

## **Young, Driven but Sidelined: African Climate Activists Fighting From the Margins**

**Article by Desmond Alugnoa, Gloria Equiyah Agyare, Jennifer Kwao, Washington Mboya Adongo**  
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When the Associated Press (AP) cropped Ugandan activist Vanessa Nakate from a group photo of climate activists at Davos in 2020, not only did it spark public outrage, but it also confronted the climate movement with issues it had long shied away from.

African climate and environmental activists, continuing the tireless work of their forebearers on climate justice and more, struggle to be seen – much less heard. With their editorial faux pas, the AP unwittingly illustrated the erasure and silencing of African voices from the climate discourse. This incident threw into focus the exclusion of these vital voices that not only media but also the climate movement finally had to address.

Several years later, and in spite of investments into improving the representation of African voices, the gap remains wide. In media, the problem has proven more challenging than a *Time magazine* cover of Vanessa Nakate could assuage.

Through the stories of young climate advocates from Ghana and Kenya, this panorama spotlights the nature of their continued exclusion at national and international levels. We hear about the impactful work they lead from the margins despite these barriers as well as where any serious effort to improve the representation and inclusion of young African voices must focus.

Curated by [Jennifer Kwao](#)

Barriers to Full Representation in Climate Policy

*Contribution by:* [Desmond Alugnoa](#)

For advocates in Ghana, climate advocacy has been an uphill battle. Young people have always been seen as not knowledgeable enough about climate change or able to speak about its impact – even when it affects them.

However, things are changing. Since my organisation Green Africa Youth Organisation (GAYO) established a Youth Climate Council and began training youth negotiators, we've been able to demonstrate that we can work at the policy level. Now Ghana's delegations to climate conferences reserve spots for young people we have trained.

However, policy spaces still remain difficult to access. Many leaders at the national, regional, and international levels talk a big game about youth inclusion and the importance of young people, but do little to change things. After delivering their impassioned speeches on youth, some of these leaders leave the room immediately, preventing young people from speaking with them or raising questions.

On the same panel where young people are talked about, you would not find a youth representative. Leadership demands integrity but many of our leaders do not demonstrate this on youth representation.

On the international stage, some global institutions' behaviour towards African advocates shows a lack of commitment to this value and to fundamentally changing their problematic engagement models. They extend invitations to young Africans only to retract this when they have to accommodate needs such as childcare, visas, and tailored training.

Many of them claim to offer technical support and, with youth in focus these days, many promote their own capacity-building programs for youth. This sounds great until you dig deeper and discover that these organisations don't support local initiatives by young people. Many of them bring Europeans to provide technical support which doesn't only keep funding in European projects but fails to address local concerns.

National leaders and international institutions must recognise the influential position they occupy and open the climate space again to young people. This was my message to the president of COP28 during a closed meeting at the Africa Climate Summit. We need to open different levels of decision-making to young people. COP28 should be about implementation and young Africans should have the space to showcase and fundraise for their projects.

Importantly, we need powerful players to be less performative in their support; their solidarity with young Africans must mean supporting their work with money and resources.

The Struggle for Environmental Justice in Nairobi's Slums

*Contribution by: Washington Mboya Adongo*

My first fight as an environmental activist was against the chemicals and confectionery factory Kenafric Industries in my neighbourhood, the Ruaraka area in Nairobi. The company ignored one of its sewers that had burst and was releasing untreated chemicals with a pungent smell onto nearby communities and into the Nairobi River.

We organised a mass peaceful protest with media coverage to call an end to this ecological injustice. For three weeks, before our mass action, the factory ignored us while its waste contaminated the environment and people's health. We contacted local authorities who remained unmoved, but their inaction did not diminish our spirit. After escalating the issue to national authorities through intensive advocacy, the National Environmental Management Authority shut down the factory until the issue was resolved. Later, we pressed the factory on its social responsibility, leading to discussions between them and the community, as well as green initiatives and support to the community. This experience made me realise that I had a role in building resilient communities and a sustainable future.

My organisation YOUTHPRINUA educates young people about these challenges and empowers them through workshops, after-school programmes, training, and seminars to take action. Lucky Summer Environmental and Waste Management Organisation (LEWMO) is another community-led organisation which is spearheading ecosystem restoration and training households on recycling, reusing and upcycling to improve solid waste management in Nairobi's slums.

These areas are marred with extreme poverty, radicalisation, poor sanitation and health, high criminal rates, illegal dumpsites, and broken sewer lines. These issues sit within a broader context of environmental breakdown in Nairobi which can be observed from the air pollution, shrinking green spaces, high temperatures; and Nairobi River overrun with plastic waste.

Thus our environmental work has become an important part of not only community resilience but also non-violent mobilisation and resistance to political sabotage such as corruption and poor leadership.

Our work as grassroots environmental defenders follows a long history of resistance from the margins of Kenya's society. The late Professor Wangari Maathai and her Green Belt Movement fought land grabs and encroachment into the forests across Kenya. They led a movement against the government's plans to construct a tower block in Uhuru Park in downtown Nairobi and another to campaign for the release of political prisoners. This legacy inspires us to become meaningful environmental custodians and teach us the power of grassroots environmental organising for change.

Yet the power of grassroots communities is often overlooked.

My book *The Youth Struggle* documents the specific challenges marginalised youths in an urban context face while also calling on policymakers to involve them in their decision making. We face many hurdles in our environmental work such as unfavourable regulations and policies, delayed or prolonged licensing approval, limited access to relevant information, lack of funding, mistrust in community land ownership, court battles, and politicisation. Our impacts on the ground are not recognised, alienating us from policymaking processes.

President Ruto's administration has shown a willingness to close the distance between the grassroots and the highest political level, notably by giving youth a seat at the table. The negotiation of Kenya's plastic law and the Africa Youth Climate Assembly, a precursor to the Africa Climate Summit, are all evidence of his commitment. However, this engagement must seek partnership with socially and economically disadvantaged communities for the effectiveness and long-term success of policies. The slums of Nairobi are just one of the blind spots to this engagement even though communities there are doing the work while experiencing the worst impacts of both environmental degradation and economic marginalization.

To me, the Nairobi River is a microcosm for the challenges but also the untapped potential in this part of the city. We need the river flowing freely again and returning to its place as a space for play, connection, and solace. This security of the environment will not just be for the benefit of those living in the area but for the rest of Nairobi. Addressing the environmental degradation in this area is needed for climate resilience from the heatwaves and irregular rain patterns we are experiencing. This change will not happen without the most impacted; their vision and vital environmental work need to be recognised and they need to be supported with capacity building, meaningful engagement and financial resources.

The Forgotten Grassroot

*Contribution by:* [Gloria Equiyah Agyare](#)

I was drawn to environmental activism because I witnessed the depletion of our lands and was determined to make a change. I have been conducting workshops, capacity building programme for farming communities in Ghana to help them address these challenges on their own.

I've learnt that changing our food systems and introducing a climate lens to agriculture requires mobilising people at both grassroots and political levels, which is no easy feat. This work is often about engaging people who do not share your concerns. Those who do are seldom motivated to take action.

In 2021, my organisation, the Ghana Youth Environmental Movement, launched the Green Clubs in

Schools project to integrate climate education into curricula across the country. We approached the Minister of Education to present our initiative, hoping to alleviate the burden that is typically placed on the government. Unfortunately, we were not even granted an audience.

As young people, we are too easily dismissed even though we are doing the work. Compared to their counterparts in the Global North, African grassroots activists receive less media attention and recognition for their tireless efforts in addressing climate change and promoting sustainable food systems. This lack of visibility hinders the impact of our work. By excluding these voices, not only do we limit our understanding of the impacts of the climate crisis but we also risk rendering solutions ineffective. Making our food systems more sustainable and responding effectively to climate shocks depends on this visibility and representation of grassroots voices.

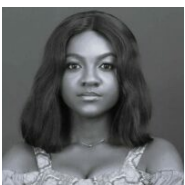
I think many young Africans understand this challenge and want to see it change. I find it inspiring to see so many of them take up environmental activism despite experiencing unemployment and the unrelenting impacts of the climate crisis as well as lacking access to quality education and information, financial resources. They are raising awareness not only about the environmental problems in their communities but also the solutions. Many of them are using online and in-person climate education programmes, campaigns, and community-based projects to effect the change they want to see.

Allies outside of the African continent, especially those with larger platforms, must amplify the efforts of grassroots activists. They can provide funding and resources, and advocate for increased media coverage of their work. This visibility can be a powerful way to get our national leaders to listen to grassroots voices. Sadly, they take us more seriously when we have the global spotlight.

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Gloria Agyare is an environmentalist and aspiring Agri-food system policy expert. She is experienced in youth education and engagement and is well-versed in cross-sectoral community-based project management, particularly in the areas of Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH) and Climate Change. Gloria is a prominent speaker on agriculture and climate change issues, advocating for women and youth inclusion in environmental decision-making and food systems. At COP27 in Egypt, she passionately engaged in discussions on gender and youth empowerment, aiming to drive climate action at the grassroots level. Gloria is an active member of the Food and Agriculture working group under YOUNGO.



Jennifer Kwao is the editorial and project officer of the *Green European Journal*, with a background in EU law and external relations. She is also the co-founder of the climate justice platform [1.2 Diaries](#) which documents and amplifies the ideas, expertise, and lived experiences of those most impacted by a world at 1.2+ degrees warming. Her work and advocacy focus on climate justice, racial justice, diaspora youth mobilisation, and Africa-EU relations.



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