Shapers & Shakers

ON CLIMATE CHANGE

“Today we are faced with a challenge that calls for a shift in our thinking, so that humanity stops threatening its life-support system. We are called to assist the Earth to heal her wounds and in the process heal our own - indeed to embrace the whole of creation in all its diversity, beauty and wonder. Recognizing that sustainable development, democracy and peace are indivisible is an idea whose time has come.”

— Wangari Maathai, *Unbowed*

Foreword

From floods affecting millions across West and Central Africa, to record high temperatures across Kenya and the variability of seasons across the continent affecting farmers livelihoods, there is no denying that climate change is here with us.

Africa's development depends on ensuring that none of its citizens are left behind and that everyone's voice has the possibility of being heard. With the looming climate crisis too, I see the continent being called to show the world that even though we contributed very little to the crisis, we are the home of innovation and will be part of the solution to bring back humanity from the dangerous path we are going down.

Women have been front and center of the crisis, as the most affected, but also the ones driving innovation, resilience and solutions to the crisis that are inclusive and take into account the needs and realities of communities they live in.

This is why this year we are putting out this particular report that is a supplement to our annual 'Shifting the landscape: African women in Governance' report to highlight African women's achievements in climate change issues. This is important to us as the climate crisis represents the worst catastrophe of our generation, but we believe that Africans, including African women will be a critical part of the solution.

Their role as community workers and leaders shows the way forward, creating innovative long-term solutions to help the continent respond to current challenges. This report will shed light on their unique role and contributions in advancing climate justice and raising climate change awareness.

Context

Climate change has been defined as the worst catastrophe of our generation. Even what we are living through right now, is only a small fraction of the carnage that can be expected if the world is unable to keep to the Paris Agreement goals to limit global warming to well below 2, preferably to 1.5 degrees Celsius, compared to pre-industrial levels.

"Climate change is an African problem because we are affected. The fact that we are not responsible for it, doesn't mean it's not our problem," says Faten Aggad, a Senior Advisor on climate diplomacy and geopolitics at the African Climate Foundation (ACF).

This past year, we had what has been dubbed 'The African COP' in Sharm el Sheikh, Egypt. While there were high hopes for COP27, for many it is felt that some of the commitments and pledges are still too little, too late and do not take into account the urgency of the crisis. One thing that is becoming overwhelmingly clear is that even though Africa and other developing nations did not cause the climate crisis, they are bearing the worst brunt.

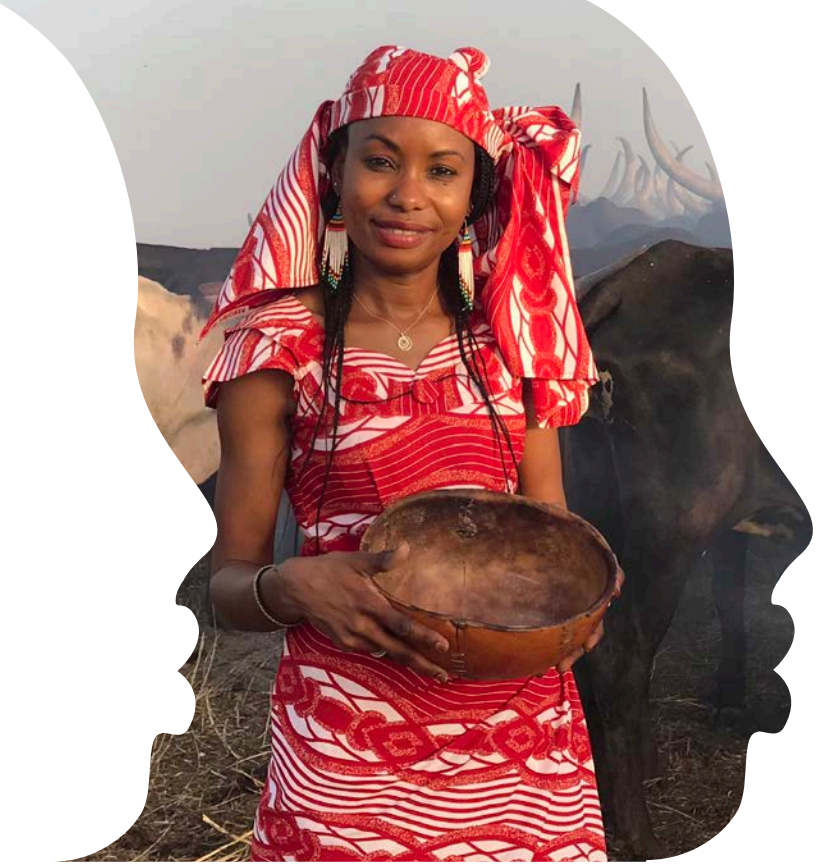
"Women are the holders of knowledge in terms of seeds, seed varieties and knowledge of which seeds are resilient or have the power to be and yet when you think of who's at the table when policies are being formulated about climate smart agriculture, or developing the latest science for agro-biodiversity, those women are not there," says Masego Madzwamuse, the Director for Environment at the Oak Foundation.

African voices, including the voices of Africa's women must be heard as decisions are made that will affect the future of the world as we know it. This means that solutions to the crisis must take into account the realities on the ground for Africans and other heavily affected people in the world, but also that Africans must have a seat at the decision making table.

This is the reason why in this year's report we look at the top Africans who are shaping discussion and shaking up their communities to respond to the climate crisis.

The Shapers

Other female African shapers of climate change include: Botswana's Bogolo Kenewendo UN Climate Change High-Level Champions' Special Advisor, Africa Director; South Africa's Dr. Ruwadzano Matsika, Research Analyst at Quadrature Climate Foundation; Kenya's Irene Kanani, Africa Director, Climate at Children's Investment Fund Foundation (CIFF); Kenya's Wanjira Mathai, Vice President and Regional Director for Africa at the World Resources Institute; and Kenya's Rose Mutiso, Research Director for the Energy for Growth Hub.



Hindou Oumarou Ibrahim

CHAD

"Man responds to climate change by running away from the problem...where there is drought and floods... "I'm going to the city to look for a job and come back to you." The women who are left behind with these problems, they face the problem. We have to face the problems every day of our lives. If there is no water, you have to find the water. No food. You have to find food because the children don't understand there is no food. You have to sacrifice yourself, feed everyone first, eat a little just for your survival."

Hindou Oumarou Ibrahim is an expert in the adaptation and mitigation of indigenous peoples to climate change. She is a member of the Mbororo pastoralist people in Chad and President of the Association for Indigenous Women and Peoples of Chad (AFPAT). She is an advocate for the greater inclusion of indigenous people and their knowledge and traditions in the global movement to fight the effects of climate change. She serves as a Member of the United Nations Permanent Forum for Indigenous Issues; Member of the Indigenous Peoples of Africa Coordinating Committee (IPACC); Member of the Advisory Committee to the Secretary-General's 2019 Climate Action Summit; and Conservation International Senior Indigenous Fellow.[1]

On her story

"I have been lucky to have a very strong mum. In my community, they don't send children to school. She fought all the men in the family including my dad to send us to school. She broke rules saying we can have western education and during the holidays we get cultural knowledge. This is why I know how to milk and how to take care of animals. I went to school with other children in the city and it made me realize how marginalized my people are. I knew I had to stand up and fight for the

rights of girls who don't go to school. I realized though that I can't talk about girls' issues without talking about community issues in general.

This is how from the age of 8, I started speaking about indigenous peoples' rights that are human rights. It's so intertwined with environmental rights as I needed to speak about how we get our food and how climate change was affecting us. I created my organization at the age of 14 and got documentation at the age of 16 to begin my national and international work."

On her motivation and what drives her

"Injustice everywhere pushes me in my work, but especially for indigenous people whose rights are very easy to violate. There is no electricity, no clean drinking water, no health facilities, no schools where I grew up, but people are still looking for solutions daily. They are innovators, they are creative, they are problem solvers. I knew I could not let things remain the same. I have to fight for them. Going back home and seeing all the women in my community who don't know how to read, how to write, but know how to protect the environment and are standing up for the food security of their families. That's what drives me to push at national and international levels for policies to change that will help those back home."

On what they wish people understood better about climate change

"We do not have time. It is an emergency. We are already living in a catastrophe. Climate change is driving poverty every single day. We have to act right now.

We cannot keep working on fixing what is coming. We have to work on preventing it further. This is a human rights issue. An issue of the loss of dignity. We should have addressed it yesterday."

On the importance of women in the fight against climate change

"Man responds to climate change by running away from the problem...where there is drought and floods..'I'm going to the city to look for a job and come back to you.'The women who are left behind with these problems, they face the problem. We have to face the problems every day of our lives. If there is no water, you have to find the water. No food. You have to find food because the children don't understand there is no food. You have to sacrifice yourself, feed everyone first, eat a little just for your survival. The women are the thinkers and problem-solvers working collectively. They are thinking about how families and communities can survive. Female leadership in climate change is very holistic while male solutions are siloed. Women will go slower, but build sustainable solutions for all communities while men might go faster, but come up with solutions that leave many out."

On stories that shaped her

"In my country, there is a phrase that shows you how society views women. In my language it is 'Debbo Meré' and in Arabic it is 'Mara Sakit.' It means 'Just a woman.' It is something you constantly hear growing up, 'She is just a woman.'

It's a national anecdote that tells you that even if you achieve everything, you are just a woman. It gets into people's minds and a lot of women feel that even if they wanted to do something, they cannot as they are just women. 'I am just a woman..I can't go further than my brother." There is also another phrase that translates to "You can do nothing...just like a grandmother!"

At the same time though, you can't deny the important role that grandmothers play in my society. Whenever problems arise, families turn to the grandmothers. They are the home of memory. We need to respect and learn from grandmothers. The gathering of memories it's done by women. You have to start from the women. Whatever they do to break women down, we are taking it back. It is our real power."

On her legacy

"I want to be remembered as an indigenous woman who never gives up in the fight for justice for all species, not just humans, but insects, birds, plants, the water, the soil. They all matter."

Masego Madzwamuse

BOTSWANA

Masego Madzwamuse is the Director for Environment at the Oak Foundation in Geneva. She was previously the CEO of the Southern Africa Trust which has the mandate to strengthen the agency of the poor in regional policy processes. Over the course of her career, she has worked on the rights of communities in conservation and has supported social movements advocating for social and economic justice. Masego has extensive experience across a wide range of areas including community based natural resources management, community adaptation to climate change, land tenure issues, gender, and social policy. Her previous posts have included working for the Open Society Initiative of Southern Africa, UNDP and the IUCN.

On her story

"I've either been working in or studying climate for the past 20 years. My first understanding of climate vulnerability was when growing up in the 1980s. I'm part of a generation that lived through a ten-year drought in Botswana. I'm half Zimbabwean and grew up visiting both countries. I was curious about why my grandmother in Kalahari was not involved in crop farming. In Zimbabwe, I saw crop cultivation and livestock production. In my young mind I concluded that 'My mother's people are not crop farmers.'

Much later, I was studying environmental sciences and part of the curriculum was 'global warming and environmental change', as it was called at that time. This is when I realized that my maternal family wasn't cultivating crops simply because there was no rain; they were living in an arid area that was most affected by the drought.

Present moment, and decades later, rains came back, but crop farming didn't return in the same way. Two years ago, my mother took me to the land that our family in Botswana uses for crop cultivation. It's a large piece of land and even now with all the improved technology, only a quarter of the land is being used for crop cultivation. You can see how climate variability not only affects people's livelihoods and practices in the short term, but much longer term.

"Women are the holders of knowledge in terms of seeds, seed varieties and knowledge of which seeds are resilient or have the power to be and yet when you think of who's at the table when policies are being formulated about climate smart agriculture, or developing the latest science for agro biodiversity, those women are not there."

If you think now of the incidences of climate variability and the speed and scale at which we are experiencing it, you ask yourself 'Do we have what it takes in terms of social capital, social memory, and livelihood practices, to build back?' Crop cultivation faded in the memories of people, but this loss of memory also shows up in policy. Until recently, Botswana's agricultural policy was dominated by livestock production. Perhaps if there was more of a focus on diversified livelihoods and how rural communities pursued a combination of livestock and arable farming and use of natural resources to spread risk more people would have what they need to prosper."

On what she wishes people understood better about climate change

"Agricultural policies in the past 30 years have focused on mono-cropping, industrialization, and fertilizer use but crisis after crisis exposes the fallibility of these models. The recent Ukraine crisis was a reminder. This was the same with COVID. During COVID, smallholder farmers still had produce, but the main barrier they were facing was how to get it to the markets. Once markets opened, certification of who could move produce across borders favored commercial farmers.

There are organizations such as the African Food Sovereignty Alliance and other cooperative farmer networks that are doing good work. What is encouraging is how they have been able to mobilize even from the margins and are now breaking through into policy discussions centering agroecology and regenerative agriculture in climate responses.

We should also see the opportunity. This is not just a vulnerability discourse. In the transition to a clean energy future, the inputs and minerals that will be needed are located in areas that are underdeveloped. We should think of how to create economic opportunities there."

On the importance of women in the fight against climate change

"Among many other important things, women are the holders of knowledge in terms of seeds, seed varieties and knowledge of which seeds are resilient or have the power to be; yet, when you think of who's at the table when policies are being formulated about climate smart agriculture, or developing the latest science for agro-biodiversity, those women are not there.

A group that has been a source of inspiration and learning for me is the Rural Women's Assembly. They have knowledge from the past, but also imagine what the future will look like in their work. They are a group of rural women mobilizing women to influence agricultural policies around land, seeds etc. They also amplify the voices of women who are overlooked. They are organizing on a daily basis, exchanging seeds, hosting teach-ins on climate change and seed propagation, and raising awareness on gender based violence and other issues the women in rural areas care about."

On her legacy

"Most responses to climate change are dominated by technical and technological responses, some of which have led to significant wins and mobilised the climate community around important shifts such as electrification of transport, advancements in the development of batteries for electric vehicles, expansion in renewable energy and so forth. But, in that transition story, many have been left behind and these are communities and geographies that hold an important space in global climate action. They are custodians of lands that host important transition minerals and holders of Indigenous knowledge. They have the potential to build resilience in our food systems. We have a lot to learn from indigenous knowledge systems of communities that have had to live inherently with climate variability for a very long time. What can we learn from them about robust policies that actually remind us about the intersection of people and nature and its inherent limits?"

Wangari Maathai's autobiography, Unbowed, demonstrated the power of personal stories. It gave me language to articulate the ideas that I had for a long time—interconnectedness between human rights and environmental sustainability, between environmental sustainability and the rights of women as custodians of nature and the main producers of food. 70% of food production in Africa is by smallholder farmers, the majority of whom are women. It is this Indigenous knowledge that I want us to acknowledge."

Faten Aggad

ALGERIA

Faten Aggad is a Senior Advisor on climate diplomacy and geopolitics at the African Climate Foundation (ACF), leading engagements with the EU/European countries and China. She is also the lead for diplomatic relations with African countries and partnership building with African institutions. She is also an observer on the coordination group of the Africa-Europe Foundation on behalf of the ACF as co-founding foundation. She was a former advisor at the African Union.

"It's an African problem because we are affected. The fact that we are not responsible for it, doesn't mean it's not our problem. We need to take action. We need to engage with climate change as it has become a multidimensional discussion that goes beyond the environment."

On her story

"Like many of us, my parents taught me the basics when growing up: don't throw trash, take care of the environment etc. But when I got a deeper understanding of the climate crisis, was when I was working as an advisor representing African countries on international negotiations for the African Union. I saw that climate change is likely to become the major issue that will shape our future as a continent. Environmentally, it's clear that the impact on Africa is disproportionate. What my role made me realize is that while Africa is disproportionately affected, it risks to even be more affected by the climate change policies being put into place. I felt quite strongly that for Africa, climate change isn't just an environmental issue, it's a justice issue too. It's about our development, our trade relations, energy access for our people. It's a multidimensional issue. I realized it's important to use my experience to dive into the climate change debate and what it means for Africa, the opportunities, and how to mitigate the risks with the energy transition."

On her motivation and what drives her

"The impact on climate change on daily lives of Africans is tremendous. I'm driven by making sure we put in place policies that cater for the equity aspect of the energy transition. Equity both domestically, but also internationally, between Africa and industrialized countries. Making sure

I add a voice into the discussion on justice and that our countries are putting into place the right policies. The decisions we take now around those issues will really shape the lives of generations to come. We are really at a pivotal moment in terms of policy. We have a immense opportunity to restructure our development approach and if we do it right, it can bring a lot of benefits. If not, the risk for future generations is overwhelming. They might be caught up in a vicious cycle."

On what she wishes people understood better about climate change

"I see two main challenges. The first is that in the African context, the reality is that the debate is about tradeoffs. It's not just about the environment, but also about development. What we do in climate change will determine the ability of a farmer to survive but also determine the future of our coastal cities. It will also determine whether our countries can move to a different economic model that looks beyond extraction. There will be big tradeoffs between short term and long term gains.

The second challenge is when it comes to action. The tendency to see climate change as an environmental issue which makes some believe it's not an African problem. It's an African problem because we are affected. The fact that we are not responsible for it, doesn't mean it's not our problem. We need to take action. We need to engage with climate change as it has become a multidimensional discussion that goes beyond the environment. It's about trade relations, whether or not we give subsidies to farmers for fertilizers, what types of fertilizers."

On the importance of women in the fight against climate change

"Women come up with more holistic solutions that take society into account. Given women are being burdened the most by climate change, inclusivity in finding solutions is needed."

On stories that shaped her

"I am inspired by the stories of many women who fought in the Algerian liberation war. Unfortunately once we attained independence, the stories of such women were quickly erased, something that is symptomatic of life on the continent. These women include Djamila Bouhired and Lalla Fatma N'Soumer who was an anti-colonial leader.

On her legacy

"At least contributing a voice that challenges prescriptive approaches to the way Africa tackles climate change and climate justice. There's a lot of lecturing of Africans on how Africans need to approach climate change. A lot of 'Do not do…' statements targeted at Africans, but very little discussion on solutions. I see my role as challenging that prescriptive narrative. I want to be part of those who work on finding solutions that work to the realities of Africa and our context."

> The root cause of conflict is not simply poverty but poverty brought on by exclusion. Exclusion in its broadest context: exclusion from resources, from power, from education and information, from the opportunity to better one's life."
>
> — Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, This child will be great

Eugenia Kargbo

SIERRA LEONE

Eugenia Kargbo is Africa's first chief heat officer. She is from Sierra Leone and has been commissioned with the task of shielding her city, Freetown, from the dangerous effects of climate change. Previously she worked in the Mayor's Delivery Unit Freetown City Council, as lead for the Sanitation sector.

On her story

"I was appointed as Freetown's Chief Heat Officer in October 2021, making me the first Chief Heat Officer in Africa. My role is to work with city leaders and the community to develop a heat action plan for the city and implement it working with communities, raising awareness about extreme heat and climate in general. Before that I was working at the mayor's delivery unit for the past four years. I was working and providing support on environmental management and sanitation at the Freetown city council.

As the sanitation lead, initiatives were closely tied to environmental management. One of the biggest challenges in sanitation was a lot of illegal dumping by communities along the hillsides and the coastal sides of the city who live in areas that can't be accessed by vehicles. As such, they were unserved by garbage collection, resulting in people dumping their waste into gutters and on the streets. We realized these actions exacerbated floods as waterways are blocked with wastage. One task I was given by the mayor was to close all illegal dumping sites by the end of 2022.

It was very complex as when we were clearing, people were dumping more. That's where the brown to green space concept came from. We started clearing sites, working with the communities and environmental management teams to ensure that those sites aren't abandoned after clearing. We planted trees and flowers and transformed these illegal dumpsites into green sites that communities can use, also planting community gardens. Across the city we now have six community gardens that are green spaces for Freetown and its residents. People are using them to cool off from the sun and relax. This is what brought me into environmental space, just seeing that you can make these changes happen and you can create something beautiful out of a messy situation."

On her motivation and what drives her

"Nature has always been my happy place. Growing up as a child in Freetown, I loved the

"In 2017, more than 1000 people lost their lives in a single day from landslides due to extreme weather events. Now more than ever we are witnessing extreme heat and rising temperatures. If we don't do something about it, the end will be disastrous. I know I am in this space to make history."

water, I loved the beach, I loved trees. During my childhood, I found myself in my backyard sitting around trees and enjoying nature.

Freetown used to be very beautiful with lush vegetation cover, lots of trees and flowers, grass, great scenery, amazing beaches. Over the past 20 years, we have seen that beauty fade away. I think of the joy nature gave me and I think of how if we do nothing about it, these are opportunities that my children and others will not get to see.

Witnessing the disaster all around because of the things we do, the massive deforestation. We are almost getting rid of our wetlands, massively deforesting the coastal lines. We have witnessed floods, seen landslides. In 2017, more than 1000 people lost their lives in a single day from landslides due to extreme weather events. Now more than ever we are witnessing extreme heat and rising temperatures. If we don't do something about it, the end will be disastrous. I know I am in this space to make history."

On what she wishes people understood better about climate change

"People think about it as something that will happen in the future, but we are living in it at the moment. We are seeing the impact on communities, livelihoods and food security. Majority of people in rural areas of Freetown rely on subsistence farming. We have seen an expansion of food insecurity due to rural to urban migration. What can we do to show vulnerable communities what it is? At the global level, there is a larger understanding about it. At the community level, the knowledge is very low. Yes, people feel the impact. People experience it in terms of rising temperatures, but understanding of the what and how is very low. We need to work together with the communities themselves."

On the importance of women in the fight against climate change

"Women are disproportionately affected by climate change. 85% of climate migrants are women. When disaster strikes, women are left with the heaviest burden. As caregivers, they are responsible to look after the sick, provide food, and get water. Climate change leads to drought and scarcity of water, a change in weather patterns leading to reduced rainfall. Women in the community I live in have to wake up every single morning to search for water. Our voices must be heard. If we are most impacted by the issue, we need to be part of the solution. We have seen a lot of women championing climate issues around the world, changing narratives. I work with women, but I am also advised by women. We have seven community health officers in different cities, working tirelessly to ensure that their communities and environments are safe. They are all women. I rely on their knowledge to deliver."

On the stories that shaped her

"Wangari Maathai inspires me for driving and changing the narrative around climate change, being the first black African woman to receive the Nobel Peace Prize, plus her work with the Green Belt Movement planting millions of trees. Her work is an inspiration to me. Not just her work on the environment, but I am also inspired by her work in allowing women to be heard.

My other role model is the Mayor of Freetown, Mayor Aki-Sawyerr. Seeing her commitment and continued support around the climate agenda, and the work that she's doing to transform Freetown is amazing. She is my icon. I see her go through all the challenges every single day and she never gives up. She has so much energy and makes such great sacrifices for vulnerable communities, lifting up Freetown to the international world is amazing. This is who I really want to be.

Three years ago, if someone asked you where you were from and you said Freetown, all they knew about was war, Ebola, but now when you travel and you say Freetown, they will tell you about the work we are doing, the 1 million trees, 'Freetown the tree town.' The role we are playing in the global scene, not just in Sierra Leone or Africa, in driving the climate change agenda. This is what you want your country, your city to be remembered for."

On her legacy

"I want to be remembered for channeling my words into action. I want to be remembered as one of the strongest female voices in this space, the work I do in this space and helping vulnerable communities change the narrative of climate change in Freetown."

“10 years ago, we worked with smallholder farmers in Mozambique and none of them used the word climate change, but all of them knew things were different... in terms of weather patterns, sowing their seeds, being able to swap and transfer seeds. They knew they had to do things differently. There were many things that we should emulate.”

Louise Olivier

SOUTH AFRICA

Louise Olivier is a program manager at the IKEA Foundation. Previously, she was an Associate Director at the Open Society Foundations where her global portfolio was climate justice.

On her story

“My background is that I am an international lawyer that works on crimes against humanity and war crimes. It was only in 2013 that I got into climate justice work. I began to see that climate crimes are grave crimes and that the destruction of the planet, the destruction of humans and people and everything that lives on the planet is indeed a great crime. Climate change is the biggest crisis that we are facing. What made me pursue climate justice work was realizing

we need to do so much more. I knew that with my background in philanthropy and justice, I can make a contribution to positive change."

On her motivation and what drives her

"I am motivated knowing I work at a foundation [IKEA foundation] with a decent budget and lots of drive to tackle climate change and brother and sister foundations globally that are passionate. I'm inspired by the person who wakes up every morning, tries to make their living the best way they can, knowing that things are increasingly difficult. This is the ordinary person whose current and future lives are affected by climate change, but with their limited means and circumstances, they are doing the best for their families and children."

On what she wishes people understood better about climate change

"What they choose to do, does make a difference. A lot of people feel it's too big, too terrifying for them to feel they can do anything. Yes, unless we deal with oil and gas companies, we will never reach the 1.5 degrees of the Paris agreement, but every one of our actions makes a difference. Africa's footprint is minimal, but we are the ones feeling the implications most severely. Proactively, there are things we can do.

10 years ago, we worked with smallholder farmers in Mozambique and none of them used the word climate change, but all of them knew things were different..in terms of weather patterns, sowing their seeds, being able to swap and transfer seeds, They knew they had to do things differently. There were many things that we should emulate.

There is more solidarity in Africa, than there is in Europe. In Africa, there is an understanding of what community and collective action means. We are very well placed to take these steps to minimizing climate change as much as possible. Africa's resilience to adapt is more impressive than anywhere else in the world."

On the importance of women in the fight against climate change

"If you look at the top Africans heading climate philanthropy right now, they are almost all women. It's women women women...they are at the forefront. They show leadership. Their intellectual capacity is amazing, but they also have the power to deliver. It's overwhelmingly women who are the most creative innovative thinkers that I've been fortunate to work with. I come from privilege as a white South African woman and I am humbled when I am in these spaces. People like me need to even be more humble in these spaces and listen.

When a woman finds her voice and her power, that's it! There's no stopping her. We stand together very well. In a way that's not confrontational. It's constructive. When men stand together, it can sometimes be quite confrontational, and aggressive, but women are more about how do we move forward in a way that finds solutions."

On the stories that shaped her

"My grandmother was the single parent of one child. There was no man, no husband. She loved the Kruger park and instilled the love of it in us three grandchildren. We would take the bus and she would teach us about the dung beetles, the trees, the bush babies and the small things that made nature. She made up beautiful stories about everything in the park. It instilled a love in me of nature. She was so feisty too. We grew up Catholic and the priests would sometimes be rude to her because she had no husband. She would tell them 'Don't judge me! You know nothing about me.' I have huge respect for her. She taught me about nature, but also taught me to be a strong woman. She lived until 93, and she never did things like grannies do like knit, sew, bake and cook, but she instilled in all of us a sense of curiosity. She was so generous with her unconditional love."

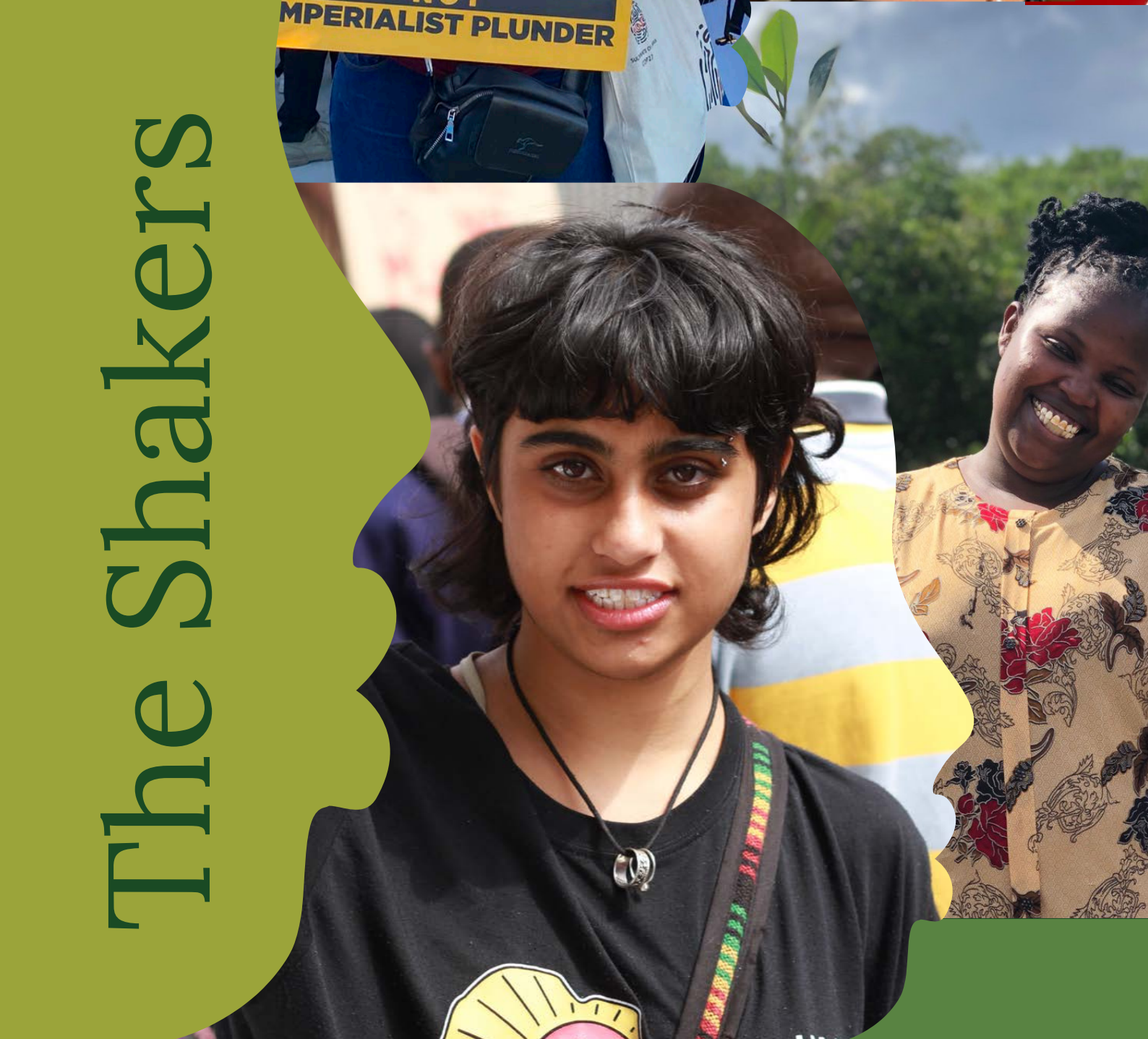
On her legacy

"That I worked with people in a way that I respected their humanity, rather than me coming in as a donor as 'I am the one with the right solutions.'"

The Shakers

RIGHTS-BASED
CLIMATE
ACTION
NOT
MPERIALIST PLUNDER

A BIGGER
PICTURE
VANESSA
NAKATE



Other female shakers of climate change include: Evelyn Acham, a climate justice activist from Uganda and national Ugandan coordinator of the Rise Up Movement, which was founded by her friend and fellow organizer Vanessa Nakate; Patience Nabukalu, a Ugandan activist affiliated with the Fridays for Future movement and a representative of the Most Affected People and Areas (MAPA), where the impacts of global heating are felt most intensely; and Fatna Ikrame El Fanne an Environmental Engineer & Climate activist from Morocco[2] who is the co-founder of Youth For Climate Morocco.

Adenike Oladosu Titilope

NIGERIA

Adenike Oladosu Titilope is a Nigerian eco-feminist, climate justice activist and eco-reporter. She is the founder of I Lead Climate: a youth-led movement raising awareness about climate change induced problems in conflict zones and African societies.

"Climate change is not a religious issue, a political issue, or a tribal issue. It's an environmental issue. In Nigeria, due to the clashes between herdsmen and farmers, it's being viewed as a religious, political, tribal issue. Climate change could lead to climate war in Nigeria."

On her story

"I left Abuja to go school in Benue state which was considered the food basket in Nigeria. It was when I was there that I saw the impact of climate change in a food crisis. There were constant clashes between farmers and herdsmen as they had the same needs. They all depend on water. The herdsmen were moving with their cattle from dry parts of Northeastern Nigeria and coming to this lush green area resulting in battles for natural resources that were leading to bloodshed, violence and displacement. Climate change is a huge national security crisis in Nigeria and if ignored will only get worse as increased temperatures affect crop production and result in more drought. At the same time, this climate variability is causing deadly floods in other parts of the country. You can't solve a problem if you don't know it exists. I started using my personal money to start raising awareness on the issue and advocating for climate justice for all. I started at different schools and universities, getting young people aware and involved in the issue. I also joined the Climate Change for Future movement and I was the first person in Africa to join the Fridays for Future movement. This was in 2018 when the environmental crisis started to be seen as a real issue by Nigerians. That year was a defining moment."

On her motivation and what drives her

"I want to create a world where women and girls have a safe place to exercise their rights and have the resources to become self-employed. For us not to see a girl child drop out of school due to climate related factors. That every woman's right matters in a society. Getting towards that point is my goal."

On what she wishes people understood better about climate change

"Climate change is not a religious issue, a political issue, or a tribal issue. It's an environmental issue. In Nigeria, due to the clashes between herdsmen and farmers, it's being viewed as a religious, political, or tribal issue. Climate change could lead to climate war in Nigeria. Climate change is leading to the failure of our democracies. Just look at the countries with recent coups. Many of them are in the Sahel region because 80% of the farmlands in some areas are degraded. It leaves people jobless, rural to urban migration is on the extreme rise leading to economic pressures. War becomes imminent."

On the importance of women in the fight against climate change

"Men don't see climate change in the lens of females as they don't do what women do. They don't see how the crisis affects women.. housekeeping... trekking long distances to get cooking material. Climate change is limiting women's ability to contribute their indigenous knowledge as now they are focusing on everyday survival. It takes women 200 million hours every day[3] to source drinking water. Think of those time constraints. If women could channel it towards bringing indigenous knowledge to environmental conservation and protection, economic empowerment, self-empowerment, you can imagine how it would improve our society, nations and the world.

It's difficult for any society that doesn't put women at the forefront to have development. Girls have to drop out of school to hawk or look for resources alongside their mother. Where there are floods or drought, the girl child is used as a survival strategy being married off young for bride price.

Women have limited access to their own land. It's very difficult for women to own land on their own due to traditional factors. Women contribute 50-80% of food production despite the fact that they have limited access to own the land they till."

On the stories that shaped her

"Wangari Maathai has shown to the world that if we have women in power, women driving changes, women restoring the environment through green belt movement, the world can be a better place. She has shown the world the way women are capable politically and environmentally, despite being seen by men as inferior. Look at all she did despite all the barriers against her. Women are capable. This is why men are afraid. If women are given a chance they can do greater things than men can do when they have been in power for decades and centuries."

Raessah Noor Mohamed

SOUTH AFRICA

Raessah Noor Mohamed is a South African climate and intersectional activist.[4]

"It's now...All those bad things people say will happen in the future.. it's happening now. Until it happens to us, it is something that happens to 'other people.' We are not yet even at 1.5 degrees. We are still at 2.4 degrees. [Even if countries reduce their carbon emissions to the targets they pledged in the Paris Agreement, temperatures will increase to 2.4 degrees Celsius by 2100.] Just in August, 33 million people lost their homes in Pakistan to floods. Think of that magnitude. Things will be devastating if we don't act now."

On her story

"I am an intersectional activist who believes that everything is connected. We shouldn't view anything in isolation. If we are looking at solutions, we have to ensure no one is left behind. In 2019 I really started making the connection between climate injustice and colonialism in my history classes. Then in geography, I was learning about fossil fuels and again this tied to climate change. I had the realization that all this is about colonialism, the industrial revolution and all these changes are happening at the expense of poor countries. Science is not my strong area, but I love art. I decided to raise awareness about climate change using art. In August 2019, I started public performance pieces about climate change.

Then in 2020, the fires started in Australia and climate change was being covered a lot in South African news. In school I had also learnt that South Africa is prone to forest fires. I started to wonder, 'If a country like Australia is doing so badly, what will happen when this comes to South Africa?' We won't cope and again it will be the most marginalized people who will suffer the most. I sent an email to the Department of Environmental Affairs saying that if a climate emergency isn't declared, I will boycott school on Fridays [Fridays for Future]. Then I sent an email to the media as well. Until COVID started I was at the school gates every Friday. It got attention and eventually I was able to meet with the Environment Minister.

With COVID, I moved a lot of my activism online. I joined university recently, moving from Johannesburg to Cape Town and now I am working with the African Climate Alliance and other activists remotely. I was at COP26 and I also went for a climate camp in Tunisia in 2022. I am using my art to work with organizations that want to engage the public on climate change issues through art."

On her motivation and what drives her

"Anger used to drive me, especially as I was learning all these things and feeling angry at governments, institutions and fossil fuel companies. I believe young people fuel movements. As you get older and see how unfair the world is, you can get despondent and jaded. But we have to keep fighting for the most marginalized. They are the ones who suffer the most whether it's from colonialism, apartheid or the climate crisis.

As you learn more it gets harder to hold on to that hope that the world can be changed. After going for COP26, I was sad to hear how little they care. Most of the people are there to see how they can maximize fossil fuel usage without breaking rules.

The shift to renewables is based on the assumption that everyone has access. If we shift to a sustainable world, we can't just jump there and continue the unequal life. The world we are living in was never built for us. It doesn't include us. When I see how plans don't involve poor people, already marginalized people, or if they haven't been clear that renewables won't be exploitative, I will speak up. Something can still be sustainable and exploitative. If no one else is saying it, I will say it.

Reports might show that every year, 'This many less people are suffering than last year.' But every single person who is suffering is still a person. That is still a life."

On what she wishes people understood better about climate change

"It's now… All those bad things people say will happen in the future..it's happening now.

Until it happens to us, it is something that happens to 'other people.' We are not yet even at 1.5 degrees. We are still at 2.4 degrees. [Even if countries reduce their carbon emissions to the targets they pledged in the Paris Agreement, temperatures will increase to 2.4 degrees Celsius by 2100.] Just in August, 33 million people lost their homes in Pakistan to floods. Think of that magnitude. Things will be devastating if we don't act now."

On her legacy

"I want to be remembered for unapologetically being myself. For standing my ground and not compromising my integrity or in any way benefitting from harmful organizations."

Winnie Cheche

KENYA

Winnie Cheche is a conservationist, environmental blogger, climate activist, volunteer and communication lead at Kenya Environmental Action Network.

On her story

"I am an eco-blogger and climate activist. I have a degree in Wildlife Management, but realized that finding a job in that field straight out of school was difficult. I ended up working at an IT firm and this is when I started blogging as I am very passionate about wildlife conservation and the environment. I felt that most of the stories on wildlife destroying crops, ignored the aspects of human encroachment in wildlife areas. Climate change doesn't only affect people and livestock, it also affects wildlife. At least with the recent 2022 drought, the government got food for wildlife too. They need to be fought for as unlike humans who can move from area to area, they can't move. They are stuck in the conservation areas. For us to fight for climate action, we have to include everyone and that includes wildlife."

“How do we get people into climate action if they don’t understand it? That’s why I focus on simple videos and blogs. ‘What’s your contribution to climate change? What was said at COP?’ My motivation is to create awareness. It’s here, but there is hope if we are informed.”

On her motivation and what drives her

“When climate change became a wave, we assumed that everyone understood it. For most people though it’s a complicated topic. How do we get people into climate action if they don’t understand it? That’s why I focus on simple videos and blogs. ‘What’s your contribution to climate change? What was said at COP?’ My motivation is to create awareness. It’s here, but there is hope if we are informed.”

On what she wishes people understood better about climate change

“We are good in pushing for climate finance, but haven’t understood that the solutions are at home. Why are we not tapping into indigenous knowledge? We are assuming solutions come from the North. At COP27, they were pushing for loss and damage, but did they include the people who have been directly affected by climate change? The person in Kajiado who lost all their cattle. Our leaders don’t understand. They interact with climate change from written speeches.

Fossil fuel people were present . They know what they were doing. Our leaders who were there to talk for us, do they understand the reality? They have really good speeches, but on the ground things are different. We are losing culture. We are losing languages. Africans are social beings and this crisis is destroying us. Are we understanding these impacts? Kenya had the fourth-largest delegation at COP27 , but here back home, have we seen any changes? People who have been struck by doubt, shouldn’t have to depend on wellwishers. Think of these people who are meant to provide for their families. Solutions need to address the root causes.”

On the importance of women in the fight against climate change

“In most of the rural areas I work in, women are very marginalized. For example in Garissa [arid area] when there is no water in a home, it’s a woman and the children who have to travel long distances in search of water, while the man stays at home looking after the cattle. When the woman gets home, she has to do all the housework and the children miss school. Their carbon footprint is nonexistent, but they are living the consequences of the climate crisis.”

On the stories that shaped her

“I was raised in Nakuru and after the 1997 tribal clashes, my father became a full time drunkard. My mother single-handedly held the family together. I remember when I was in Class 7, I only went to school for one term due to lack of fees. My mother told me, ‘Ciku I know you’re a bright girl, but life hasn’t been easy on you. If you keep pushing, nothing is impossible. You will get lots of nos, but keep pushing.”The same thing your brother can do, you can do it better.’”

On her legacy

“At least if I die, my website will remain. I am happy I am documenting these stories.”

Anisa Bek Derna

LIBYA

Anisa Bek Derna AKA Nissa Bek is a climate activist and the founder of Project Mulan, a youth led project that aims to spread and achieve the UNDP's sustainable development goals in Libya. She's also the national leader of Let's Do it and Fridays for Future in Libya.

On her story

"Over the years, I was increasingly learning more about the climate crisis. When I did my IB [International Baccalaureate], they had added environmental sciences as a course and I decided to take it. In Libya, if you choose to study environmental sciences, you are really looked down on by your peers. Science in my country, means Biology or Chemistry. I didn't care though. I wanted to know more about what was happening to the environment. When I took that class, I learnt insane things. The first documentary was The inconvenient truth by Al Gore. You study things that make you think, why is no one talking about this? It made me so angry that in Libya, we are not doing anything about climate change.

I decided I wanted to do something tied to the SDGs [sustainable development goals] to raise awareness about the issue. When I came home from boarding school, I started doing events at schools focusing on the SDGs. I wanted to focus on development and education as the entry point as most people in the climate change space were focused on conducting events, which means they attract people interested in the topic already. How do I get people who might not come to me? I decided to target a younger audience of around 8 years old

"I got to meet with the Dalai Lama this past October and I shared with him this story. I told him, 'I don't understand how a child this young can see the urgency of the climate crisis, but a world leader cannot.' When you talk to young kids about what is going on, many of them cry. They understand how terrible what is going on in the world is. Even if I am careful with my words and don't try to frighten the kids, they understand that the terrible things that are happening right now are just the beginning. How can world leaders not understand this?"

with 'SDG junior.' I got in touch with schools and would go do a 1-2 hour workshop with the kids.

I realized I need to focus on climate change and this is my cause. I also started targeting older people and doing larger collaborations with others focusing on the intersectionality of gender and education. I partnered with World Cleanup Day and I am the national leader in Libya for days. I also take part in Fridays for Future, but in Libya we can't use the same approach as it's very dangerous to protest and have people gather together. You can get killed for mobilizing people in public."

On what she wishes people understood better about climate change

"The rest of Africa is more aware about climate change than North Africa. In North Africa, Morocco comes first, then Tunisia next. Egypt comes next after that, but they have to do climate advocacy under the guise of 'youth entrepreneurship.' It's dangerous to be thought of as an activist in Egypt. Libya and Algeria are completely blacked out. We don't have a unified community working on climate change issues. We have very few activists mostly focusing on policy and based abroad, but very few in Libya.

We have everything we need in order to survive if we plan well. We need a seed bank in Libya for indigenous seeds that can survive here. I saw successful stories from East Asia on what types of crops can survive the climate crisis. Cacao project looks at crops and develops recipes for people to cook . We need to look at alternative crops that we can invest in to survive when drought hits. Libya didn't have winter this year.

On the stories that shaped her

"I have a lot of respect for women who played a huge role in the Libyan revolution. When it comes to climate change, women were always part of the climate movement. Women were the first to come out and talked about climate concerns earlier. Maybe if it had been men who had spoken about it earlier, it would have been taken more seriously. Activism in climate change was driven by women. Women were talking about it, starting projects, working with communities. Reading and studying about these women made me feel more powerful, though I know my life as an activist would have been easier if I was a man. I would have been able to move around more easily and gather people together."

On her legacy

"If we are going to talk about development in Africa, we need to talk about the fact that we are still colonized. I understand. We are not inferior to anyone, but we are economically colonized. The world works in a way that we don't own our own means of production especially when it comes to food. There is so much hypocrisy e.g. France making fracking illegal but continuing to do those activities in former colonies including Algeria.[5] We are sugarcoating everything. Let's say things are they are.

Making my voice heard is something, but actually doing something about what I say is something else. I don't want to waste my time. There are people using youth as props. They like to bring us into these spaces, 'Yeah. I organized this. I brought this youth.' Trust me, Pre-COP26 was in Milan. I felt so disrespected as an African.

We were there as decorations. When European activists would be interviewed, they would be asked about their work. When activists from Africa and East Asia would be interviewed, we would be asked how we like Milan, complemented on our outfits then asked about what we think of Greta Thurnberg's work.[6] We were there as decorations. No one took us seriously.

A British journalist once told me, 'You know we have a lot of activists here too..I want to hear about anything else you're doing.' The difference between a European activist and an African activist is that when we do these activities, we might get killed. When a European does it, nothing happens, they might pay a fine. Here in Libya, you might get shot. You might get arrested. We put our lives on the line.

I want to focus on local activities. I'm tired of going to global events to be treated like a decoration. I'm going to use what our leaders said against them. 'Ok, at COP you said you have this on the agenda, then you have to prove it to me and other activists.' I'm not going to be used as a prop or a toy. I would rather collaborate with other African youth and hold our governments accountable. This is what I want to be remembered for, my work in Libya."

Abigael Kima

KENYA

Abigael Kima is an energy expert and climate activist. She is also the producer and host of Hali Hewa (state of the air) podcast.

On her story

"After high school, I wanted to be a lawyer, but ended up in environmental science and a lot of things became clear. I'm from Elgeyo Marakwet, in Iten. Most parents who had day jobs also sold maize in the evenings to pay school fees. I started connecting the dots, seeing how the changing weather patterns were impacting farmers, delaying planting seasons and raising temperatures. My hometown used to be a heavily forested area, but now deforestation has changed it. I started wondering how we can attain sustainability and stop harming the environment so badly."

On her motivation and what drives her

"I am driven by seeing how climate change is impacting communities, especially through drought and floods. I recently visited Isiolo [an arid part of Kenya] and some places haven't had rain in over two years. Families eat one meal a day and they have to walk long distances to

“I recently visited Isiolo [an arid part of Kenya] and some places haven’t had rain in over two years. Families eat one meal a day and they have to walk long distances to fetch drinking water. And this is not even clean water, it’s full of silt. The world needs to see what is happening. Africa is responsible for only 4% of emissions but suffers a lot from the devastation.”

fetch drinking water. And this is not even clean water, it’s full of silt. The world needs to see what is happening. Africa is responsible for only 4% of emissions but suffers a lot from the devastation. The more we know about it the more we can ask for instead of waiting for UNFCC [United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change] guidelines or governments to act.”

On what she wishes people understood better about climate change

“Most economies in the west have developed off the backs of fossil fuels. Does it make sense when we sometimes say Africans should leave their resources on the ground? We need a different way. We are not responsible for the issue, but we need to push for others to change while also charting a green way towards our own development.”

On the importance of women in the fight against climate change

“Things are getting worse for the women. In Isiolo [arid area] men go out with the livestock looking for vegetation while women remain behind and have to figure out how to feed the family. You will find homes that had 50 cattle, but now they are only left with 2, due to the drought. When they are few like that, the responsibility of taking care of them also moves to the woman. Migration has also made the woman vulnerable to gender based violence. The women are now left alone or some times they have to go fetch water at night and there are many cases of women raped when fetching water at night. Everything has gotten worse for the women.”

On the stories that shaped her

“I am inspired by Professor Wangari Maathai. I recently had her daughter, Wanjira Mathai on the podcast and we spoke about the generations of women who paved the way for us. These are women who fought when there were still no positions for women. Till today we benefit from her legacy anytime we enjoy walks and fresh air in Karura or Uhuru Park. She did that for us. I am also inspired by younger activists, especially Elizabeth Wathuti and Vanessa Nakate.”

On her legacy

“My legacy will be in amplifying African climate stories including stories of innovation on how we are driving solutions. We are telling our own narratives.”

"I grew up surrounded by forests and there was the most beautiful green forest in my village. It nurtured my love for nature. The forest was slowly cleared in time though. I was overwhelmed with sadness."

Precious Kalombwana

ZAMBIA

Patience Kalombwa is the founder of Citizen's Network for Community Development Zambia, an organization that advocates for climate change justice and raises awareness through campaigns trying to find local solutions to climate change problems.

On her story

"I started getting involved in climate activism about 5 years ago. I grew up surrounded by forests and there was the most beautiful green forest in my village. It nurtured my love for nature. The forest was slowly cleared in time though. I was overwhelmed with sadness. As I mourned my beautiful green forest,I got inspired to climate activism and I started planting trees. I started planting trees in my village and I continued to dedicate my time and effort to this calling.

Since I embarked on this journey, I have managed to create awareness in my village about planting trees. This has been a great achievement both at personal and at a community level.

The main challenge I have encountered as an activist in Zambia is creating awareness. How to convince people that there is climate change? How do we make them aware of the challenges and impact climate change has? I also started engaging youth and women in my community to strike with Fridays for Future."

On her motivation and what drives her

"My personal aim is to make young people more aware of the human impact on the environment and the impact of the degraded environment on their lives. Together we can pave the way for a thriving greener future Zambia. I am driven to do climate change work because of the damage I've seen it cause Zambia and the world. Ecosystems have disappeared because of it. I hope to live in a society where climate change shall be addressed seriously as it is affecting millions."

On women's stories that shaped them

"My mother is the leader I remember most as a child. She showed exemplary leadership in raising us four children yet being so actively involved in each of our lives."

Honourable Mentions

Vanessa Nakate

UGANDA

Vanessa Nakate is a climate activist from Uganda. She was the First Fridays For Future climate activist in Uganda and founder of the Rise up Climate Movement, which aims to amplify the voices of activists from Africa. She spearheaded the campaign to save Congo's rainforest, which is facing massive deforestation. This campaign later spread to other countries from Africa to Europe.[7]

Elizabeth Wathuti

KENYA

Elizabeth Wanjiru Wathuti is a Kenyan environment and climate activist and founder of the Green Generation Initiative, which nurtures young people to love nature and be environmentally conscious at a young age and has now planted 30,000 tree seedlings in Kenya. Elizabeth founded the Green Generation Initiative in 2016.[8]

“A tree has roots in the soil yet reaches to the sky. It tells us that in order to aspire we need to be grounded and that no matter how high we go it is from our roots that we draw sustenance. It is a reminder to all of us who have had success that we cannot forget where we came from. It signifies that no matter how powerful we become in government or how many awards we receive, our power and strength and our ability to reach our goals depend on the people, those whose work remain unseen, who are the soil out of which we grow, the shoulders on which we stand.”

— Wangari Maathai, *Unbowed*

Endnotes

1 https://www.weforum.org/people/hindou-oumarou-ibrahim

2 https://www.vogue.com/article/african-climate-activists-cop-27hopes

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4 https://allafrica.com/stories/202111040613.html

5 https://imes.elliott.gwu.edu/public-outreach-and-educator-resources/impop/environmental-exploitation-triggers-protests-in-algeria/

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7 https://www.un.org/youthenvoy/vanessa-nakate/

8 https://www.un.org/en/climatechange/voices-of-change-elizabeth-wathuti

About the EJS Center

The Ellen Johnson Sirleaf Presidential Center for Women and Development (EJS Center) was founded in 2018 to be a catalyst for change across Africa by helping unleash its most abundant, yet minimally tapped power — its women.

Through a unique blend of programming, advocacy, research, and exhibitions, the EJS Center works to advance women's public leadership and development on the continent. Through its work, it envisions more voices heard, talents unleashed, and leaders launched that prioritize the aspirations of women.

The EJS Center was founded by former President and Nobel Peace Prize winner Ellen Johnson Sirleaf. As the first democratically elected woman president in Africa, Madam Sirleaf is passionate about supporting the next generation of women in public life. By helping women in public leadership to raise their profiles and advance their careers, the EJS Center seeks to amplify the voices of all women and girls across the continent.

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