



**The Brookings Institution
Africa Growth Initiative
Foresight Africa Podcast**

**“Young Ugandan climate activists on their work and vision”
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Host:

ALOYSIUS UCHE ORDU
Director, Africa Growth Initiative
Senior Fellow, Global Economy and Development
The Brookings Institution

Guests:

HILDA FLAVIA NAKABUYE
Founder, Fridays for Future Uganda

MORRIS NYOMBI
CEO, Earth Volunteers

Episode Summary:

Two young Ugandan climate activists discuss their work on meeting the challenges of climate change in their country, their region, and continent-wide. Hilda Flavia Nakabuye, founder of Fridays for Future Uganda, and Morris Nyombi, CEO of Earth Volunteers, share why they became climate activists, explain the projects they lead, and discuss their messages for leaders who will gather for COP27 in Egypt later this year.

ORDU: From the promise of new technologies to the innovative and youthful population shaping our continent's future, Africa is full of dynamism worth celebrating. Hi, I'm Aloysius Uche Ordu, director of the Africa Growth Initiative at the Brookings Institution and host of Foresight Africa podcast. Since 2011, the Africa Growth Initiative has published a high profile report on the key events and trends likely to shape affairs in Africa in the year ahead. Entitled "Foresight Africa," the goal of the publication is to bring attention to these burning issues and to support policy actions to address them. With this podcast, we intend to engage the report authors as well as policymakers, captains of industry, Africa's youths, and other key figures.

So, my guest today are two Ugandan youth climate change activists. I met them on May 31st during the launch of Foresight Africa 2022 in Kampala, Uganda. First is Ms. Hilda Flavia Nakabuye—she's a climate, gender, and environmental rights activist. Hilda is the founder of Fridays for Future Uganda. We also have with us today Morris Nyombi, a climate activist and CEO of Earth Volunteers. Hilda and Morris, welcome to Foresight Africa Podcast.

NYOMBI: Hi. Thank you for hosting.

NAKABUYE: Thank you. Thank you.

ORDU: Let's start with you, Hilda. At what point in your youthful life and why did you become a climate activist?

NAKABUYE: Thank you Aloysius, for hosting us today. We are glad to be sharing with the world. Well, I became an African climate activist after I faced the reality of climate change, after I knew about its brutal ways. And that was during a dialogue at my university that was organized by a local non-governmental organization called Green Climate Campaign Africa, where the speaker talked about climate change, its role, its effects, and how it's damaging our lifestyles. And with that came examples, for example, rising temperatures, the droughts, the floods, the constant issues we've been facing with growing up.

And to me, this opened me to the reality of what is going on in the world, because I knew little about climate change and thus believe that very few people knew about climate change, and even the few that know about it are not willing to stand up and speak about it or even do anything to combat it.

This pushed me back to a time when I was still young and my parents couldn't raise my tuition fees, so I had to miss several months out of school because they couldn't afford it. And agriculture was our only source of income at that moment. And since we couldn't sell any more agricultural products or food or what, we couldn't raise money for my tuition. And this is because we had a big plantation back then, but due to the constant effects of climate change, the rising temperatures, floods, strong winds, they kept on destroying our garden, our crops were withering, our streams where we used to fetch water were drying up. So, we would move long distances to get water. Life was really hard at a point when my grandmother used to cry all alone in her bedroom saying that the gods have cursed us and that's why we are suffering this much.

To me, it didn't sound like it's concrete because I believe also the gods are considerate. We didn't do anything bad, but why would they punish us to that extent?

So, I grew up with that gap, and when that gap was filled during this dialogue at my university, I knew about the reality of climate change. I knew that this is the biggest challenge humanity's bustling with at the moment, and it needs to be eradicated. It needs to be solved. So, I started to speak up and tell other people about climate change because I didn't want them to pass through the same experience I passed through growing up. And that's why I am an activist now.

ORDU: Quite a story indeed, Hilda. And you, Morris, what made you decide to become a climate activist?

NYOMBI: Thank you so much, Aloysius, for hosting us. And this is wonderful. It was in 2019, in March, when I was staying home, because most of the time when you are done with studies, sometimes looking for a job is not easy. And then one day I happened to see one of my neighbor by then, Vanessa Nakate, the climate activist, she was standing in front of our parliament asking for climate emergency. And I was like, how come? Because even in my country protesting or standing on street with cardboards is not allowed, like, everything is politicized. So it gave me an impression and I was like, I need to know more about the issues she's trying to push out, they may be worth understanding.

So from there I had to look for, however much she was my neighbor, it wasn't easy for me to get access to her. It took me another four months until one day I reached out through Facebook and was like, I would like to meet you, we are close neighbors. And she was like, Yeah, I'm organizing a community cleanup in August, so I would like to invite you.

From there, we discussed a lot because the community cleanup took like 3 hours. When I told her about my story, she was like, Morris, whatever I'm talking about actually is linked to your story. You are a victim [of] climate change. I [was like], how come?

My story was when I was growing up, at first we were not staying in Kampala until in 2007 when floods took over our home and we were forced to evacuate from where we used to stay. But then we used to own a farm and both my parents were farmers who used to spend most of their money in farming.

But when time kept on moving, we started receiving a lot of climate impacts. Seasons kept on changing. I remember in 2009, I think it rained more than five times, which doesn't usually happen in a year because here sometimes it can rain in March and April and it stops until November or September. But that year it was so hard for us when it rained because we were staying near the shores of Lake Victoria. So, the illegal sand mining that used to happen—and this was being carried out by Asian companies, mostly Chinese saying that they are given license for their work, so there is no way to stop them. They endangered the land, leaving everywhere near the lake with holes. Whenever water could rise, water could expand, coming to our garden the time when it rained heavily that year in 2007. Even the government was forced to declare a climate emergency. And when they declared if you can't evacuate now, we are not going to support you unless you do that.

That very day, it was in 2007 around July, when it rained so heavily to an extent that the entire night we spent carrying our bags and also our clothes, me and my mum, because that day my dad wasn't there. He used to go to town and sell some commodities because we used to have pineapple, our garden used to have a lot of types of food so that the only way to get for us some school fees, he would sell some food and come back with some money. So, that

night he wasn't there, and by the time he came back, we were already at somebody's place because when they told us to evacuate we had no option apart from leaving some of the things inside that were floating already to go to our neighbor.

When we shifted, it was so hard until dad called our grandma, who was in Kampala, to help us at least provide us with shelter, because that was the only way we could survive at that time. When she accepted [hosting] us, we came to Kampala and that's where life started to be hard for us because we had lost the farm. My parents were jobless by then. And now they had to look for jobs. At the same time, these are the parents who didn't receive enough education, the only thing they knew was farming. But when the farm was destroyed, the government didn't bother coming up with some solutions to take care of all of the victims who have been impacted. Even [the] Red Cross that came in that time never helped us apart from evacuating the road that we are stuck, nothing came in.

When we started staying in Kampala, dad used to go and come back some days, until one day, it was in 2009, September, when he went to work and never came back. Some of the jobs he used to do when we shifted to Kampala, he was working on a construction site and I think it became so tight for him because he couldn't take care of all of us. And that's the reason why he abandoned us in 2009 September. Mum filed up a case about it and we never saw him.

So, when I started working, the first job I got was from our neighbor, Vanessa Nakate's mom hired me. So, I used to work there and that's where I worked [for] my first tuition for my certificate in IT. The first two years I completed, then the second year, I [developed] another job saying maybe this certificate wasn't enough for me, I need to upgrade to a diploma. So, it was tight for me and I was the only one paying my own tuition. When I applied they gave me everything, but I didn't go because money wasn't enough for me to start. When I finalized my certificate in 2017, I had to sit home.

Now, in 2018, after getting some small job in a certain company, I went back and I said, Let me continue with my diploma. So, through my diploma that's when the developing of IT and being a social media manager came in and I started seeing so much on social media, learning about internet, manage accounts. And the time I reached out to Vanessa, actually, I didn't want to be [an] activist, but I just wanted to help her develop a social media presence because she had no followers, two people were following her by then. So, through that process, it made me learn more about climate change, and in October 14, 2019, I decided to join her.

ORDU: That's quite a story, Morris. Thank you very much for sharing that. Hilda, let me turn to you. You're also involved in a lake cleanup project. What progress have you made and what challenges do you face in the lake cleanup project?

NAKABUYE: I lead a lakeshore cleanup project on Lake Victoria, which is the second biggest freshwater lake in the world. But it's also a source of income and livelihoods for over 40 million people. It's shared by many African countries. And I read somewhere that the lake will be dried out in 100 years. This is the lake I grew up seeing. This is the lake my parents, grandparents used to talk about where they lived, where they used to get food, fish, everything.

Many people in Uganda were depending on this lake for survival. And reading this research made me think about the reality of what life will be 100 years from now. If our streams dried

up and we couldn't have food for days, then how about a lake that feeds over millions of people. It drew me to the vision or the need to protect and preserve our water bodies, to like them more, because without them, we cannot survive.

And I thought of what to do, something to do, an action to do, to make sure that our lakes are preserved. When I met Morris I found out that the lake is suffering from dumping—like many people who live around the shores dump all their rubbish and everything into the lake. And also there's a lot of wetland degradation.

I read about what was happening to Lake Victoria, so I decided to start this lake cleanup project to protect and preserve our water bodies. And many friends of mine joined me for the lake cleanup until it was something big. At first we, went to talk to the community around Gabba, which was our first cleanup. And everyone was looking at us like we are mad people because we were picking rubbish out of the lake, and people were just dumping their rubbish in the lake. And the people in the community told us: "Why are you doing that? Who's paying you to do that?" So we talked to them. We're like, No, no one is paying us to do this. But do you know that generations before you were born, this lake was actually there? It fed your grandmothers, parents and older, your family lineage. And do you know that it's facing threats because of our generation, because we are dumping, we are pouring a lot of chemicals and fertilizer. So, we went on to explain to the people about their actions or their deeds, what they're doing to the lake, how the lake is being affected, and how it will affect us thereafter.

And when we opened up to them, they started to tell us the stories like, yes, we've been facing issues with our incomes because those days we used to get a lot of fish, they used to do a lot of fishing, and the fish was big and very good. They would get a lot of money. But nowadays there's less fish, little fish from the lake, and it's not supporting their families enough like it used to. So we told them, Yes, and this is going to keep on getting worse if we continue with what we are doing. If people continue to dump their rubbish in the lake, we will have no fish left at all. And that means we will starve. That means our sources of incomes will be affected. That means you won't be able to pay for medicine. You won't be able to pay for tuition for your children to study and to learn. And we need to change the way we are living.

Slowly by slowly the community came to a new understanding our idea and why we are doing this lake cleanup. And more and more cleanups went on thereafter. Communities started to join us slowly by slowly.

But it was really hard to actually, even up to now, it's very hard to make people understand why we need to protect or preserve our environment and why we keep on doing it. Because many people in Uganda have never heard of climate change. They don't even know what it means. They don't even know that something like that exists. And it's been hard to change people's attitudes and mindsets about different things because to some it feels like you are changing their culture and tradition. And that is not what we are doing. We are trying to protect our environment because even our culture, our tradition, emphasizes that we should protect the environment around us.

So, with this we started to organize trainings, community trainings and lectures to train and to sensitize people about the need to protect the environment. And on and on, we kept on carrying out these cleanups. And many people join us now for these cleanups. And this is a great change. The lake that time was really dirty on those shores in Gabba. They were really

dirty, but now there's a difference. There's not so much rubbish that is going into the lake. And also we put up dust bins at the lakeshore so that people do not dump in the lake, but rather in the dust bins.

We had a lot of community discussions about what is happening and how city authorities are making them pay to dump their rubbish and they have to do it freely, among other things. And right now, there's a very big difference even in the water, the water quality. It started to change because not so many rubbish was being dumped then after the sensitizations. And we hope this goes on and on, even with other places where we've been carrying out these lake cleanups, and we hope to protect and preserve our lakes. We don't want Lake Victoria to dry in a hundred years and that's why we do everything possible to protect it.

ORDU: And Morris, very briefly, what other projects are you currently working on in Uganda and why?

NYOMBI: I'm working on two projects. One started in 2020, when I received a lot of critiques on why I was standing on street because they thought that was done by ladies. When I realized that I had to do something, I went on and started following up on how our forests are being treated. And I realized one of the forests was under attack by then in 2020, that was Bugoma Forest. I came out and spoke about it, which even made my account to be banned for one and a half months.

When I got it back, I had no option apart from starting to follow up on how forests are being treated and what were the main reason of those forest to be sold like they are not valued. I wanted to know why. And I realized that the more they cut, those missing spaces that are found in those forests within are the ones causing the government to look at them like they are no longer important and so they should be sold out. I mobilized my people and I told them, you know what, we need to do something. I started raising money on social media and I got some which made me go to the National Forest Authority to get some saplings. And these are the saplings that we started planting in every forest within Uganda, countrywide. So far we have planted over 48,000 trees in two years.

And the second project is on climate school. This one was started in 2021 just to educate young people about climate change, because I realized that ignorance among way young people is still much, and I don't think it should be like that. But the challenge is climate education is not yet implemented in school. So it was my responsibility, I had to reach out to my friends, and one of my friends who was working with UNICEF give me a book with a copyright and told me, Morris, you can use this while continuing with your project. So, this is what I'm doing right now.

ORDU: Forty-eight thousand trees planted in two years. That's quite that's quite an impressive accomplishment, Morris. Thank you for sharing that. And Hilda, in your view, what should our governments at the municipal, at the city, and indeed at the national level do to address climate change?

NAKABUYE: Well, I believe that if the government comes up and starts talking about the reality of climate change before it's too late, we can be able to solve this climate catastrophe. Because right now, what is missing is the knowledge of the people. Because few people know about climate change. But if government comes out and starts to talk about climate

change, starts to skill and train people in how to adapt and mitigate climate change, it will be very grateful.

And also, I would call for a change in the school curriculum to involve climate change studies, because growing up we didn't learn about climate change. We were just taught the definition of climate change and nothing more. So, climate change needs to be in the center of school curriculum. Every child needs to learn about climate change even when they are still young. The government should avail information about climate change free to the public, and it should put up centers where people can receive trainings free of charge so that they can change the way they do certain activities. For example, there should be trainings on how to make energy efficient, eco-friendly sources of energy. For example, use of briquettes instead of cutting down trees. If people have these knowledge and skills, there would be more trees in Uganda and that would have solved the problem of deforestation.

ORDU: Fascinating, indeed. Sticking with you, Hilda, we do not hear much about Africa's legislatures in the quest for climate justice. What role do you expect our legislatures to play?

NAKABUYE: I will give one short answer. I expect legislators to stand up and speak up for the people and the planet, and not for profits. We have a bad reputation as Africans of being corrupt, and this needs to change right now. We need to see a difference in the way our politicians and legislators act or do their responsibilities. There has been a lot of neglect of responsibilities in what exactly is supposed to be doing. They should stand up on the side of the people because it's the people that make them. And we people have a responsibility to make them accountable or to make them respond or act on their responsibilities. And if we stand up and work together, we can make this happen. Because I believe that the power of the people is greater and bigger than the people in power.

ORDU: Let's turn to you, Morris. I think our listeners will be particularly interested to know in the lead up to COP26 in Glasgow, what exactly did you and your movement do? Any studies, any concrete proposals for action?

NYOMBI: Yes, last year actually we were unable to [sit] at the table, but we had a chance to reach out to communities where we were doing our data collections, and we mobilized many young people to come in our events that we were organizing in different regions. This time we visited five regions.

But the biggest challenge and one of the issues that many youth shared was lack of support because many have huge projects that need finance. But when they reach out to governments, they don't receive positive feedbacks and many times they feel afraid and give up when they are prodded. This is one of the biggest challenges that we received in many youth.

We also came across to see wind farmers. This is one of the carbon capture solution apart from tree, because we always talk about trees that absorb carbon dioxide in atmosphere. But we came up close to see farmers in western Uganda who have been on the frontline, but they are still lacking support in investing in their biofuel products and also investing in some of their solutions. Because [seaweed] farmers have been helping us also in the fight for climate change in western Uganda, but they have not received enough support. And this was not the issue we wanted to bring out because not many of [them] are aware of seaweed.

ORDU: So looking back, are there any lessons you've learned from COP26 in Glasgow?

NYOMBI: Yes, I learned something that leaders accepted that climate change is real. But again, the question was, would they act this time? Because if you say that climate change is real, why don't you fulfill the promises that you put in place? Because they acknowledge. But again, where is the actions we want to see? Where's the implementation? I learned that they hear and they listen to whatever we share, but they're not ready to act. That is the only lesson I got from them.

ORDU: And you, Hilda, any lessons from COP26 in Glasgow?

NAKABUYE: I learned that despite the fact that leaders are hearing us, they are not listening because there is less action compared to the words and promises they are making. There was a promise that was made by leaders years back even before I was born. And these promises are keeping on being renewed over and over again. And to me, it was clear that COP26 or COP27 will not be the last COP. Our leaders have been negotiating for years, even before I was born. And it has always been about promises and negotiations, and there's less action to this.

This is a time when humanity has to shift to a new level of understanding, and we need more action than once, ever. We need to foster an inclusive gender-equitable transformation. We need youth inclusion front and center of each and every plan that we make. We need to include women. They must be actively involved in the planning and expansion of any sectors or project because they are very vital in playing a role in combating climate change, because women can draw on their experiences to offer solutions to this changing crisis since, according to the UN, 80% of people affected by climate change are women.

ORDU: Sticking with you, Hilda, COP27, Africa's COP, will be held in Egypt, as you know, November this year. How are you and your group preparing to engage in COP27?

NAKABUYE: Me and my group are preparing to raise youth inclusion or youth involvement and also to be gender equitable, because we realized that many of the decisions are made by the big people like the growing generation. And many youths are given less space in these fields, and yet we have the most to lose from an unsafe future. We have to deal with the decisions that our leaders are making right now, and they're making us without them. So, we need to have youth in each and every conversation, the decisions that are being made.

And with that, we have a project of raising youth voices to be heard at COP, because realize many people do not speak up or engage in such conversations because they do not have a space or a platform in which to share. So, Fridays for Future Uganda is reaching out to the community, to the people, to the ground, to raise and have these youth voices contributed into one report or one paper, which can be presented at COP27. And with this, it will make a lot of inputs in what decisions our leaders are making for us or for our generation.

ORDU: In that particular respect, Hilda, what sort of relationships [does] your group in Uganda, if any, have with other youths or youth groups in the East Africa region or indeed broadly across our continent?

NAKABUYE: Yes, we have some. We started this project of raising youth voices for COP27. Even in COP26, we had the same, but we noticed that it doesn't only have to stop in Uganda, it has to continue to other countries because youth elsewhere also have something to

say. They have a story to tell. So, we are looking at making these conversations or bringing these conversations in other countries so that we can raise youth voices from, say, Kenya, Tanzania, Nigeria, South Africa into one document. And that is kind of our plan. But it's a process, so it will take time. But that is what we hope to achieve.

ORDU: Sounds wonderful. Morris, let's turn to you. What would be your top two recommendations to the African group of negotiators going to Egypt in November?

NYOMBI: One of the first things I should have to remind them is that when you are going there, you are going as a messenger, not a listener. At COP26, everything failed, because the people we sent did not bother to deliver the message. But this time around it is in Africa, we need to make sure that we upfront finance. Because in the last four decades, people have been talking about climate adaptation, climate adaptation, but we cannot have any of that without support. Many of our infrastructure have been destroyed. We need to build back better. Setting up resilience needs money. The flooding that we received last year in western Uganda, we haven't recovered from the wounds that happened. So, the only time is now to upfront climate finance.

The next thing is African negotiators need to understand that African green energy is the key to unlock growth. So when we ask, we need to put up Africa energy on top. We need more investment in this. Also last year, African Development Bank had another target of 700 billion. Where was that money put and was that money approved? We need to know. Because these are one of the, some of the targets that we took to Glasgow.

And also loss and damage funds. Actually, my overall point is on finance, because we have talked and talked a lot. Last year, Africa was under attack on climate impacts. Kenya, the game park was under attack, our animals—according to BBC, they said over 300 animals were found dead. And these are some of the challenges whenever we delay. Actions means actions, not reactions. So, negotiators should understand that when they come back, we are going to demand the results. Not like last time. If we forgot, this time we will not.

ORDU: Fascinating. So, Hilda, if you had the opportunity to speak for yourself at COP27 in Egypt, what priority outcomes would you particularly seek from world leaders?

NAKABUYE: Just to add in what Morris has said, we need finance. We need to cater for our loss and damage because we have been facing the effects of climate change first hand.

And another thing is we need clean energy. We need renewable energy because this is the future. The future is sustainable. The future is clean. The future is green. We should stop investing in fossil fuels. Africa is not a fossil fuel continent. We are agriculturalists. We are farmers. And we depend on our environment for survival. Why would we be investing billions into fossil fuels, and yet we have alternatives that are free of charge? Africa as a continent receives sunshine throughout the year. We should make use of this opportunity—it's cheap and available. We don't need to invest a lot of money into fossil fuels that end up destroying us and our environment. We need cleaner alternatives. We have sunlight. We have wind. We have water. We should invest in these.

If Africa is well invested in terms of solar energy, it can even power the world. Our sunlight is free of charge. And this is one of the things that I would highlight. Right now, East Africa is facing a threat in regards to the East African crude oil pipeline project that is being

operated by Total. This will be the world's longest heated crude oil pipeline ever. And it will affect millions of Africans or East Africans. We are battling with effects from floods, with droughts, with landslides, with high rising temperatures. We do not need more effects from an oil pipeline, and that's why we need to invest in renewable energy, because it's sustainable and it's safe.

ORDU: And, of course, as you both rightly mentioned, our continent is facing the brutal effects of climate. We also happen to have the solutions. For example, next door to you in Uganda is DRC Congo, which is the second largest lungs of the planet in the terms of the Congo basin. And then, of course, we have so many rare earth minerals in your region, in Congo DRC, and many other countries in East Africa as well. These are all part of the solutions which Africa is contributing and will continue to contribute in the future even though the rest of the world is really, really, as you said, do they really listen? Are they listening? Will they listening at COP27.

These are some of the challenges we are facing in terms of what Africa brings to the table. And yet all we know is that mostly the consequences, the consequences of climate change, as you all mentioned—the Sahara Desert creeping increasingly southwards; in the Horn of Africa we see a lot of drought, we see in Madagascar and many parts of our continent. So, it's been very, very interesting to speak with both of you, two youth climate activists from Uganda. Hilda, thank you very much and, indeed, Morris, a climate activist as well, I really appreciate your taking the time to speak with us this morning. Thank you very much.

I'm Aloysius Uche Ordu, and this has been Foresight Africa. To learn more about what you heard today, find this episode online at Brookings dot edu slash Foresight Africa podcast. Each episode will be listed on its own web page and there will be links to the content discussed in the episode.

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Thank you very much.