

Empowering Tomorrow's Leaders: Network Day with ASPnet Students

On the 12th of March, supported by the Flemish Unesco Commission, the Dirk Boutsgebouw buzzed with youthful energy as international students from UCLL and KU Leuven joined forces with pupils from ASPnet Flemish schools for a day of collaboration and inspiration. The event, organized under the UNESCO Associated Schools Network (ASPnet) in Flanders, aimed to ignite passion for global issues and empower young minds to drive positive change.



ASPnet, spanning over 182 countries and linking more than 12,000 schools, serves as a beacon for fostering peace, understanding, and sustainable development among children and youth. Grounded in UNESCO's principles, ASPnet schools champion values of equality, justice, diversity, and solidarity.

The day kicked off with a warm welcome to all participants, setting the stage for a series of engaging activities designed to deepen understanding and spark dialogue around the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Led by Stijn Dhert, the ASPnet coordinator in Flanders, the event embraced inclusivity and collaboration as its guiding principles.



Facilitated by UCLL students, small groups were formed where pupils enthusiastically shared their initiatives and projects aimed at addressing SDG 14 (Life below water), showcasing the efforts of schools over the past year. In Brussels and Mechelen, activities such as paddle surfing and canoeing were organized to clean waterways, while others created awareness-raising videos. Additionally, funds were raised by some schools to construct a water well in Benin, and another school collected rainwater from rooftops for plant irrigation.

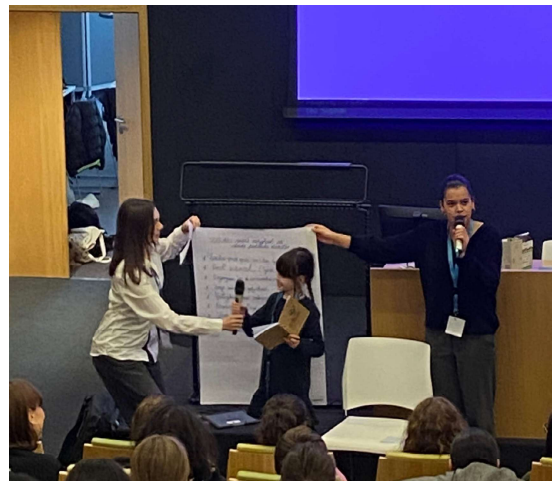
Guided by a spirit of exploration and collective decision-making, the participants delved into the intricacies of 5 SDGs, exploring the

interconnectedness of global challenges and local actions. Through interactive discussions, they gained deeper insights into the urgency and complexity of issues ranging from poverty and hunger to environmental sustainability and social justice, in particular we focused on SDGs 1 (No Poverty), 2 (Zero Hunger) , 13 (Climate Action), 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions), and 17 (Partnerships for the Goals). Their enthusiasm and commitment underscored the potential of young people to drive meaningful change in their communities and beyond.

The highlight of the day was a lively game designed to democratically select the SDG that they would focus on for the year ahead. Fostering teamwork and critical thinking, the game encouraged participants to weigh the importance of each goal and consider their own roles as agents of change, finally each group presented what they discussed about and the chosen SDG for the ahead year was reached by voting with green and red flags. The chosen SDG was 16, however, it was said that schools could equally work towards SDG 1 and 13 if they wished.

As the event drew to a close, a sense of purpose and empowerment filled the air. The Network Day had not only strengthened bonds between students and pupils but had also ignited a collective determination to tackle the world's most pressing challenges.

In a world where the voices of young people are more important than ever, events like Network Day with ASPnet students serve as powerful platforms for nurturing the next generation of global leaders. Through collaboration, education, and advocacy, these young minds are not just the leaders of tomorrow but the catalysts for a brighter, more sustainable future for all.



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