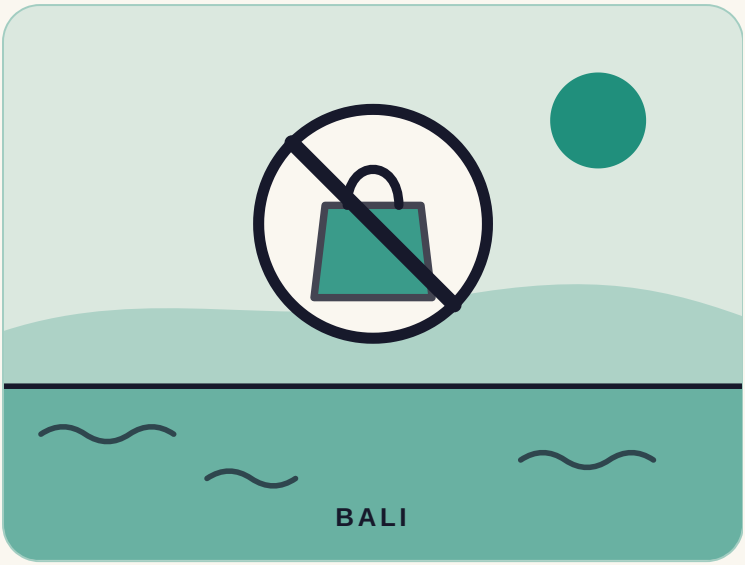

INDONESIA

The sisters who took on Bali's plastic bags

At 12 and 10, Melati and Isabel Wijsen began a petition to ban plastic bags on their island home, Bali.

WHERE	Bali
WHO	Melati and Isabel Wijsen, sisters who founded Bye Bye Plastic Bags
WHEN	2013 to today

4 min read

CHAPTER ONE

The story

Melati and Isabel Wijsen grew up on Bali, an island in Indonesia. Bali is famous for its beaches and rice fields. But it has a big plastic problem. Each year, when the winds turn, trash washes onto the beaches.

The sisters saw it everywhere. Melati says that when she swam, plastic bags could wrap around her arm. Farmers planted rice on top of plastic.

Two kids, one question

One day, their school taught them about leaders who changed the world, like Nelson Mandela and Martin Luther King. Melati was 12. Isabel was 10. They went home with a question. What can kids on an island do?

They searched online. They found that 40 countries had banned or taxed plastic bags. So they thought: if those countries can do it, Bali can too.

In 2013, they started a group called Bye Bye Plastic Bags. They had no business plan and no money. They began a petition. Over 6,000 people signed in the first day. Later it passed 100,000 names.

> **We didn't want to wait until we were older to stand up for what we believe in.**
>
> MELATI WIJSEN, QUOTED BY CNN

12 and 10	100,000	2019
the sisters' ages when they began	names on the petition	year Bali's ban took effect

A hunger strike with limits

Bali's governor would not meet them for over a year and a half. So the sisters planned a hunger strike. They had visited Gandhi's home in India. Because they were so young, they fasted only from sunrise to sunset, with a food expert watching.

It worked. Within 24 hours, police took them to the governor. He signed an agreement to work with them. The goal was a plastic-bag-free Bali by 2018. That date passed.

In December 2018, a new governor announced a ban on single-use plastic bags, straws and foam. It took effect in 2019.

But a law is not the same as obeying it. In 2021, Melati said plastic bags had "come back in full swing." The sisters now run Bye Bye Plastic Bags in dozens of places worldwide. Young people lead every group.

How it unfolded

- **2013** Melati, 12, and Isabel, 10, start Bye Bye Plastic Bags.
- **2018** Bali's governor announces a ban on single-use plastic.
- **2019** The ban takes effect.
- **2021** Melati says plastic bags are back and the ban is not enforced.

CHAPTER TWO

What makes it special

They began without a plan or a budget, at an age when most children are told to wait their turn.

Their hunger strike was changed to suit their age, with limits and care. They kept the pressure peaceful and safe.

OUR TAKE

They won a law, then learned that winning the law is only the first half of the job.

CHAPTER THREE

What we can learn

1

Start with a question

They asked what kids on an island could do.

Try this: Write down one problem near you. Ask: what can I do about it this week?

2 Copy what has worked

They found 40 countries had already acted, and said Bali could too.

Try this: Before you start, search for who has solved a similar problem.

3 Use peaceful pressure

When the governor ignored them, they used a careful, peaceful protest.

Try this: When you are ignored, find a safe, peaceful way to make your case seen.

4 Keep watching after the win

The law passed, but bags came back because it was not enforced.

Try this: After a decision, check back in a month to see whether it really happened.

ONE THOUGHT TO TAKE AWAY

A law on paper is a promise. Someone still has to keep it.

Sources

CNN
The teenagers getting plastic bags banned in Bali (2017)

NPR
Two young women on Bali are on a mission to change that, beginning with plastic bags (2019)

VICE World News
Bali's plastic bag ban and the Wijsen sisters (2021)

Fact-check note: The sources agree on the main story and differ on details. Ages: Melati was 12 and Isabel 10 when they began (NPR, VICE); CNN says "10 and 12". Founding year: 2013 is the year commonly given; CNN (2017) says they had campaigned "for four years". The hunger strike: CNN (2017) says it came after over a year and a half of being refused a meeting, that it was done only from sunrise to sunset with a food expert watching, and that within 24 hours police took the sisters to the governor, who signed an agreement for a plastic-bag-free Bali by January 2018; VICE (2021) dates the threatened strike to 2017; NPR says the sisters were collected from school the next day after a phone call. The story gives no date for the strike. NPR says the sisters' petition got over 6,000 signatures in less than a day; CNN says they later passed 100,000 with signatures collected at Bali's airport. The goal date: CNN says January 2018 and NPR says "plastic bag-free by 2018"; the story says 2018. The ban: NPR (broadcast in January 2019) says a new governor announced a ban "last month", which is December 2018; VICE says the order banning bags, straws and styrofoam "went into effect in 2019 after sustained pressure". The story says it was announced in December 2018 and took effect in 2019. Enforcement: VICE (2021) quotes Melati saying that plastic bags "have come back in full swing" and that the law "is not in effect", which is Melati's view, not an official count. Number of places: 28 (NPR, 2019) or 50 (VICE, 2021); the story says dozens. The quote is Melati's, in CNN. The 40-country figure is from NPR and VICE. The pin shows the island. Lines marked "Our take" are interpretation. Everything else comes from the sources above.