

From Uganda to COP: An Activist's Fight for Climate Justice

Article by Jennifer Kwao, Patience Nabukalu

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The responsibility of the “Global North” for the climate emergency and the failure to address it is not just a thing of the past. The international media often sidelines or exploits the voices of African activists, while Western companies continue to cash in on local resources. Climate justice starts with recognising one's own privileges, explains Ugandan activist Patience Nabukalu.

Jennifer Kwao: What drew you to climate activism and what does it mean to you?

Patience Nabukalu: I am deeply passionate about achieving climate justice. This passion has led me to various campaigns and strikes both internationally and locally. I'm also fighting for a green future, with fresh water, food, and clean energy. This will not happen by default, but rather through action.

Being an activist is not about being on camera. An activist fights for their community even when the cameras are not watching. An activist goes to the ground and finds out what the community needs and does something about it.

You are in a position that many African climate activists can only dream of. Many of them don't have the platform you have. What is it like being in the spotlight and becoming one of the faces of the movement?

For me, having that spotlight is a great thing because I get to amplify not only the stories and ideas from the frontline but also the people's demands. People on the frontlines of the climate crisis are not just victims; they have solutions. Many like me, carry out various activities in their communities including climate education in schools, cleanups, and workshops. The spotlight also gives me the opportunity to talk to big media houses and put what we really want on the map.

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But there's another side to this which often feels exploitative. For instance, NGOs invite us to Europe to participate in their events. That usually means working with someone who is paid when you are not paid. Some media houses have also used and monetised my image without my consent. We want to be heard and platformed but being used is also not great. Exploiting us isn't standing with us.

NGOs, media houses, and international organisations need to be more considerate. Just like any other person in a job, we have families and friends, we fall sick, and we have people to take care of. The only difference is that activism is more than a job. It's passion. It's the desire for a different future. So we risk everything, including our life and that of our loved ones.

More than being considerate, NGOs, media houses, and international organisations need to practice

what they preach. They cannot preach about gender equality, social justice, racial justice, or human rights when they do not exercise this when they work with Global South voices.

Let's turn to your activism in Uganda. Could you give us a picture of the work you are doing?

I run climate education programmes in schools. We have trained students in over 100 schools on climate change, how to respond, how to adapt, and how they can join the fight. I'm the founder and the lead of Stop Wetland Degradation and Stop Plastic Pollution campaigns because I'm a victim of wetland degradation. Lake Victoria, for example, feeds over 40 million people but the lake and riparian lands around it are under pressure from plastic pollution. If we don't fight to protect it, many lives will be devastated. So we carry out cleanups to protect this natural resource.

I have been part of the [Stop the East African Crude Oil Pipeline](#) campaign which has been running for over four years. The EACOP project will construct the longest heated oil pipeline in the world, emitting 34 million tons of carbon emissions per year, [displacing over 100,000 people](#) from their homes and livelihoods. This campaign has been my main focus in 2023.

I am also participating in a women's empowerment project in a village called Chivoga, where rising temperatures are making farming and herding difficult. The project aims to educate 50 women in the district about using vegetable plantations for both food and earning.

What impact would you say your activism has had in Uganda and internationally?

Activism really *does* work. And I will tell you why. When they started the East African Crude Oil Pipeline, it became clear that this was a climate bomb that would affect several generations. As activists, campaigning against it was an obvious choice. And guess what? We have seen big brands, banks, and 23 insurance companies pulling out of the project. The European Parliament passed a resolution [on violations of human rights in Uganda and Tanzania linked to investments in fossil fuels projects].

The delayed construction of EACOP is because of our activism. After signing agreements for such projects, they usually progress through the next stages quickly. Even if EACOP eventually got a license, we made it a lot harder for them to get one.

All these things explain what activism does. I'm sure many companies are now cautious about new oil projects because they're afraid of the backlash and suffering losses. I also think banks are pulling out because they don't want to risk their reputation.

I know we can top this but what we have achieved already exceeds what I thought was possible through activism. I'm happy with the progress we have made, though we'll keep fighting until we end this climate bomb.

What are some of the challenges? And how has your government responded to your activism?

I want to be honest, it's really hurtful that we don't have the same space and rights as our Global North counterparts. When Global North activists are given microphones to speak up, they really don't understand that this is a privilege. They have the right to speak. They have the right to strike. They have the right to defend their communities. But Global South activists, we have nothing. Young people in Uganda are afraid to become activists because they fear [what could happen](#) to them or their families.

We face challenges of ignorance both in our communities and from our leaders. Leaders paint climate activism as political opposition, which makes it harder for people like us to campaign here at home. We

experience government, political, and community threats because people are afraid of our work more than what we are fighting to change.

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We cannot just stop the East African Oil Pipeline as the government expects to make lots of profit from it. This is a selfish project. So the government won't side with us. When you have the government making false promises, such as that the EACOP will bring jobs and develop Uganda, our campaign looks like a threat. The truth is that the main shareholder of the project is Total Energies, which is a French company. It owns 64 per cent of the project, meaning almost all profits will not stay here. It's a colonial continuity project in the making. Another truth is that many oil-rich countries on this continent are still suffering from poverty, crises, pandemics, while experiencing an escalating climate crisis.

The other challenge has to do with media. In many cases, the media give more opportunity to the white face and they forget the frontliners of the climate crisis.

And is this international media or local media as well?

In Uganda, we don't even go to any media, unfortunately. But internationally, it's the case.

Could you tell me more about the media landscape in Uganda? Why do you avoid it?

To be honest, it's because the media in Uganda are controlled by the government. So if the government doesn't want to speak on a certain topic, no one can be given an opportunity to speak about it. I've tried to reach out to various media houses in Uganda but it's hard. So I gave up on it. The media have painted the East African Oil Pipeline in silver and gold; like our government, they're only talking about the jobs and development it will bring. When we visit high schools and ask them about the EACOP, most of the pupils repeat these claims.

How do you get around these challenges?

I've followed a few trainings by Climate Activist Defenders on how to protect yourself as an activist. In my country, for instance, I don't do street strikes because it's not allowed. I know it hinders my activism, but I don't engage in it because at the end of the day if you strike in front of the parliament and you are arrested, who will rescue you? We are in a country where the media cannot publish such a thing. Who will know that you were arrested?

You've talked about exploitation when working with people in Europe. How can they do more for climate justice?

I want people in the Global North to understand that climate change has no borders. It affects us all. So projects like the EACOP that are set to increase emissions will affect not only East Africa but also those that call themselves developed nations. It's high time they woke up and stood with frontline communities. They must also understand that we cannot exercise the same right to freedom of speech and human rights in our own countries. So they should use their privilege to call leaders to account. Their media can do this too.

Not everyone can support Global South voices financially but they can support them in different meaningful ways. The least they can do is speak to people from the frontlines, listen to them, amplify their voices, and be a part of their journeys. Even though I'm here speaking with you, there are many activists like me in Africa who are not heard.

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for by the Global North.*

They should also remember that Global North countries owe the Global South countries a great debt. Loss and damage from the climate crisis must be paid for by the Global North.

You mentioned that it's sometimes dangerous to take to the streets for climate issues on the continent. How come this was possible in Kenya on the sidelines of the Africa Climate Summit in September? Was that a unique thing? And why was it important for you to organise such a protest march?

I think this march went ahead because the president of Kenya authorised it. But it had restrictions. This was an improvement because at the previous climate gathering on the continent, COP27 in Egypt, we weren't allowed to march at all. There were other restrictions in Egypt too: you were not supposed to wear t-shirts with labels. You couldn't gather in 10 or more, and you certainly could not coordinate t-shirts. It was very strange, especially since there were no justifications for these excessive rules. So the march at the Africa Climate Summit felt historic. It's the first one on the continent that I have participated in.

We organised our own pre-event and had our own declaration after the summit. We organised the People's Summit and People's Declaration and an Energy Reasoning roundtable. These civil society-led initiatives sketched a people's vision for climate action and green transition in Africa. We agreed that Africa has a bright future in renewable energies. And this sector must be supported instead of fossil fuels. We want our leaders to push for the delivery of the 100 billion dollars that rich countries promised to give to the most climate-vulnerable countries. We want more support for clean cooking solutions and other innovations by people on the continent. We want it to be acknowledged that Africa has long been exploited for energy and continues to be; EACOP is a prime example of this.

We took to the streets because we wanted these demands to be heard. We wanted to say to our leaders at the summit, End fossil fuels in Africa, Don't gas Africa. I personally would have liked Kenya's President Ruto to outrightly reject EACOP and fossil fuels. The summit was after all in Kenya, a member of the East African Community and a country that will be affected by EACOP. It's rare to have these summits in Africa so it was really an opportunity for our leaders to put African demands on the table. But unfortunately, it didn't happen.

Why do you say it didn't happen?

It didn't happen because leaders inside did not champion our solutions. They were just sugarcoating everything for the white man. This really broke us. The Africa Climate Summit turned out to be like any other summit. I paid from my own pocket to be in Nairobi. But I feel like I wasted my money.

And you hope that COP28 will be different?

First of all, COP is taking place in the wrong place; an oil-rich state. The president of COP28 is the CEO of an oil company. So I think it's going to be a meeting for business leaders and full of greenwashing.

Second, there are big concerns about Dubai's human rights record and its treatment of black and brown people. As an African activist, I don't know how I will be treated. I don't expect anything. And honestly, I don't know if I have hope.

Do you still find it important to be there?

Yes. The future we want is not with NGOs and media alone. At these conferences, we get to push our demands directly to leaders, organise our own action, and be part of the solution. We also show that we are not giving up on us. Not on them, but on us. When activists meet in such places, we really get solutions on what we can do, plan for the months ahead. And also hug each other tight.

This interview was conducted online before the beginning of COP28.



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Patience Nabukalu is a prominent climate, gender, and human rights activist from Uganda. She is coordinator of Fridays For Future Uganda, founder of Stop Wetland Degradation and Stop Plastic Pollution campaigns, and has been part of the Stop the East African Crude Oil Pipeline initiative.

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