my future because it has helped me find out what I am good at and develop new skills like leadership and public speaking.”

Dewi agrees, saying she thinks the skills she learned in the adolescent circle will help her when she starts university later this year.

“I used to be so shy, I didn’t think people would listen to my ideas but now I know that with some effort I can put my ideas into action,” she says Dewi, adding that it has inspired her peers to continue playing an active role in creating opportunities for themselves.

They have set their sights on a new project – a daily school bus for students attending the senior secondary school. They hope regular transport will enable more of them to complete high school by making the distance less prohibitive.

“Now that we’ve seen our idea become a reality we’ve realised that adolescents have a role to play to make our situation and living conditions better. We can have a say in our future.”