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FORESIGHT AFRICA  
PODCAST

**The Brookings Institution  
Africa Growth Initiative**

**Foresight Africa Podcast**

**“Conserving biodiversity from Angola’s  
water tower to Botswana’s Okavango Delta”**

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*Guest:*

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*Episode Summary:*

Kerllen Costa, Angola country director of National Geographic’s Okavango Wilderness Project, tells the story of the flora and fauna of Botswana’s Okavango Delta, fed by rivers that cross international boundaries and originate in the “water tower” highlands of Angola. Costa explains how important a relationship with local people in the region is key to conservation and sustainability for the vital watershed.

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**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.

Today is the last episode of season two of *Foresight Africa* podcast. In this episode, we will depart from our normal interviews with the authors of our report. Instead, we'll bring you a story of one of Africa's unique treasures, the water towers of southern Africa and Angola, the source of the Okavango, the Zambezi, and the Cuando Rivers. From the highlands of Angola, an area with the world's largest concentration of land mines, the Okavango River flows through Namibia to the Delta in Botswana.

Millions of people and wildlife depend on the Okavango River. With growing human demand for water, agriculture, food security, biodiversity, and climate change, it's imperative that the water continues to flow unimpeded, that it continues to be protected, and that it is not polluted. Today we bring you the story of the flora and fauna of the Okavango River Basin, the local communities who have, against all odds, preserved this pristine environment, and individuals who have dedicated their lives to protect the water tower for posterity.

I am delighted to welcome to our show Mr. Kerllen Costa, country director for Angola National Geographic's Okavango Wilderness Project. Kerllen hosts a brilliant podcast series titled *Guardians of the River*, which I encourage you to track down and listen to.

Kerllen, it is indeed great to see you again.

**COSTA:** A great pleasure, Aloysius. Really am honored to be here.

**ORDU:** Great. So for the benefit of our listeners in Africa and around the world, could you tell us A, how you became involved in the National Geographic's Okavango Wilderness Project? And B, what is the goal of this project?

**COSTA:** Thanks again, Aloysius. My story with the National Geographic's Okavango Wilderness Project is quite a peculiar one. I started with the project in February 2016, so I had just come from finishing my second degree in environmental and life sciences in South Africa. And the project had done their first survey in Angola by the end of 2015, which was on the Cuito River, the main tributary to the Okavango system. And my sister had participated in that expedition as a specialist for freshwater fish.

So as I returned from South Africa, I heard about this advertisement for a position which was someone to download and upload data from watches, tablets, and computers. And my sister invited me to apply for the position. I was a little bit

reluctant because I didn't see myself doing that type of work. It wasn't what I was envisioning for myself. But she insisted and I applied.

The project got back to me saying that unfortunately they had already found a specialist from India to do that type of work, but that they found my curriculum and experience quite interesting. And because of the fact that I was Angolan, they invited me to participate as a volunteer, and that's how I joined my first expedition on February 2016 as a volunteer to do assistance for the different type of researchers at the Cuanavale source lake and Cuanavale River. So that's how I first got involved.

For your second question, what is the overall goal of the project? Basically the project has realized and shown to the world how important is the Angolan water tower. So basically we have this system in the eastern part of Angola, which has been undocumented for several decades because of the civil war. And a lot of our research shows that it is a crucial system in terms of water supply, in terms of biodiversity, in terms of endemic species, mainly because of its water supplies all of southern Africa, some of Central Africa, the most important river basins in southern Africa have their water coming from this place. And as a project, we believe that if other areas further downstream are protected and preserved, then it only makes sense for the sources of those basins to also be protected. So the general objective is protecting the headwaters in Angola and creating the largest biodiversity corridor in the world.

**ORDU:** That's fascinating indeed. In your podcast, Kerllen, *Guardians of the River*, you talked about the decades of war and conflict in Angola. How has that shaped your approach to your work on this project?

**COSTA:** In Angola, depending on the generation, especially up to my generation, we like to say that the war has shaped who we are as people, has shaped the way we think, has shaped the way we interact with the world, and the way we interact with our own natural landscapes and with each other. Obviously, our war, our civil war was one of the longest in the world, certainly one of the most intense since World War II. But because of everything we lived through of this war, and it was really a war that wrecked the country, that separated people, displaced millions, millions of people, of course killed millions of people.

And it could be ironic, but we say that this in turn has made us a lot more humble people. It has made us people that actually appreciate with so much more intensity the little things of life. And we recognize how as little as certain things might be for other people in other parts of the world, for us, it's like a privilege. So it makes us people who are always happy or always thankful for every single opportunity that we have.

So with the work that that has allowed me or allowed me to actually connect very profoundly with the different communities living in this remote landscape because of these aspects that I just mentioned, it allowed me to be aware of how people are sensitive, but also very welcoming and how they like to share things and has allowed them to see me as one of them. Because of this humbleness and because of this capability to connect with people and understanding that every connection is really important, is really meaningful for everything that we do.

And the project has dedicated itself to research. But constantly throughout the years, this connection was always happening on the side and certainly the connection, the approach, this human-to-human approach is what has allowed science to actually developed in our project very.

**ORDU:** In the same podcast, Kerllen, you also mentioned the discovery of vast quantities of peat. What is the significance of this finding?

**COSTA:** The discovery of peat, and this is, I think, one of the one of the topics that we discuss a lot. It wasn't really discovering, it was understanding that peat exists there. And these local communities where the people who actually bring that to light, to our minds because we were traversing rivers, exploring the forest, and we didn't really realize that there was peat because it was just hidden under the grass, under the floodplains.

And it was a little bit funny because we were stuck. We were trying to navigate the Cuito River and as we exited the source lake of the Cuito River, there was no rain and there was a little stream going down after the lake and we were pulling our canoes, 300 kgs each canoe, across the grass for two weeks, only traversing a couple of kilometers, but for two weeks we were pulling because there was no water.

But then as we were pulling it, we realized that we're not getting ourselves into something, getting stuck waist deep. And we were really confused what was happening because there was no river. And that's when we decided to take a sample, meter deep sample of that soil. And we understood that we were actually traversing on top of a lot of peat. And that made us understand, with the help of the locals, that every single valley in that landscape is actually peat. And we're talking about an area of more than 150,000 square kilometers, and most of it being peat.

The importance of this, I think it's one of the biggest discoveries as project, because as we all know the developments, the effects of climate change, specifically to Africa and specifically to this part of Africa, and peat is one of the biggest deposits of carbon. Peat is one of the elements, one of the systems that has been sequestering more carbon than anything else. So we're talking about millions of tons of carbon being sequestered by the Angolan peat every single year, and that cannot be highlighted, emphasized enough how important it is. So we're talking about a region that has been contributing to the resilience of climate change for many years. And now with its proper scientific documentation, we can actually elevate protection in order to maintain that. And we can say it's the second largest peat deposits ever found in Africa and one of the biggest in the world. So it just showcases the importance of helping to protect this place.

**ORDU:** That is really, really a fascinating statement you just made there, because we keep telling the world how much the rest of the world owe to Africa. And the idea of this, the Okavango peat, and of course the Congo Basin peat, when you combine these two, not to mention the river basins, the Nile, the Niger, the Congo, the Senegal, Orange, and the Limpopo, et cetera, the world owes Africa so much more. I just wish that we Africans and our policymakers can actually showcase these things in global conversations because there's so much, so much riding on humanity's survival on our continent. But thank you for sharing that.

Sticking to climate change, this is already wreaking havoc, as you know, across our continent, the Sahel, the Horn of Africa, Central Asia in Central Africa, northern Mozambique, Madagascar, not too far from you guys in the south, and elsewhere on the continent. The impact of climate risks on water, agriculture, tourism, especially in view of our drier and warmer world, what are some of the impacts you're already studied or you've come to grips that you want to share with us?

**COSTA:** We all know that climate change, though being a natural process, it has been extremely exacerbated and aggravated by us, by humans, and mostly in developed countries because those are the countries that have sort of started their industrial revolution a long time ago, and the ones that actually produce more require more.

In terms of the effects in this part of the world and in Africa in general, the countries that you mentioned, it couldn't be more emphasized. Given geographical position, given climatic cycles, these parts of the world that actually are the least developed and the ones that contribute less for climatic changes are the ones who have been suffering the consequences the most.

You see examples like in northern Mozambique, Madagascar. And I can give you an example in Angola, because I spent a lot of time on the ground where people talk a lot about how different the processes and climatic processes have been. The change in rains where people normally start planting in August, but it's no longer starting to rain in August. It's only now starting in November and everything gets messed around when you planted something in August and the rains are not coming.

You can see how although there's the peat deposits in eastern Angola, there's untouched forests, you can still report on how people say that river flows are different. You have the example of the Cubango River that becomes the Kavango in Namibia, and the Okavango in Botswana, you can see that when it gets to the border between Angola and Namibia—and we've done two expeditions to highlight that scientifically—I don't like to alarm, but it's really on the brink of coming to the point where in certain months of the year, it will dry out in certain sections of the river. And we're talking about the fact that 80% of the Namibian population lives along that stretch of the river.

So the implications are ... are massive. And like I said, all these effects are in these countries that have never really contributed too much. So there's an extreme urgency and importance for us, the project, for different entities, for different governments, especially in Africa to inform in the best manner possible what these consequences are so that the world can realize what effects it is having on certain specific regions, and how can it best contribute to tackle or contribute for systems that can make these areas more resilient to these changes.

So the although the climatic cycles are really long, a lot longer than our lifespans, but you can feel them every single year here in this part of the world. So it couldn't be more stressed how important it is for us to realize that and to create systems that protect especially the people who are suffering the most.

**ORDU:** Extreme urgency, indeed. And I think that every effort and every good luck to you guys for the work you are doing, because pushing this narrative is absolutely

imperative. Because even though we contribute absolutely infinitesimal to the climate disaster facing the planet, the consequences are far, far greater in Africa than elsewhere. In one of the episodes, Kerllen, I'm intrigued by a statement you made that a landscape without people is just a landscape, but a landscape with people has soul. Could you tell us what you mean by that and the efforts being made to ensure that the local people in the project area contribute to the project and benefit from it?

**COSTA:** That's probably one of the most important statements for myself as a person and for myself as an Angolan, as an African. So the project itself based their activities for the majority of the first few years in scientific exploration, understanding what the ecosystem looked like, what kind of fauna and flora existed, what's the state of the rivers. So a series of scientific procedures that would inform how that landscape looked like.

And along those years the locals were constantly—because I was the liaising point with the locals—the locals were always guiding us to those processes. So the locals would show us what's the biodiversity hotspot. The locals would take us to forests they thought were interesting for us to research. The locals were already telling us certain things that would counter our scientific knowledge. And along that way, because I could hear a lot of knowledge being shared that science wasn't really taking that into account. That's when I decided to dig deeper and connect more profoundly with the people.

So what happened there was a realization for even for myself personally that there's only a story to tell about the landscape because there's people in it, and the people have been seeing the evolution of that landscape for millennia, I can say, for many, many generations. They are the scientific libraries that will inform us of these different cycles, these different changes in the landscape and its system. We can use different systems, satellites and a lot of sensors that we use to inform us of the landscape. But it doesn't give us a realistic understanding of what changes have been occurring and what those changes have been causing to the ecosystem if it's not felt, seen, absorbed by someone.

So we've come to a point now where a lot of our scientific discoveries actually are being reformulated after a while because of this profound diving with the communities. I'll give you a specific example where we always described this region of Angola as being the second largest Miombo forest, second largest subtropical forest in Africa. And the locals were informing us, this is not one forest. There's several different types of forest, there's several different types of vegetation. And we're now and we're finishing up a paper confirming with scientific methodology that there's actually seven different types of forest within what we would call this Miombo forest. So that's a great example on how these local people, the soul to the landscape that I was describing, has knowledge that science will take a couple of hundred years to discover.

So all the discoveries that we've made in the last five years, if it weren't for guidance and sharing of knowledge of the local people, it would have taken us several hundred years to understand those. So the conclusions that were coming up after five years the people already knew for a long time, and it's something embedded in their subconscious because they, you know, they grow up learning and seeing and interacting.

And then the sentence specifically was told to me by a really, really old person. I think he was 88 years old, where he was asking, Why are you coming with these scientists that are so focused on trying to understand the little snake or the little bird and they're only looking at the bird?

And I explained to him, listen, they're trying to understand the system, the fish, the bird, and the snake. And he said, Well, you're not going to understand that if you looking at things individually. Only if you pay attention by looking with your eyes to the system in front of you then you'll understand the connections. And in order for you to understand the connections, you need people to see it. That's why the knowledge of people within the landscape gives the soul, this history, which is generalizing our African tradition, our oral tradition, which has so much into it and to contribute to science.

**ORDU:** Wow, I like the phrasing that the local people in the area are scientific libraries, and I think that that's really that's really incredible. And of course it goes to show how we are so obsessed with individual stuff when in fact the local people already have a completely holistic look at the systems. And we're literally, if I hear you correctly, we're using cutting edge science to understand what these guys have always known all along in terms of the holistic approach to the systems in which they've lived in years and years in perpetuity. Thanks for sharing that.

I'm just wondering, apart from the forests, distinct distinguishing between them rather than one forest, many forest in the other examples from what you're hearing from the local people you want to share with us of this sort of knowledge cutting edge knowledge, science meeting local knowledge.

**COSTA:** Certainly. Because of this tendency of us coming into a landscape and trying to understand things individually and not understanding the whole connection or our place as part of the system. For example, it's an area that traditionally has a lot of fire certain parts of the year, and we would come into the landscape and immediately criticize there's too much fire. People are destroying the forest. If it continues like this, this forest will not last for another three years. And we've now realized how naïve, and I don't want to use the word stupid, those statements are because we didn't understand the system. We didn't bother to understand the methodologies, the reasoning that that the culture, the tradition, the knowledge behind it. And now we've come to a point where we also revising our insinuations around fire. We're writing certain articles around fire because we've discovered based on the fact that there's different types of forests within that forest, that fire does not really affect certain types of forests.

So basically, when we go to an area now and we see fire season around May, we now understand that actually that fire is done on that specific time of the year in order to avoid that a fire isn't done in that area in that time of the year. If a fire breaks out in September, it will destroy even the types of forests that don't normally allow fire to come in. So they're actually using a management system that protects the landscape. And we're coming to a conclusion that actually the forest is expanding and not retreating, and that's because of these fire managing techniques.

There's the example, of these systems of lakes where we've documented up until now about 26 different lakes. So it's ... this is incredible, two kilometers long, 500

meters wide, 20 meters deep, pristine, crystal clear water of lakes. And there's no one close to it. And you can see how pristine the system around it is. And that's only because they have this belief of a mythical creature that inhabits these lakes, gives life to the lake, protects the lake, so nobody gets close to it. That has resulted subconsciously on extreme protection of the of the landscape.

So we are saying we need to protect the place when in fact they have been protecting with their own methodology for several generations. And instead of creating new systems of protection, we can lean on those already existing systems and elevate them.

**ORDU:** You know, this is very humbling, very, very humbling, especially coming from the scientists, because we always, we always think with our science we know everything, but evidently we don't quite know everything. There is a reason why the local people do things the way they do them. So thanks for sharing. I can imagine that this whole area is probably replete with vegetation of tremendous medicinal values, which I'm sure you guys have come across some already, maybe.

**COSTA:** There's still a big presence and a big importance given to what we call *kimbandas*. This is a local word for this person who is really a healer, and the amount of knowledge that they have on individual species, effects of which part of the species of trees or plant or roots, to treat whatever ailment is present is just you can write maybe a hundred PhDs, it will not match the way and the knowledge some of these healers out of this plants. And again it's still existing and part of everyday life of the people because unfortunately of the civil war, it's like something lost in time but it is allowing us to understand that that's actually the perfect example of sustainability of knowledge.

**ORDU:** At the outset, you indicated that although the Okavango Delta is a protected area, the headwaters in Angola is not protected. Why is that important? And what do you hope to accomplish?

**COSTA:** As I said before, if we are protecting, for example, the Delta in Botswana and the Delta has been for a long, long time a protected place, it already is part of the UNESCO's World Heritage sites and there's a lot of natural parks in the Namibian side also. And Angola has been restricted because of the civil war for about 40 years. That's why no development, no usage of these landscapes has occurred in the side of Angola. That doesn't allow for pristine wilderness, for untouched landscapes. And Botswana and Namibia have benefited for that for over 60 years.

So it has come to a point where we understand that those places exist because of its source, because of the headwaters in Angola. And not protecting the headwaters we're putting at risk a whole complexity of systems that depend on those headwaters. So it only makes sense for us to contribute for official and concerted protection of the headwaters. Protecting the headwaters, like I said, will allow for us to understand that for many generations to come systems downstream, people downstream, fauna and vegetation downstream will also endure for generations to come to a natural heritage that is literally of all Africans. And we all should do something to pay attention to these headwaters.



**ORDU:** Let's now turn to international relations. You mentioned the three countries and the transboundary issues. What challenges have you faced thus far and what are the opportunities?

**COSTA:** Like I've mentioned before, Angola is on a very different moment of its existence comparing to Namibia, Botswana, Zambia—in a very different moment. So those countries have been having tourism, conservation, economic development for the past 60 years without really much interruption, whereas Angola has been secluded and unable to do anything because of the decades of civil war.

And now that the country is opening up, now that the country is eager for economic development and to use its rich, very rich natural resources, that itself poses a lot of complexities and dangers for the countries downstream. So there is a very big importance for all these countries to actually align in terms of strategy. You can clearly see that water is an issue for Botswana. It's mostly a desert. You can see that water is of great importance for Namibia. Angola doesn't have such problems. And if Angola decides to use its resources without really evaluating the impacts downstream, those countries will really be very negatively affected.

And I think that is where the biggest problem really lies, because those countries are in a different existential phase and they're thinking of other things, while Angola is thinking development dams, industrial agriculture. And they should actually look at examples elsewhere in Africa. You have the case of Egypt and Ethiopia with that dam where no synchronization can result really in exacerbation of climatic effects, access to natural resources. And we have the opportunity to look at those examples and actually synchronize our strategy.

There's a little bit of differences in terms of strategies for sovereignty, opening of borders. But I really think these countries have the chance to put that aside and create a synchronized system that can actually teach a very important lesson to the rest of the world in terms of sharing of resources, in terms of being in harmony with how they can have their own economic development, but with preservation of these resources.

**ORDU:** In fact the point you made very, very valid about alignment of the strategies, it reminds me so much of the fact that a great deal of studies have been undertaken on the Indus basin in Pakistan, the Amazon basin in Brazil, the Congo basin, of course, and the Nile basin and the Niger basin in Africa. You just alluded to the Nile, Ethiopia, and Egypt a moment ago. So could you explain further for us what you see as some of the key economic development aspects of this particular highly understudied basin wide in terms of the systems of the Okavango River?

**COSTA:** In terms of economic development—and really that's the key for this system and for everyone in the world, we are really hostages of this economic global economic system. So without an economic system, nothing will really sustain itself. So in this case, for the Okavango River basin, like I said, we have the chance to actually look at mistakes done elsewhere and from scratch create a system that sort of is synchronized with all parts involved.

I'll give you a very concise example. The Angolan governments last year has authorized a law that enables the government to extract any type of mineral

resources, including oil, in any area of the country, even if it is a protected area. And the immediate reaction is because there's suspicions that there is a big deposit of oil within the Okavango River basin. So it is normal and completely understandable and very important for countries to evaluate what sort of natural resources and riches they have. Because that informs you how to use them, how to manage which areas are best for each economic activities.

With regards to the Okavango basin, we know that it has specific strong points in terms of economic benefit and some of those are a direct result of this natural heritage. That is, conservation itself will propel other economic systems to exist in this region. You have tourism, you have other activities that will endure longer term than the extraction of immediate resources, which could, of course, contribute to the economy of the country. But we know and are aware of a lot of issues in terms of how to manage those resources, who is going to benefit from those resources, and why not create the system from the beginning that benefits the actual people that have been protecting these resources and that makes it endure for a lot more generations.

So there's economic potential, but there is a very specificities on how should we target each economic development for each and in the Okavango basin, again summarizing, we have a great opportunity to create a system that contributes to the economy, but in a very long term aspect that includes local people who I like to call them the guardians of this landscape.

**ORDU:** So, the work you're doing, these scientific studies and evaluations obviously absolutely, absolutely critical and vital. I was just wondering is there any plan for an integrated model, an integrated model of the water, climate, food, tourism, and indeed, the points you are making now, the macro economy of the three riparian states done as one? Are you aware of any such study?

**COSTA:** Yeah, to give credit to these governments, the government of Angola, Zambia, Namibia, Botswana, and even Zimbabwe to some extent, to give a lot of credit to them they have created some time ago what is called KAZA, the Kavango Zambezi Trans frontier Park, let's call it, which is the biggest system of protected areas in the world, that occupies the largest area. So they have created a system where they're connecting each of the different protected areas within their own territory and putting them together because they have borders.

The thing is, it exists but it has never been implemented properly because of differences in aspects like sovereignty, how to manage certain natural resources. So the idea was there, but the implementation is lacking, and the whole objective was exactly that, because these natural resources cannot be seen as unique to one of the countries because they connect and are part of different countries. And our actions need to take that into consideration. So the idea was to connect these areas and to have a management plan that is synchronized.

But of course, governments have different visions, strategies, and they were never aligned fully. For example, in terms of border crossing, in terms of food and goods interchange, where some countries are afraid of being taken over by more industrialized countries and so forth.

But, then this is where projects like ours come with a key role, with all the information that we're gathering, all the scientific discoveries that we're making, to inform our government and the neighboring governments of the importance of having an aligned strategy. And there has been some reactions. The government, for example, has created an agency to manage investment in the Okavango basin in the part of Angola. But there really needs to be more direct engagement on the results that we are giving to Angolan to the rest of these countries to actually induce more active collaboration the way they make management plans for these landscapes. The elders always say, you can only go so far if you go by yourself, whereas if you have company ...

**ORDU:** Very true. Very true. Mandela made that point very, very clear in his biography. I love it. Thank you very much for reminding us of the need to go together rather than to go it alone in order to at least get to the destination. So as we wrap up, Kerllen, looking ahead, what does success look like for you, for the National Geographic's Okavango Wilderness Project, and of course, for the local people in the project area that we're trying to protect?

**COSTA:** It's a question that provokes very profound thoughts. So my immediate reaction is to tell you that I have a lot of objectives and ideas of success in my mind. The project also has the same very specific ideas, but I can tell you that those two, A and B, are really not relevant and this is not why we should be doing the work that we are doing. Not myself as a person, not the project as an organization, but it should be for C, for the people in the project area. And that's how we should approach what success looks like. Success should be where the people of the area sees themselves in the future. So taking into consideration what's their worldview? What are their intentions? What is their vision for the future? How does protection of their own natural heritage looks like? How does protection of their own cultural heritage looks like? And success should really be the result of that, whatever it looks like but based on these people worldview.

And then again, if you connect the people on the side of Angola, the people in the side of Namibia, the people on the side of Botswana, you'll actually see that although they're in different geographical areas, they have the same intrinsic principles when it comes to existing and where they see themselves as people. And if you connect them, you'll find that the answer is the same, the methodologies are the same.

And I think for the project and for myself as a person, very specifically, success looks like the existence of these people in a very harmonious way and in a way that they feel their knowledge is elevated and it's useful for their own sustainability. Just that will trigger other things that will be secondary to that but will elevate the country, elevate the neighboring countries, elevate the economy. It all comes to the people who are the guardians of these landscape. And success should be it that.

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**ORDU:** Kerllen, it's been a wonderful pleasure speaking with you today. I wish you and the Wilderness Project, this important work you're doing for our continent and indeed for the world, all the very best. Thank you very much.

**COSTA:** Thank you. It was a pleasure.

**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 Reboredo, audio engineer.

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