

BROOKINGS

FORESIGHT AFRICA
PODCAST

**The Brookings Institution
Africa Growth Initiative**

Foresight Africa Podcast

“Liberia’s agriculture minister on her vision for farming and food in Liberia”

Wednesday, July 5, 2023

Guest:

HON. JEANINE COOPER
Minister of Agriculture
Republic of Liberia

Host:

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

Episode Summary:

Jeanine Cooper, minister of agriculture for the Republic of Liberia, shares her transformative vision for agriculture in her country, one that is green, regenerative, appealing to youth, and promotes local consumption. A rice farmer herself, Minister Cooper also talks about the importance of that crop, and how Liberian agriculture is responding to the challenges of climate change.

[music]

ORDU: I'm Aloysius Uche Ordu, director of the Africa Growth Initiative at the Brookings Institution, and this is *Foresight Africa* podcast.

Since 2011, the Africa Growth Initiative at Brookings has published a high-profile report entitled *Foresight Africa*. The report covers key events and trends likely to shape affairs in Africa in the year ahead. On this podcast, I engage with the report authors as well as policymakers, industry leaders, Africa's youths, and other key figures. Learn more on our website, Brookings dot edu slash Foresight Africa podcast.

My guest today is the Honorable Jeanine Cooper. Jeanine is the Minister of Agriculture for Liberia. She previously served in various capacities at the United Nations, including as the permanent observer to the Africa Union and the Economic Commission for Africa, and as head of the liaison office for the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, UNOCHA. She also spent many years in the private sector as owner of Fabrar Liberia, the largest rice processing and producing company in Liberia.

Jeanine wrote a brilliant essay for us in *Foresight Africa 2023*, which we will discuss in today's podcast. Honorable Jeanine, a warm welcome to our show.

COOPER: Thank you so much Aloysius, it's such a pleasure to be here.

ORDU: Let's then start, Honorable Minister. Both your parents served in the government of Liberia for many years. Could you share with our listeners, how did that affect your career choice?

COOPER: Well, that's a question I've never been asked before. It's actually multiple generations of my family have been public servants in the Liberian government. And after high school, I always wanted to study development because that's what we were on track to doing. And it interested me, all of the dynamics. How do you grow an economy, grow a country.

And so, yeah, when you say my career choice, I didn't come directly into development. Originally started in the private sector, then went and joined a humanitarian action when Liberia plunged into civil war. And I stayed in humanitarian action until I joined the UN, and then retired back to my first love, which was the private sector in agriculture. From there, I came into the government. So, almost a third or fourth career, if you will.

ORDU: I can imagine, indeed. You founded Fabrar Liberia, the country's largest rice processing and producing company as we talked about in the introduction. Could you tell us more about that company, some of the challenges you faced in setting it up?

COOPER: In setting it up ... given our history in Liberia and my own family history, agriculture has been in my blood. And I watched my father, and the government of Liberia, and many other people really struggle with rice production, and we were doing very well with that. And then we had the rice riots. I was in university at the time.

Sadly, we tended to shift our policy direction in the country away from production and more into ensuring stability of supplies. And that is to say, importing. Our imports shot up I think three- or four-fold after the rice riots in 1979. And we didn't look back until recent events have shown us that maybe we need to start and pick this up.

But for me, with Fabrar—Fabrar is actually an acronym that I developed from the first two letters of the names of my three children, Fabio, Breece and Ariane. I thought that the best way to do anything would be to showcase that it could be done. Almost a generation had passed since we were actively cultivating rice and even that had been very much government led. And I wanted to show that the private sector, that it was possible and was well on track for doing that when I accepted this post in the government.

If I may add one thing, the president asked me as we were discussing whether I would accept this job. President Weah, he said, I want you to do for Liberia what you've done with your company. And so, that's what I've set out to do in my time as minister.

ORDU: That's really, really impressive—actually the acronyms of representing the initials of your children and of course being approached by the head of state to do for the nation what you have done in your private company. You couldn't get a better recognition than that. So, congratulations, honorable minister.

COOPER: Thank you, thank you, thank you so much.

ORDU: Sure. And as minister of agriculture, your vision is to elevate Liberian farmers from subsistence farming to commercial smallholders. What challenges and opportunities have you faced in realizing that vision?

COOPER: Oh, well, it's a huge vision. And it's not just in Liberia or in many places. For Liberia, agriculture has long meant cash crops: rubber, cocoa, coffee, oil palm. We didn't have massive vegetable farms or food. We're not really food producers at huge commercial scale. Food was produced at subsistence level in smallholder farms.

And so, over the years here have been calls for treating agriculture as a business and not as a development project. And I often adhere to what President Akinwumi Adesina from the African Development Bank said from the time he was in as minister of agriculture in Nigeria, that's the direction we need to go.

But how do you do it? That's always been the challenge is the how. When we're used to producing food in our backyards or at subsistence level to now take it commercial, when we have always traditionally made a distinction between cash crops and food crops, except for a small portion of the population—how do you do that? How do you foster that?

And particularly in a country like Liberia emerging from civil war, in recovery mode, and then we got thrown back with Ebola. It's difficult to wean ourselves off the kind of dependence that we have on development projects and humanitarian actions to now take a commercial approach.

And I'll find almost 95% outside of the major plantations like Firestone and Golden Veroleum, et cetera, agriculture in Liberia is largely in the informal sector, which means that principles of business and commercial activity have to be started almost

from scratch. So, it's challenges and opportunities. The opportunity is that the willingness is there. And the willingness is there and people want to do it.

Then comes all of the other things like access to finance. Agriculture is not seen as a viable commercial prospect by our commercial banks. And so, none of the commercial banks had an agricultural lending product. So, short-term loans, high interest for quick turnaround, that's not really suited to the sector. So, investments into the sector tended to be either through microfinance, which is not sustainable and usually lands the farmer in problems, or for larger plantations, such as the Firestones and the [lacks], et cetera, they have easier access to finance than the Liberian farmer typically did.

So, those have been the challenges and opportunities. Those challenges are opportunities for us to transform and to transform from scratch. And the good thing about transforming from scratch is that you don't have to retrofit. You don't have to change the policy and it's basically the mindset that you have to do and demonstrating what can be done. Regional partnerships and other partnerships help. Development projects also help.

The opportunity in all of this is that to align our development trajectory to de-risking the agriculture sector and making it attractive for commercial investment at small, medium, and large scale. And that's what we've been working to do and I must say I must commend our partners, our development partners, and also the government and the president for the vision to support this kind of move.

ORDU: So, as you look back on this journey thus far, honorable minister, what would you say are the most memorable achievements of your ministry so far?

COOPER: Oh boy. Well, I mean, I've been minister for three years and a couple of months. And I became minister two weeks before COVID hit Liberia. So, it was a completely the world upside down period where everything you knew to be true about everything shifted. And again, that was an opportunity. That's an opportunity for us to look within. And we had seen that during the war, we had seen that, and we call it resilience come true. And so, it was an opportunity to reach that.

But there have been moments when I've been floored by what we're doing. One of them is when I see groups of smallholder farmers dancing and welcoming as if welcoming a hero, the first tractors that we managed to finance through matching grants to come in and help them to plow their farms. And that joy, that moment for me was one of them. Making, helping, facilitating mechanization to happen in the country, where we just didn't have that before, not for decades, not in the Liberian private sector anyway. That's one.

Another one is sitting talking to some women that we call the Coco Queens. Some of the discoveries that we have, discoveries as they say, that women are much better at post-harvest processing of food than men. And that women are the ones who, when you look at the food systems, do most of the work in Liberia from farming to harvesting to processing to cooking and then even to feeding people, marketing, selling the food, et cetera et cetera. That's mainly women's work So, when you see women actually active in producing premium high quality cocoa, and even chocolate, that blows my mind.

Let me tell you another one, and this is an important one for me. It just happened yesterday. Yesterday I sat for my breakfast and I realized that apart from the butter that I put on my toast, the eggs were grown in Liberia; the bread was made in Liberia; the sausage and bacon were coming from pigs in Liberia; the coffee I was drinking Liberica coffee from Briscoe coffee; the chocolate paste spread that I put on my toast was also from Liberian cocoa beans. And it was just by chance the juices that I was drinking, I did a combination of two kinds of juices, ginger and beesap and pineapple, and all of them produced right here in Liberia. That was not possible a few years ago. And it's that transformation that shows what we can do and what we can aspire to.

And so that was a proud moment for me. I sat there and took a picture of my breakfast, and I'm happy to show it to you one of these days.

ORDU: I think that's a phenomenal story. The phenomenal story of how self-reliance, right, who would have thought after what Liberia has been through, the civil war, the Ebola crisis, that you come to a state now where what you just described now is the envy of many countries on our continent who, the reliance on imported goods and all that. So, kudos to you and the administration for the work you're doing on agriculture.

COOPER: Thank you, thank you so much. And it just shows when you can see what is possible, it's much easier for you to put your weight behind it.

So, the interest from the private sector in agriculture, in agribusiness, in agrifoods, in processing, marketing, and everything has really tripled, quadrupled. It's difficult to measure because we didn't do a baseline.

And that was the basis of me starting my rice company was looking at a local variety of rice, a red rice, which is healthy and organic everywhere else in the world, but had basically been forgotten in Liberia. And so, this rejuvenation—now today, there's 10, 20 vendors of red rice because we started something 12 years ago. And those are some of the achievements that show you what is possible when you are intentional about transformation.

ORDU: Talking about the red rice, I know you've done some more work on regenerative agriculture in general. Could you share a little bit more about that for our listeners, please?

COOPER: Sometimes, you know, a mindset change, you need to sit down and study, and the "aha moment" came from me when a couple of years ago, I think it was July 2021, when the U.S. Congress mandated or gave an instruction to the U.S. Department of Agriculture to go and study carbon and the possibilities for carbon banking. And I just read that just by chance. And then leading on to what does that mean? The U.S. Department of Agriculture, carbon? you know, for me, carbon was forests. And then I saw some videos, this man showed his farm, he was very proud of his farm. And I looked at the picture and I said, but his farm looks like our farms. He's intercropping. That's what we do. We don't have a culture of monocropping in Liberia. He's letting land lie fallow for a year or two and letting it regenerate. But that's what we do, but we call it shifting cultivation. And it's a negative thing when we do it. But he's going to be paid for this.

And then they showed other things for rehabilitating soil organic matter, including using biochar. And I said, but that's what we do when we burn our farms in West Africa before planting. So, a lot of things look familiar, but with different terms.

And so we've been exploring and we just signed a partnership with regenerative hubs to set up a climate and agriculture center where we can actually study how we can do more of the things that we're doing that actually sequester carbon and take it out of the atmosphere, they call it carbon removal, and put it into the soils. The crops grow better.

One of our multinational companies did an experiment of intercropping coffee and rubber and found that the rubber trees grew faster, had more production than those that were grown just alone. Similarly, with the coffee trees, the yields were higher. So, I mean, there's evidence from all over the world.

And so, we want to study that much more closely. We want to have an institute where, or a center where, we can get the best of the minds because there's a new field—regenerative agriculture—although it's what we've been practicing for centuries. How can we do it better and in a more systematic way? And how can we then reap the benefits of farming in this regenerative way? Not only the benefits of higher yields and higher production, and organic production too, but also what's out there for environmental payments that we could possibly get for our farmers. So, we're very excited about that work. It's just starting.

ORDU: That's fascinating indeed. Let's now stick to the issue of climate change since you already alluded to that. So, how is climate change impacting agriculture in Liberia? And what's being done to address climate risks?

COOPER: Yeah, what's being done. Climate change, it's been creeping up on us in Liberia because we're a tropical rainforest and because we hold almost half of the Upper Guinea Forest, the remaining tracts of forest. We didn't really pay attention to it until our main river started to ... for example, the Saint Paul River which provides us the hydro power for our electricity in Monrovia, the river levels would not be high enough every year during intense periods of the dry season, something we're not used to. We did, for example, an integrated rice and fish farm on we call the mighty Cestos River, one that we don't know as a river that can dry up. But the river levels fell so low that the rice and the fish were lost.

So, there's been these little impacts. Of course, coastal erosion and things like that that we've been facing. But Liberia has escaped some of the worst of the disasters that come along with climate change like the droughts and the flash floods, et cetera. We've had them but very, very low quality.

But let me say where the real impact on climate change has been for us. And that's been how it's affecting because we're still an import-dependent country, particularly for our food. If it's affecting those countries that we import from, then either the supply is lower or the prices are higher of the food that we're importing. And so the multiple headwinds that we faced in 2022 have been building up. And so, we were impacted by the global shocks—we've talked about globalization and have all been very proud of our role in globalization. And then in a global economy, well, that's a double-edged sword. And so, we started to realize that we need to build that resilience to not just climate change as it impacts us, but also to climate change in

general and the food sovereignty that we need to move towards to be able to be resilient.

ORDU: You mentioned the multiple headwinds that all our countries have faced. COVID-19, of course, conflicts north, you know, in the Sahel, north of where you are; commodity price inflation due to the Russian invasion of Ukraine; food insecurity around the world, and of course the burgeoning, the burgeoning debt crisis that many of our countries across the continent face. You alluded to the need for resilience. I was just wondering, minister, how is the government responding specifically to address some of these multiple, multiple shocks?

COOPER: Yeah, well, the shocks, like I say, they were kind of insidious. They took some time for us to realize that we were in a crisis. With COVID we did the lockdown and then quickly realized that if we restrict movement we can't get food into our urban areas, which are dependent on food from the rural areas and from imports.

So, probably we responded more quickly than most when it came to COVID and all of that. We knew to put on the masks and take the precautions, washing the hands, keeping distance. We'd had that in Ebola. But we were being impacted in a way that kind of took us by surprise.

So, one of the things that we did, of course, the first thing that we did was to tap into some of our development resources that were coming in. And that's linked to what you talked about, the debt, and found ourselves borrowing a little bit more and shifting the focus from some of our development projects towards responding and building resilience to address the COVID crisis. That hadn't even ended then then we had the Ukraine crisis. And then we had, of course, the climate change that we've talked about a little bit.

One of the things that the government is looking at is exploring through the National Climate Change Steering Committee, exploring ways that we can monetize or get some value for our natural capital that we have. If we say we have, and we do, have 48 or 49% of the remaining Upper Guinea forests—we're a biodiversity hotspot, West Africa's most important—but what does that mean? We have a REDD+ to reduced emissions from deforestation and forest degradation. We have that program going, but no major adaptation fund had come in.

So, the Ministry of Agriculture, we did get a grant from the adaptation fund to start to look at how we can build resilience for farmers. But the government itself is taking the approach of, well, let's look at what's out there in terms of climate financing. And we're starting to explore what is there. We've got this tremendous asset. We're providing huge ecosystem services to the world in general, but also to ourselves. How can we capitalize on that to finance our development so we don't have to drown ourselves in debt?

And that's something that we've been looking at increasingly and you've probably heard, well, you may have heard me speak on this, other ministers, even the president has spoken on this at various COP 26 and 27. We will be doing that more intensely. But it's a new area for us. We had one pathway to development that's too depend on our partners and on our own resources, but we now see another pathway that's opening and we're exploring what's best for the country.

ORDU: So, minister, let's now turn to your brilliant essay for us in *Foresight Africa 2023*. You remember the genesis of this when we were on that panel at the UNDP—

COOPER: —That's right, that's right. Yes. That's right.

ORDU: during UNGA. So, I'm glad that you said yes and wrote the brilliant essay. In that essay, you highlight the importance of getting rice production right in Liberia.

COOPER: That's right, that's right.

ORDU: So, for the benefit of our listeners, why does rice play such an important role in Liberia's diet?

COOPER: Well, in the diet, I guess it's a preference. You know, when you look at the history of rice production in West Africa, there's a belt that stretches from Senegal to probably Western Nigeria, and Liberia is at the heart of it. And the place that's now known or has been known as Liberia for the last 200 years, that place used to be the center of rice trading. Coastal sailors and ships at sea would stop into our riverways and trade rice for their journeys. So, we've been cultivating rice for centuries.

Mention has even made way back, almost a thousand years ago, that this whole area was known for rice. So, we've been cultivating it. And it is a staple. You know, in Liberia we say, and I find out when I said this at the Feed Africa Summit in Dakar, I had several other West Africans come and say, we say the same thing in our country, particularly Sierra Leone, Nigeria: If you haven't eaten rice, you haven't eaten. That's what we say.

And so, the rice riots in 1979, although it's a long time ago, and more than half of our population was not born at that time, was very significant for us because it questioned, it brought into question a lot of the things that we almost took for granted. And the genesis of the riots was simply a government attempt to increase the tariff on imported rice to support local production and speed up local production.

Now, you see when you've had a riot and then the following year the government was overthrown, still linked to the riot, rice then becomes a security concern, and no government wants to mess with the formula that's working. We certainly don't want to be having riots over food anymore.

And so, for all those decades the sector was relatively neglected. The irrigated farms that we had and the investments that the government had made up until that time in rice production were kind of let go dormant.

But rice is very important to us. We want to make sure all the time that rice is there and available for people.

ORDU: On that actually, what was accomplished and what lessons were learned from the National Rice Stabilization Task Force that the government has set up?

COOPER: That was a task force that the president set up because it's happened a few times before, of course. We had the war and we've had pipeline breaks in our imported rice, but we had shortages. It wasn't for very long, but we as a government the last thing we want, and the president certainly did not want us to be in a situation where we didn't have any rice in country, dependent on imported rice. And there was a pipeline break of a few weeks. So, we were scrambling.

So, he set up the rice stabilization force to ensure that the supply of rice would remain steady. And one of the lessons that we learned, sometimes challenging assumptions, the 40-year assumption that we had, that we always have to keep the price of rice low—we have the lowest price of rice in West Africa, probably in Africa, the imported rice. So, we were even subsidizing imports to make sure that the price was kept low enough for the population.

And what we found, and the task force, we interviewed, we went out into the markets, we checked warehouses and depots and stores, talked to people, the Market Women's Association, and the overwhelming push was if the price has to increase, as it was increasing everywhere else, and we were still trying to maintain it at the same low level, if it has to increase, it can increase. Not a lot, but it can increase. Just make sure the supply stays steady.

Now, that's a challenge and opportunity for somebody like me in the Ministry of Agriculture, because you can't say let's lower imports or put a tax on imports if you don't have production up to a level where it can substitute for imports. And so, we've used that in tandem to the cost increase or the price increase in imported rice on the markets.

We've also started what I call a rice offensive—I didn't invent that term, the West African, the ECOWAS countries have been doing this for several years. But we started a rice offensive where we're going to boost production for smallholder farmers, for medium-sized producers and processors, and we're looking to attract larger investments in commercial rice farming into the country. And that is underway.

Right now we have teams out there supporting—and this is important because the government is not doing it themselves—we are working with the private sector, with the cooperatives, with the farmers themselves to make sure they have everything they need to boost their production. The processors are all in the private sector. It's not government setting up mills, and the ones that we do have, we have turned them over to private sector entities to run them because we want to build sustainability into it. And so, we're putting a lot of resources. And I must credit our development partners. They've come in with grants and loans and everything to support this effort.

So, we're looking this planting season, which is underway right now, to plant between 10 to 20,000 hectares of mechanized, farmed rice, working with farmer-based farming communities, farmer-based organizations, cooperatives, farmers, processors in the private sector. And it's underway and I know we're going to do it. That's the first start because we've set ourselves a goal: in four planting seasons, we want to reach 75% rice self-sufficiency in Liberia.

And we know it can be done.

ORDU: That's an amazing agenda indeed, and I wish you all the very best in that. Honorable minister, one of the things, as you know, the magic, the magic of the green revolution is really about four things or so: improved varieties of planting materials; access to inputs; irrigation water, especially, especially when the farmer wants it; and then of course, agronomic practices, extension services, et cetera. As you travel around our continent, why do we still have many green areas in Africa that have not seen this revolution?

COOPER: Well, I wouldn't want to speak for everybody, but I lived for 12 years in Kenya. And Kenya is one of those countries that embraced the green revolution. Yields were boosted, yes, but it also created a dependency on certain kinds of things like the fertilizers and the kinds of varieties of seeds that can't exist without a lot of inputs that many farmers can't afford.

And so, if you plant your field without all of the inputs being there and you find that your crop is failing—and we've had multiple crop failures in some of the green revolution countries—there are lessons you can learn from that. But I want to look at a country like Liberia because we've been in some sort of turbulence or civil crisis and had really neglected any green revolutionary things after we first started in the '70s and continue a little bit in the 1980s. We've been busy with the civil war, with different things, so the green revolution passed us by.

And interestingly, we don't have that dependence on fertilizers, and that's something to keep. We also have our local varieties of rice that had been developed in our Central Agriculture Research Institute—one of the oldest in Africa—had been developed there adapted to our local conditions, our tropical rainforests, undulating hillsides, et cetera, et cetera. We had local varieties that yield as much as, for example, the New Rice for Africa, NERICA, that everybody talks about and now we grow here as well.

So, we've gone back to the basics, the things that we knew. We have our research institutes. We're now multiplying the seeds of our local varieties that, for example, one of them the stalk is very, very thin. It's like a broomstick, it's so thin that the birds can't land on it. Birds are one of the pests that can destroy a rice farm. So, it doesn't grow very high, but it's very high yielding, beautiful, organically grown rice.

So, we're looking at how we can combine the best technologies of the green revolution and our local knowledge, our local varieties adapted to our growing conditions and seeing how we can help the farmers do what they do in the best possible way given modern technology.

I've resisted to a certain extent gifts and massive purchasing of chemical fertilizers. Because we don't have that dependence we have to manage how we now use it and make sure we're using it. And it can be good. But if you use it in the wrong quantities, if you don't have the appropriate technology to apply it, you can also do damage, environmental damage and damage to the crops.

So, I've also resisted the push everybody has told us, go for lowland rice farming. Lowland rice farming, yes, it has higher yields, but yield is not everything because it's a higher cost for the farmer. And you can subsidize some of that. And in most countries, agriculture, particularly food production, is subsidized. Well, we don't have the resources in Liberia to subsidize the farmers.

So, let's push the farmers to grow rice the way they know. If it's rain-fed, it can also be irrigated. So, help them to have the irrigation systems on their upland rice, help them to have those inputs, access to inputs. I call it de-risking and making sure the enablers are there, the seed feed and fertilizer organic as much as possible, bio-fertilizer, bio-pesticides to the extent possible.

But we have an opportunity to do it right, to do a new green revolution that's environmentally friendly. And that is not such a burden on the farmer that they will farm themselves out of existence, so to speak.

So, we're trying some exciting things here. And I think that that's the opportunity that Liberia offers. When you're starting from scratch, you don't need to go and undo, regenerate your soils necessarily. We need to build them up, but we have the technology and the means and the extension services. They are weak, but the government extension services may be weak because we're a developing country and we don't have a huge budget.

But peer-to-peer and farmer-to-farmer extension is happening. Extension is happening in the private sector and that's facilitated by mobile technology, et cetera. People are talking to each other and say, okay, I tried this and this happened. Have you had this? Chat groups all around, social media is helping. People are learning what works for us and what doesn't work and some of the consequences and the rewards of communicating that way.

ORDU: Yeah, it's interesting, minister, that you mentioned the technology, a subject we haven't covered in a great deal. As you know, our young people who are more adept at technology are increasingly attracted to the cities and to the services sector in our cities, leaving the rural area. What advice would you give our young Africans to pursue careers in the agricultural sector?

COOPER: Well, the first advice is for them to not see agriculture as farming. That is not the only aspect of agriculture, and there's so many ways to farm. It doesn't have to be the back-breaking labor, which are all the images that you see on social media.

To see agriculture beyond farming, to see it as a business, that's attractive to them. To look into processing—for example, I told you about my breakfast. I'm living here in the city. City people don't have time to go out there, collect the eggs from the chickens and slaughter the hog, et cetera, et cetera. They need to purchase consumer packaged goods. There's a huge industry in food prep, food processing, the consumer packaged goods industry, meals ready to eat, if I may use that terminology, *gari* that we call mixed with peanuts and cereals that you can just add water and eat. We're doing all of that. And that's agriculture writ large.

And so, we need that kind of communication. We need to make agriculture attractive. I'm not saying that we have all the answers in Liberia, but we're working on our communication and our branding.

And recently, what was funny, I was speaking at an event in Dakar, and so they had an array of ministers, even heads of state, et cetera. And one fellow was sitting there and somebody said, oh, that guy is a typical farmer, he looks like a farmer. And I said, well, I'm a farmer. And he said, but you don't look like a farmer. Well, this is what we need to share that message. Akinwumi Adesina is a farmer. So many people are farmers and we need to know that it's not just the person bent over that is actually an agriculturalist, that we have agriculturalists across the spectrum and make it attractive for the young people.

One of the things that's helping, and I just wanted to say this, we have some young people who come up in the businesses like J-Palm is one of our young entrepreneurs in agribusiness, he's doing palm kernel, he's doing cosmetics, and

different things, and we have an array of them. If he puts out a social media message and say, come and I will tell you about such and such opportunity, within an hour he can fill the room with 100, 200 young people who will walk, they will take bikes, they will take cars, they will come any way possible to listen to him.

So, that peer-to-peer learning we shouldn't neglect. They're not learning from the massive reports that we like to write. They're learning from YouTube videos. And I have the example of another entrepreneur who set up his whole factory—because it was during Ebola or something—set up his factory and there were no technicians and the equipment came from China. They set it up using YouTube videos. So, young people are using the technology. And we just have to let them do their things.

That incident where J-Palm, Mahmud Johnson, called and in a couple of hours he had a hundred people—I was the oldest person there by far. The only government person there, and I'm sitting there and I asked this question: So, how did you all learn about this event? We asked how many of you have read the newspapers today? Not a hand. How many of you have listened to the radio today? One person out of 200. How many of you have been on WhatsApp or Facebook or YouTube or Instagram or TikTok or whatever? Today, all the hands go up.

That's what we need to understand. Our ways mean something to us, but we're another generation, we're the generation going out. The young people communicate completely differently. So, if we want to make it attractive to them, we don't have to talk to them in our ways, writing them 20-page reports on how to do something—they don't get past page one. But you put out a little video or set up a little chat group and show them how to do it, and they flock to it.

[music]

ORDU: Honorable minister, on that positive note, the youths are our future. Thank you, thank you very, very much for making the time to speak with us today. Have a wonderful day.

COOPER: Thank you, Aloysius. It's been a huge pleasure for me. Thank you so much.

ORDU: I'm Aloysius Uche Ordu, and this has been *Foresight Africa*. To learn more about what you just heard today, you can find this episode online at Brookings dot edu slash Foresight Africa podcast.

The *Foresight Africa* podcast is brought to you by the Brookings Podcast Network. Send your feedback and questions to podcasts at Brookings dot edu. My special thanks to the production team, including Kuwilileni Hauwanga, supervising producer; Fred Dews, producer; Nicole Ntunigre and Sakina Djantchiemo, associate producers; and Gastón Reboledo, audio engineer.

The show's art was designed by Shavanthi Mendis based on the concept by the creative from Blossom. Additional support for this podcast comes from my colleagues at Brookings Global and the Office of Communications at Brookings.