

Innovating for a Better Future!

By Kanchan Kargwal.

Last month, more than 1000 young talents from across the globe gathered to work collectively on ideating and developing innovative solutions to achieve the United Nation Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It was the fourth edition of the [UNLEASH Global Innovation Lab 2022](#) organised in Mysore, India, and I had the privilege to be a part of this diverse group.

So, What is UNLEASH?

A brainchild of Professor Flemming Besenbacher, Professor of Nanophysics at Aarhus University, Denmark, UNLEASH is a global initiative that aims to bring together the next generation of youth from across the globe, providing a platform to share ideas, build networks, and create innovative and scalable solutions to progress towards the SDGs. It has been hosting the Global Innovation Labs annually, with the previous editions being in Denmark (2017), Singapore (2018), and China (2019).

UNLEASH India 2022 focussed on seven different SDGs and though all of them are interlinked, I chose to work under the “Climate Action” track, (SDG 13) as I work in the domain of climate risk and adaptation.

Around 200 teams were allotted different tracks to work out an innovative solution for achieving the SDGs. The systematic and detailed innovation process had five phases: problem framing, ideating, prototyping, testing, and finally implementing, with “gate checks” at every stage.

Batting for “Consume to Reduce”

After brainstorming on the solutions to address the different impacts of climate change, my team narrowed down our area of interest to climate-conscious food consumption.

Globally, about one-third of greenhouse emissions — the main culprit for climate change — comes from our food systems. With this in mind, we focussed on how a clear reporting of farm-to-fork emissions can be initiated through eco-labels on food products. These could be provided by food-producing companies. But we understood that demanding these companies to be transparent about their supply and production chains would be challenging, so unless there is a legal obligation towards this, it would be difficult to convince the companies to print eco-labels on their food items.

To deal with this issue, we took a community-centric bottom-up approach. Consumer preferences are being increasingly impacted by sustainability. A [research study on consumer products and retail by Capgemini](#) says that almost 79% of the European Union consumers want to make climate-conscious choices and prefer sustainable products.

Blending individual and collective ideas on conscious production, climate communication, and consumerism, we came up with a solution to enhance climate consciousness among consumers so that they “Consume to Reduce”. Our solution looked at popularising and promoting carbon-negative food diets — prepared using the seaweed found in the Netherlands (to begin with) — through brand collaborations, influencer promotions, and social media marketing via anthems, interactive games, and so on.

It would start with a website listing all the carbon-sequestering food products — which could be seaweeds initially, followed by mussels, oysters, etc. — along with interesting recipes for using them. This would be followed by chef and brand collaborations to help popularise and market those recipes.

We also suggested bringing climate activists, influencers, and other social media stars on board and work as ambassadors for “Consume to Reduce”. Further, through interactive games and anthems, we proposed to envision “Consume to Reduce” as a trend in itself.

We prepared some illustrations as well (using editing software) to demonstrate how influencer collaborations on social networking sites would help promote the idea and recipes under ‘Consume to Reduce’.

While our proposed solution was considered as one of the most innovative, we were not able to convince investors to invest in our idea. The most important feedback that we received was about the solution lacking scalability — it seemed to be a solution for the elite class and was unlikely to impact the vulnerable and at-loss communities in a significant way.

Our solution also lacked financial planning, as it had no business model and there wasn’t enough clarity on what we were marketing since we didn’t have a ready or tangible product/solution, which most of the other teams had.

Some Outstanding Solutions

Some solutions absolutely stood out and were among the winners. One of them focused on stubble burning and how the stubble could be used for cultivating mushrooms, while another talked about providing sustainable housing to slum dwellers. Similarly, there was a path-breaking business idea on monetising carbon credits achieved by local farmers. Further, a team focussing on SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-Being) wanted to create an efficient early-detection system for predicting seizures, while another wanted to work on promoting education through music.

More Than Winning

At the UNLEASH Innovation Lab, it was never about winning. The programme intended to equip us — the global youth — with design thinking, tools, and networks to build a community of action working towards a better tomorrow. And it sure did!

I was fortunate to attend the event and there were numerous moments of inspiration and impact throughout the lab for me. While networking and connection building was a part of the lab, having a global exposure helped me to understand how people from diverse backgrounds can come together as a team and work for a cause. Working in a team that had people from different nationalities and professions, and representing my team in front of the judges and investors for pitching our idea, improved my teamwork and communications skills and also equipped me to lead a group and make good presentations. The multiple ideation and brainstorming sessions helped me to work in consensus with all to prepare a problem-framing tree that led to a problem statement. Also, the “gate checks” that had to be crossed for every stage of the innovation process improved my time management skills.

Thus, to me, UNLEASH, was not a win-win but a more-than-win-win for all the young people working towards or passionate about sustainable development. It has made me a more dedicated climate researcher and has equipped me to work effectively with different people towards co-creating a sustainable future.

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