

# Portraits of Sustainable Youth Leaders around the World

Children of the Earth (COE)

Compiled by Saskia Troy for UN Peace Day, 2013



CHILDREN  
OF THE EARTH

INSPIRES & UNITES  
YOUNG PEOPLE  
for PEACE







Simran Vedvyas, COE Chapter Leader and Founder of Synergy,  
leads a project, planting 150 trees at a landfill site in Dubai, April 2013



Kehkashan Basu, COE Hub Leader and Global Coordinator for UNEP MGCY, addresses 1000 youth delegates from around the world as the youngest speaker at the 12<sup>th</sup> UN Youth Assembly.





**Princess Ogechi Ukaga, COE Chapter Leader Nigeria**

*We are following our path to true and lasting peace which we believe starts within our own hearts. To truly transform our communities, our countries and the world is to begin transforming ourselves, which is the way to sustainable unity within our world. We need to strive to prepare the ground for exceptional ideas and to inspire to concrete action, and allow us to be enriched by the critical voices of visionary and courageous young people. One of the principal aims of our initiative is to strengthen the dialogue between the generations - between today and tomorrow's decision makers.*



**Samuel Ayivi, COE Chapter Leader Togo (West Africa)**

*It is important to provide children and youth with a space where they can meet people from different religions and ethnic groups to build relationships and a sense of unity, exchange their views on spirituality and learn peace-building and communication skills. Then they can become real peace messengers in their communities.*



**Saskia Troy, COE Chapter Leader Netherlands**

*Business leaders can create wealth and at the same time add value to the conservation of the ecological world, treat other human beings with respect and build positive changes within their own lives. Having said that, it is not that easy to find socially responsible leaders who have been able to marry sustainability with making profits. For that reason we need to start teaching the youth at a young age about how to become spiritual, environmental and socially engaged leaders in today's society, business and politics.*

## **It Starts with One**

A poem by Fernanda Baumhardt (Brazil), Stephen Rockefeller (USA), Kartikeya Sarabhai (India) and Alide Roerink (Netherlands), dedicated to the 10th anniversary of the Earth Charter, June 2010.

### **It Starts with One**

It starts with one universe  
With one awakening, one choice  
With one person who cares  
With one teacher, one neighbor  
With one dialogue, one collaboration  
One action  
With one dream

### **It Starts with One**

Caring for one plant, one tree  
Looking after one bird, one squirrel  
Saving one drop of water  
Picking up one piece of waste  
Walking one journey  
One future, together  
Caring for one Earth Community



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### **Kehkashan Basu “It was preordained that I grow up as an eco-warrior”**

Kehkashan Basu was born on June 5th which is also recognized as “World Environment Day” and she feels this was a sign that she was to grow up with the desire to become an eco-warrior. Kehkashan has pursued three areas of environmental work – tree planting, cleanup campaigns, and recycling – all of which support her ultimate goal of stopping land degradation.

When Kehkashan turned eight years old, she used her birthday money to buy and plant a tree sapling. Since then, tree planting has become an annual birthday tradition and Kehkashan has planted over 100 trees worldwide including the United Arab Emirates, India, Indonesia, Kenya and Brazil. Additionally, her project involved several beach cleanups in one of which over 25,000 cigarette butts were collected. Her essay about her work to stop land degradation and waste segregation received an award from the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification, and was featured on their website.

In 2012, Kehkashan initiated the United Arab Emirates’ first Climate Justice Academy for Plant-for-the-Planet, where she held a youth workshop on stopping land degradation through tree planting and addressing climate change. Kehkashan was also the youngest international participating delegate to attend the United Nation’s Rio+20 meeting, where she held an official press conference calling on youth from around the world to join the fight against land degradation.

Kehkashan is now the Global Coordinator of Children and Youth, UNEP’s Major Groups Facilitating Committee and she is the only minor to hold this position in the history of UNEP. She has also recently been elected as the Global President of the Children’s Board for Plant-for-the-Planet for the year 2013 - 2014.

To carry the Rio legacy forward and continue to spread knowledge about how to combat land degradation, Kehkashan founded her own youth organization, GreenHopeUAE, whose mission is to support environmental causes and raise awareness about sustainable development and the creation of a “green” economy. Kehkashan is committed to helping achieve land degradation neutrality, and she created an educational video to help inform others about land degradation’s causes and solutions:

Kehkashan's Message on Achieving Land Degradation Neutrality. Kehkashan says that this project has



given her the confidence to challenge preconceived notions and that, “the sky is really the limit if one has the passion.”

Recently Kehkashan Basu, currently 12 years old, leader of the COE UAE Hub, was placed second in the Action for Nature 2013 International Young Eco-Hero Awards. Congratulations Kehkashan. Action For Nature Young Eco-Hero Awards, recognizes young people 8 to 16 years old for their environmental achievements. We hope the accomplishments of these outstanding young people will inspire many others to preserve and protect the Earth upon which all life depends.



Kehkashan Basu was invited by the Seychelles Ministry of Tourism and Environment to speak to their Eco Schools. Here, she is pictured planting a tree at the Botanical Gardens in the Seychelles - a UNESCO World Heritage site.





**Demi (Dimitra) Smoloktou “Freedom should not be taken for granted. That’s why I am promoting peace, intercultural dialogue and tolerance in the world”**

Demi Smoloktou has been involved in international affairs and peacekeeping for many years. Originally from Greece, Demi has lived in various different countries over the past 8 years for studies and work. She holds a Master's degree in Economics and is currently studying at the University of Jyväskylä in Finland for a joint honors in Development and International Cooperation.

Alongside her studies, Demi has been an active volunteer at the Earth Charter International and is a leader of its International Youth Task Force. Sustainability and peace are high on her agenda and as a Peace Ambassador she is committed to promote intercultural dialogue and tolerance.

*“Coming from Greece, an ancient country with a rich history and many war incidents, I feel almost obliged to celebrate Peace, since freedom should not be taken for granted. Who could imagine that in 2013 there would still be people living under slavery and war conditions. Conflict resolution has become a major need if we want to thrive towards a better and sustainable world with stable economies and peaceful inclusive societies. Let's devote at least one day a year to celebrate Peace.”*



**Roebin Lijnis Hufferreuter “Human beings cannot use the world’s riches as they individually please”**

Roebin Lijnis Hufferreuter is a researcher at the Erasmus University Rotterdam, for the Dutch Institute for Transitions (DRIFT) and is holder of a Master’s degree in Philosophy and Economics. At present, he is researching financial-economic transitions: the change in complex adaptive financial and economic systems. The focal point of his research is on measuring the extent of which financial and economic changes are sustainable. In the following account, Roebin gives a brief subject-related answer to what one can expect from sustainability transition in financial-economic systems.

First, there should be a change from a short-term “solipsistic” horizon to an intergenerational long-term vision. This implies that the self-interested utility optimizer in orthodox economics requires a complementary “individual” that is fit to look beyond his personal interest. Such “altruistic” individuals can be found in heterodox economic theory that takes into account human beings as evolving social creatures. In light of other-regarding behavior, sustainability requires discussion of the presence or lack of “moral” motivations in financial-economic systems. Sustainability implies that human beings cannot use the earth’s riches as they individually please, but have to consider the impact of their behavior on other human and non-human beings. Without leaving the theoretical confinement of the orthodox paradigm that focuses merely on the self-interested individual utility calculator the reason or rationale for such “all too human” consideration is problematic to understand.

Secondly, for a transition to sustainability there should be a change in perceiving financial-economic systems as means to national “linear” (GDP) growth. Circular economies and non-linear progress may help to curb the increasing level of global resource use, and add to a more “fair” distribution of wealth. By closing production-chains and consumption patterns (e.g. recycling, up-cycling, cradle-to-cradle, etc.) there is less waste generated, and the gains of the improved efficiency could be dispersed to enhance the capability sets of the “most needy”. This requires addressing the wastefulness of present financial-economic systems and the unfair distribution of its (waste) products. For now, we only have one planet with a finite amount of natural resources which for sustainability must be “circulated” throughout the



world among multiple generations. This suggests developing a global account of financial-economic systems as adaptive parts of an evolving whole.

Thirdly, a sustainability transition in financial-economic systems requires dealing with the hegemony of orthodox economics in governance. Economic “viability” in the market is too often taken as the most important criterion for proper policy-making - also for sustainability policy - being solely based on outdated orthodox views. For a sustainability transition, governance should put more attention on long-term altruistic behavior, moral motivations, circular processes, and fair distribution. More important, sustainability requires abandoning the isolated orthodox economic view, and taking up more insights, methods, and models of other scientific disciplines. Didactically speaking, economics in governance requires a broad approach that teaches an array of different views and considerations when dealing with financial-economic systems. These systems are not fixed nor isolated; they adapt to new endogenous and exogenous circumstances over time. Economic analyses that cannot account for such complex dynamics overlook the problems and prospects of transitions.



### **Ruba Mimi “Highlighting the suffering of the Palestinians until they get a glimpse of Peace”**

Ruba Mimi is a young journalist from Palestine. She started her media activities at the age of 15 when she began reporting for Youth Times and presenting for a Youth Channel on Palestinian TV. Her work has highlighted the need in Palestine for human rights, including that of children. More recently, Ruba has obtained a BA in Journalism and Political Science from Birzeit University and has started working as a news reporter for the Lebanese channel Future News. In addition to this, Ruba has experience in presenting a children’s TV show called "Katakeet", as well as writing her own blog.

One of her career highlights was when she produced and presented a documentary show on Jerusalem titled "Tallat Maqdisyeh". She endorsed this project at the early age of 18 and since then it has been hailed as one of the most creative ideas to have broken through the Israeli borders to allow both Arabs and Israelis enjoy Jerusalem with its vibrant culture and stories.

Besides working on TV, Ruba has lead a national advocacy campaign that has called for greater tolerance within Palestinian society. This campaign is part of her work as a member of the Palestinian Youth Association for Leadership and Rights Activation (PYALARA), for which she is now Advocacy Officer.

*"The world needs to know the true story about Palestine, the story of Palestinians who continuously live under oppression. As a journalist I see my role in highlighting my nation's suffering until they get a drop of human rights and a glimpse of peace".*





Ruba Mimi covering the memorial day of the Palestinian Catastrophe, Nakba, for Lebanese TV.

To see more photos and get to know the daily life of Palestinians, please visit her flickr account, here: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/rubamimi/>



## **Jan de Geus**

### **“Learning from the ideas of children and youth to change society and everyday business”**

Jan de Geus is a teacher, philosopher and an ambitious business environmentalist from the Netherlands. He is part of the pioneering project “Eerst de Klas”, a 2-year traineeship program for university graduates with excellent grades and motivation who want to explore both a teaching and a business career. The initiative was established four years ago with help of the Dutch Ministry of Education and several multinational companies, based on ‘Teach for America’ and ‘Teach First’ in the UK. The perks of the traineeship is that it qualifies successful participants with a teaching license and privileges them to undertake projects in large companies such as Shell, Siemens, ABN-AMRO, Tata Steel, Schiphol Airport, Philips. In their projects, trainees investigate and help create a sustainability agenda in both the company and the school where they work. The Dutch Ministry of Economic Affairs has asked the trainees to provide a review, in order to acquire an external view on sustainability in the Dutch corporate landscape. Without giving too much away about the findings of the research currently being done, there appears to be a gulf between different Dutch companies on how they define sustainability and their goals. Although there may be ambition, many of the companies hesitate in undertaking changes involving short-term costs and long-term benefits. Whether more courage, a different attitude or government intervention is needed remains unresolved until now.

Other area in which trainees are involved in is ethical banking, educating high school students about engineering sustainability and developing a sustainability plan for the capital, Amsterdam. The experience that trainees gain during their in-company projects can be used in teaching and vice versa, creating a unique synergy. We are able to give high school students an outlook of real-world problems and use the voice of the new generation in the companies we work at. I sincerely believe this combination is invaluable for creating an awareness of sustainability that the younger generation can take with them into their lives.





### **Ebrima S. Dem**

**“Striving for a world where all people embrace diversity and are living together peacefully”**

Ebrima S. Dem is a social justice activist, blogger and entrepreneur from the Gambia. He specializes in women’s rights, youth development and climate justice advocacy.

Ebrima is the national coordinator of a youth-led research and development organization called Global Unification the Gambia. He holds a Bachelor of Science degree in Agriculture and Biology from the University of the Gambia. After graduating in 2008, Ebrima worked a year as a teacher before he co-founded Global Unification the Gambia. Speaking 5 languages fluently - English, French, Spanish, Pulaar and Wollof – he is a widely travelled and outspoken youth leader. Ebrima’s work includes holding international presentations on climate change, human rights issue and writing articles on climate change education, adaptation and sustainable development. His vision is of a world where all people embrace diversity of religion and ethnicity to live together in peace, which is paramount for sustainable development.



**Maayke-Aimee Damen**

**“Combining sustainable entrepreneurship with a strive for human empowerment and passion”**

Ever since Maayke-Aimée Damen was a little girl she has been passionate about creating a just, caring and sustainable world for all. Over the years she worked for many NGOs, the Dutch government, The United Nations and multiple companies to pursue that vision. She has been very proactive and in all the positions and official functions she hold has been an advocate for peace. She combines entrepreneurship for sustainability with a strive for human empowerment and compassion. Currently she works amongst others as Director of Empowerment at Metabolic where she designs and implements holistic and replicable systems for agriculture, cities, and industry, and is a founder of Reciclata, a company addressing resources scarcity by changing the way recycling works.

She earned her Master’s (Cum Laude) in Sustainable Development at Utrecht University with the thesis ‘A Resources Passport for a Circular Economy’. Also, she is a graduate from Singularity University, where she entered by winning the Dutch innovation contest with the idea of a ‘Google for Materials’.





### **Alison Leonard**

**“Sharing experiences and ideas, discussing alternatives and connecting with others to make youth visible”**

Alison Leonard was born in Ireland and has lived, studied and worked in England, Germany and France over the past 15 years. Her Bachelors and Masters degrees focused upon International Affairs and specifically delved into the theme of identity politics in the Middle East. She has a keen interest in the topics of diversity, especially the representation of women in business where in her former position in Germany she was responsible for setting up the first European women’s affinity group.

This summer she was part of a small team that worked over the course of one year to put on the first EuroPie Festi-Forum in Toulouse, France. This international event was aimed at strengthening solidarity amongst different youth action groups in Europe. The basic idea of EuroPie was to provide a platform to empower young people from various organisations to share innovative ways in which young people can make a difference in society through their work in areas such as science and education, entrepreneurship, climate change, women’s rights and the expressive arts. Over 70 associations were represented from over 10 countries. For more information, please click, here: <http://europie.org/en/>

## Simran Vedvyas “The world needs promising youth leaders and inspiring youth leadership”



The world needs promising youth leaders and inspiring youth leadership aspiring for global healing and sustainable peace. It's prime time to tap into the passion, creativity, and ingenuity of all young people and find ways to transform communities to be responsible by allowing inspiring young people to serve. A sustainable and peaceful world with young people, their institutions', and their guardians promising to follow '*eco lifestyle*' supported by '*all possible means*' is crucially essential to sooner or later achieve the dream of a sustainable world. A young fresh perspective by talented young leaders can invigorate the greatest holistic and sustainable approach needed to help develop creative and pragmatic solutions to the many challenges.

Simran Vedvyas, age 15 from Dubai, United Arab Emirates, the youngest torch bearer, one of the only nine from the region having carried the esteemed Olympic Flame during the London 2012 Olympic Games has been an '*active environmentalist*', a '*social campaigner*' and a '*star student*'; since a very young age. Her Belief that '**Youth are the Future ChampionsToday!**' was featured by MTV voices on [International Youth Day 2013](#), at Times Square, NY, USA. She was the youngest panelist at the United Nations Headquarters to discuss Youth Migration the Development Forward, the theme of the International Youth day 2013. Simran is closely working with UNEP, UNESCO, UNDP, ILO and their youth programs.

Simran is the project manager of a variety of initiatives including the United Arab Emirates Chapter for Children of the Earth and International Youth Council, Earth Charter Coordinator Youth Network Hub-North Africa and Middle East & Country Activator UAE. She is also the Climate Leader and Ambassador UAE for Climate Reality. This year, Simran was elected a member at the Global Youth Board Plant-for-the-Planet 2013-2014 representing Arabia and North Africa Region, and was the only GEMs student to win 'four' prestigious academic awards of UAE – twice Sheikh Hamdan Award for Distinguished Academic Performance and twice Sharjah Educational Award for Academic Excellence in 2012 and 2008-2009, Best Ambassador Award by Tunza Eco Generation term 2013 and the First Prize At Global Youth for the Environment Forum 2012 Seoul, South Korea.



Simran is founder of [SynergY](#), which is the result of hard work and determination of this young leader as the Founder who has attended over 36 International Conferences, Global forums, events and made presentations worldwide too. I aspire to share my experience, and indulge youth to raise more awareness and participate systematically and effectively in promoting environmental work, sustainability- the future we want and causes that must be address sooner than ever before with creative and innovative ideas. Now, SynergY is providing many opportunities each year to youth and encouraging them to participate in the Earth Hour Events, Clean Up drives, Toners, plastic, Can Collection and tree planting initiatives for a safer Environment. Besides these special Eco activities and initiatives, Simran uses various other platforms like painting and photography, social networking, debates and blogs, by conducting workshops for students to raise environmental awareness. In doing so she is promoting many new campaigns and ideas which will benefit the future generations.



## **Thank You Note**

I would like to thank Rosie Waygood from Oxford in the United Kingdom for helping me with the English editing of this book and Kehkashan Basu from Dubai in the United Arab Emirates for designing the collage with pictures of international youth leaders around the word. For the creative graphic design I want to thank Adrian CioCoiu from the Netherlands who is a creative artist, designer, moviemaker and writer. Furthermore I would like to thank Nina Meyerhof (President of Children of the Earth), as well as Michelle Schenandou (which was Director of Children of the Earth) because they have given us the chance to present our philosophies, dreams and ambitions, as well as our concrete projects in striving for a just, peaceful and sustainable world.

Best wishes, Saskia Troy (Chapter Leader COE Netherlands)



# Youngsters 'synergise' to make Dubai greener

IT'S A non-government organisation formed by a group of schoolchildren who are environment enthusiasts in January 2013. The group, which now has over 300 members, conducts several environment-related events like tree planting, raising awareness about waste disposal, and visits to landfill sites. They are also diversifying into issues related to health and education. Trees planted till date: More than 1,000 Ghaf trees

**Tree plantation tomorrow:**  
Synergy will be planting 111 Ghaf trees at Al Barari Nursery on October 26, from 8.30am to 10.30am. Anyone can join.  
Contact Synergy online at <http://synergyyouth.weebly.com/>  
Facebook page - <https://www.facebook.com/CosmoFoundationYouth>  
Twitter handle - @SynergyYouth

their greatest supporters, especially when there were failures. "They told us failures are the first steps to success. Even today they carpool for us to get to events and meetings, keeping their own leisure time aside on holidays," Aishwarya adds.

### Better participation

While Synergy seems to be singing ahead towards a greener Dubai, Simran says that their biggest regret has been not being able to get local students involved in the same numbers as expatriates.

"While the Dubai municipality has been our biggest supporter, it is the local children whom we want to get involved in Synergy. It is their country first and they must work to increase the green cover and love the environment. Our members are mostly expatriates and we want this movement to be an all-inclusive sustainable movement," Simran says. —[mexcityvalentines.com](http://mexcityvalentines.com)

The energy and enthusiasm around these three 15-year-old high school goers, who are planning their Saturday Ghaf tree planting event at Al Barari Nursery,

The Skype chat among founder members Simran Vedyvas from American High School, Aishwarya Shetty from Sharjah's Our Own English High School and Anisha Mishra of Dubai's Millennium School is nothing short of a professional boardroom discussion.

The Ghaf, also known as the 'tree of the dunes', and a solution to desertification is facing extinction due to rapid urbanisation and SyngV, the team says, is trying to reverse this process.

"The time, place, sponsors are all set. The Ghat tree plants are in place, checked with Al Barari Nursery. Our members are informed. Parents will carpool," says Simran, the brain behind SynergY, as she runs through her checklist with the other two after

Anisha Mishra

school and tuitions on Wednesday. Simran, who is a UN millennium campaign global youth advocate, is also one of the nine from the Middle East region to carry the Olympic flame as a torch bearer in the 2012 London Olympic Games.

Aishwarya, the marketing in charge, nods and quickly logs off as she goes back to study for her examination. Anisha adds that they might have more members joining in as she has been speaking to several school students, friends of friends. They have three more events — another 250 trees to be planted, another one on climate change and a third related to how to make environmentally friendly food in November. “This is

Simran Vedyas

our 11th event related to increasing the tree cover in Dubai, which includes tree plantation. We have eight core team members who have different tasks ranging from getting members, looking for sponsors, making posters and creative. On Saturday we will be all set," Arisha adds.

### Small beginnings

Reminiscing how SynergY began, Aishwarya explains that it took off as a simple chat between her and Simran during an evening walk. "On one of our walks, Simran asked me if I would like to work with her on this project which seemed exciting. My personal belief is that we should dare to dream and I am glad

Aishwarya Shetty

we did it. Today, Synergy has grown into a 300-member organization which has the power to influence youngsters to protect the environment," she says.

Anisha adds that in the beginning, it was just their close friends, "a handful of us" who went for a tree-planting event. Slowly, the numbers doubled and the events diversified. "Further on, we went on to have waste management events, green walkathons, and visits to landfill sites teaching us how to treat municipal waste. The greatest achievement was to see the numbers doubling up at every event. We do not charge anyone or force anyone to be part of us," she added. Simran

remembers how the biggest challenge came when sponsors turned their backs on Synergy.

"When we prepared the concept note we thought people would jump to be a part of us. But it did not work that way. The first 10-11 sponsors we approached to partner with us slammed the doors. But then we worked around it and identified companies with CSR around environment issues, and it worked," Simran says. Now several sports companies, seed companies, nurseries, and even the Dubai Municipality, horticulture and education departments have partnered with Svynergy in their events. Svynergy

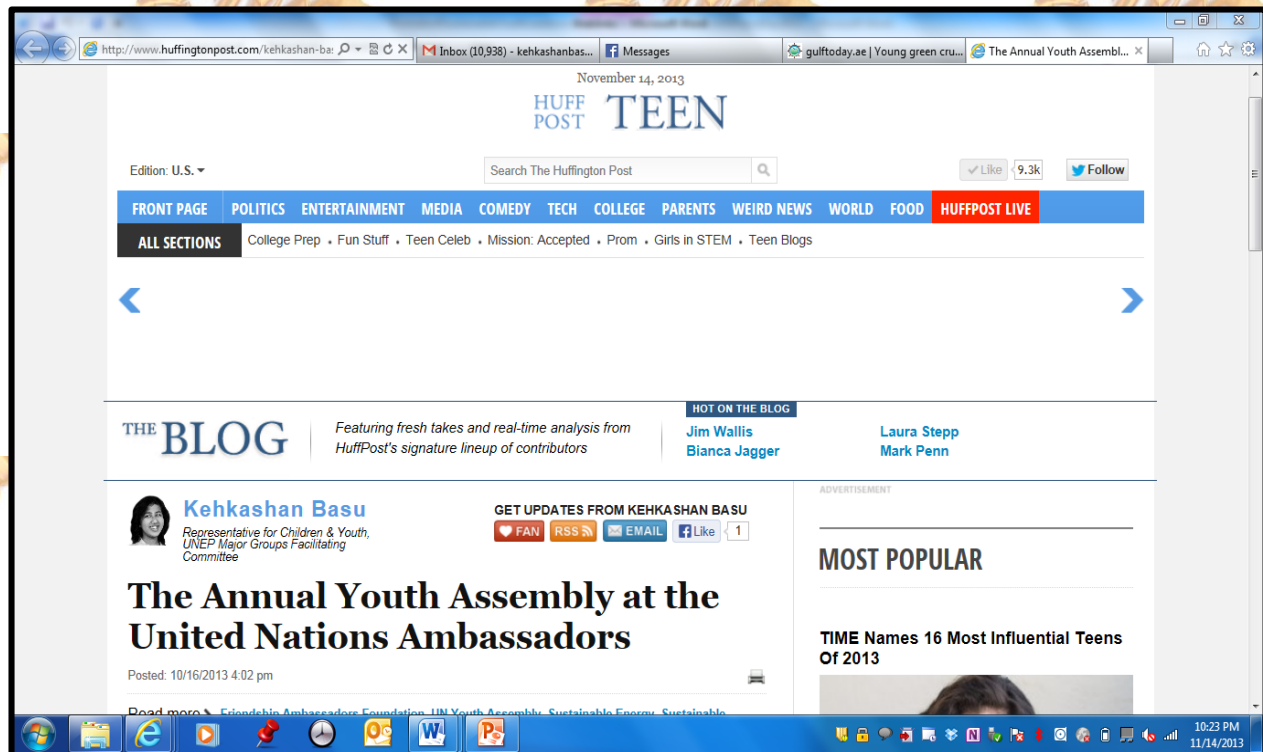
The Synergy group cannot help but thank social media enough for getting their members in place. Blogs, websites, Facebook and Twitter have remained their primary source of spreading a word on their events. Each member is encouraged to talk to students in their schools and communities to be part of Synergy. Their parents, the girls think, have been





Young environmenatists pledge to fight for climate justice by planting 206 saplings at academy organised by Kehkashan Basu . Reported in Gulf Today 1<sup>st</sup> November, 2013





The Huffington Post , USA's premier online portal features Kehkashan Basu's blog on the United Nations Youth Assembly . 16<sup>th</sup> October , 2013