



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

“National Geographic Explorers discuss African filmmakers’ role in conservation, economic development, and storytelling for Africa”

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Guests:

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Episode Summary:

Host Landry Signé speaks with National Geographic Explorers Noel Kok and Pragna Parsotam-Kok about their work to create a network of African conservation filmmakers to highlight African voices and engage African audiences. Kok and Parsotam-Kok are co-founders and executive directors of Nature, Environment & Wildlife Filmmakers (NEWF).

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SIGNÉ: Hello, I am Landry Signé, senior fellow in the Global Economy and Development Program and the Africa Growth Initiative at the Brookings Institution. Welcome to *Foresight Africa* podcast, where I engage with contributors to our annual flagship *Foresight Africa* report and other experts who share their unique insights and innovative solutions to Africa's most complex development challenges while highlighting the continent's opportunities to advance impactful engagements between Africa, the United States, and the global community.

You can learn more about this show and our work at Brookings dot edu slash Foresight Africa podcast.

This is the second episode of season four of the podcast. This season will provide incredible insights on pressing and timely topics in Africa-U.S. Relations and Africa on the global stage as we approach the deadline for the Sustainable Development Goals in 2030. I am excited to have you join me on this remarkable journey as I and my guests explore Africa's challenges, opportunities, strengths, and future through engaging conversations.

Today, I welcome Noel Kok and Pragna Parsotam-Kok from National Geographic. Noel and Pragna are filmmakers and National Geographic Explorers who focus on amplifying stories of conservation voices by Africans who lead them. They are the founders of Nature, Environment, and Wildlife Filmmakers, NEWF, which offers professional development, capacity building, mentorship, and networking opportunities to African filmmakers and storytellers. Thank you so much for joining the podcast today, Noel and Pragna.

KOK: Landry, thank you so much for having us. It's so wonderful to be here.

PARSOTAM-KOK: It's amazing. Thank you. And it's so nice to know you're from Cameroon.

SIGNÉ: That is fantastic. So in August 2023, we hosted your colleague, Kerllen Costa, the Angola country director of National Geographic Okavango Wilderness Project, who discussed the fauna and flora of the region in Botswana and Angola. And we are really happy to have National Geographic back on the podcast this show.

KOK: Absolutely. I'm so glad that Kerllen came before us. He comes from a most beautiful, beautiful part of Africa.

SIGNÉ: Fantastic. So could you start by sharing a bit about your journey? What inspired you both to become filmmakers and National Geographic explorers in Africa and connecting it with the nature and women and wildlife filmmakers initiative that you have?

[4:04]

PARSOTAM-KOK: So I think if we if we were to go really far back, my personal story is that I studied media and communications in university, as well as drama and performance studies. And I went a little bit off track for a while, and somehow it led

me back to film when Noel and I met and—or more television rather than film. And we produced content, television content, and entertainment for local broadcasters in South Africa and music videos. We produced a lot of music videos for a lot of superstars in South Africa in about 2010, 2011. And it was a really enjoyable time for us.

But something changed. And I think I'm going to hand over to Noel here. Something changed personally for him in the midst of our producing all this entertainment content.

[4:57]

KOK: Yeah, I think Africa is always alive. Our entertainment scenes are always really powerful and amazing. But, so often you're looking for something deeper.

And I remember as a little kid in Africa, they say the first time you see a rhino that moment will stay with you for the rest of your life. I remember the first time I saw a rhino. I was about eight years old playing outside the shopping center. And a lady and her two daughters came down to their car and I greeted them. And as they drove off at the back of their car was a bumper sticker. And it said, "Save the rhino." And as a little kid, I couldn't understand, what is this rhino? It was my very first moment that I saw it.

But as she as she was driving off, she stopped, she smiled, and she gave me 20 cents. And suddenly I was in love with this rhino. I thought it was the most money I'd seen in my life. You know, and so I started looking for this sticker on every car that I saw. Right?

And I'm going to say something now where the lady and the daughters who got into the car, the lady that gave me 20 cents, she was white. She was a white South African. And every time I saw the bumper sticker on the back of a car, the occupants of the car were white South Africans. And when I looked at what I saw on television, anything to do with nature and wildlife always seemed to be led by white South Africans, and we as Black South Africans were just carrying or pulling the stuff. And I started as a little boy thinking that that's not for us. It's not our animal. It's not for us, et cetera.

Fast forward 20 years and I was finally working, and I was able to go into a park finally, and I went to go and see this rhino. Because it always stayed with me. And one thing that stuck with me when I got there was, I understood why people would want to protect it and want to save it, but one thing that stuck with me was that whilst I was in the park, again, I was the only Black African person in the park who was on holiday. Everyone else, the whole park, the people didn't look like me or the people who did look like me were only working in the park. They were not on holiday.

[7:25]

And when you think back to television, the same story was prevailing on television where we were still just the ranger, the guide, or the people who sing for you when you jump off your safari vehicle.

Fast forward another 20 years, I'm sitting at an airport, Pragna and I—I've met Pragna we are married and we're making these TV series and making this content—and at the airport, I see a rhino, a rhino that's been bedazzled and it's a statue of it. And I look at this and I think, what is going on? And I go and I look at it and I realize that rhino poaching is back in South Africa. And this was in about 2013.

And I looked at this and I thought, you know what? This is a great place to put a rhino if you're raising funds. But the people who live next to the park, most of them don't fly. And when I thought back to what's on television, the same story prevailed. The stories on television still had us as portraying us as the poacher, the pirate, the ranger, the guide, or people who sing for tourists as they jump off their safari vehicle.

And I looked at this and I thought, hold on, something's got to change. How do we change the story? You know, why is it that the same story prevails? And so I sat there at the airport, and I came up with this idea for a television series, which I went back home to pitch to Pragna because, you know, in my mind, I said, you know, if we're going to change the story, we need to change the storyteller.

And that is the pivotal moment where we changed from making entertainment television and storytelling to say, hold on, if rhino poaching is back, if there's a problem in the natural world, we can no longer sit on the sidewalks. This is our heritage. This is our wildlife. How can we have that people from outside or other people are only telling the story? We need to show and remind everybody of our connection to it. And that was the point where I think we decided that we were going to change the stories that we were telling and get into conservation and wildlife storytelling.

SIGNÉ: So I really like how you elaborated on the story, and I guess this was the starting or the turning point for the shift toward conservation storytelling from an African perspective. And you had to pitch the idea to Pragna. What was your reaction when you pitched your idea? Was he a successful pitcher?

[10:13]

PARSOTAM-KOK: Usually his ideas need a lot of critical analysis. But but this one, this one really I took interest to as well. As someone growing up, I didn't go into the parks. I didn't see a rhino. Maybe a few times on TV, but I also didn't have these personal experiences to connect with wildlife. And so I was really interested in this project as well.

And so we developed a 13-part TV series called "Code Green" at the time. And it was about saving the rhino. That was its main, core theme, saving the rhino and the environment and climate change. It had elements of all of this and saving energy, because at the time as well, South Africa was also having—

KOK: —it was starting going through the load shedding—

PARSOTAM-KOK: —load shedding and an energy crisis. So we were trying to bring that information to TV as well, but through one TV program focused on conservation.

And we produced this 13-part TV series, and it sat on South Africa's national broadcaster. And it was on the channel, that it was produced in 70 percent Zulu.

SIGNÉ: Oh, fantastic.

PARSOTAM-KOK: Yeah, it was produced in 70 percent Zulu. And it was targeted primarily to the communities that live around the game reserves. And the TV program did really well. It had really successful views and it incorporated school children, and we had a live studio element where the kids came in and it was really, really beautiful and amazing. But there were elements of the show that required us to go into the parks to film. And that's where we had our greatest challenges.

[12:03]

KOK: To be honest, it completely bankrupted us.

SIGNÉ: Oh, no.

KOK: Okay? We lost in making this TV series, we literally lost everything. And the reasons were access, as Pragna was saying, access to wildlife. Now, it's almost strange for an African to say access to wildlife was one of their biggest challenges. And I think it's important that we frame this at the very beginning as to the inspiration or why we started this. Right? We were trying to make this TV series in Zulu. But access to Black African scientists was impossible. Working in the field was impossible. Access to the parks—when we would go there, they had never seen a Black African television crew coming to film the rhino or coming to tell conservation stories. And so those are the things that really contributed to a significant challenge in producing this program.

But we looked at this and we thought, you know what? Instead of walking away with our tails between our legs, film and television all across Africa and so many of the other genres is booming, except in this genre. But it is so important for us to change the narrative. Right? And so because of that, we need to start a platform in Africa where scientists, conservationists, broadcasters, storytellers, policymakers can come together and discuss the issues facing the natural world.

And that was the beginnings of starting NEWF, which is Nature, Environment, and Wildlife Filmmakers. There was a lot of debate in the beginning, are we going to be a film festival or are we going to be a congress? We said, no, we're going to become a congress, because if we were a film festival, whose films would we show? At that point, there were no Africans making films about nature, environment, and wildlife. And so we decided to start NEWF Congress at that particular point.

SIGNÉ: And will you mind walking us through the creation of Nature, Environment, and Wildlife Filmmakers?

[14:09]

PARSOTAM-KOK: So as Noel mentioned, we started as this annual congress. That was our first idea. Let's bring everybody together. At the first congress, through multiple funders, we were able to put out a call for young filmmakers, emerging filmmakers and scientists who were interested in telling conservation stories through

film. And we provided a very small grant of \$3,000 to \$3,500 to produce a short film. And that was almost the first step at the NEWF Congress to start creating more content in the nature, environment, and wildlife genre.

So that was 2017. And three films were produced in the first year by what we now call NEWF Fellows. And at that point, we didn't have we didn't have a name for them. But NEWF Fellows and scientists and conservationists and filmmakers all came together at the NEWF Congress to share and talk. You know, we had panel discussions. We did the same thing in 2018. And all the while, realizing that we can't be just an annual congress where everybody comes together and talks about the challenges or talks about the successes. We needed to do more than that.

[15:24]

KOK: Yeah, I think I think what we realized that the problems was so deep rooted and institutionalized. The problems with regards to access, coming back to that issue of access, barriers to entry into this particular genre were so big that we could not expect to just have an annual congress and pat ourselves on the back and think, okay, we've done our work. We realized that capacity enhancement—we used to use the word capacity building, we like to now use the word capacity enhancement because we believe that we always had skills. We just needed to enhance them through breaking down those barriers to entry and that kind of stuff.

And so in addition to coming together every year, we realized that we needed to be an all-year-round program that broke down those barriers to entry by identifying what were the major challenges that were hindering African storytellers from entering the nature, environment, and wildlife filmmaking world.

[16:29]

And now to come back to you, the second part of your question, how did we become National Geographic Explorers? Obviously, we looked at National Geographic Society. It's a brand. It's a brand, everyone, even if you didn't have access to it, somewhere in your life you are impacted by that yellow rectangle. Somewhere you are exposed to these most beautiful pictures of wildlife and wild spaces and habitats.

SIGNÉ: Absolutely!

KOK: You know, and so we looked at that and said, how can we bring African explorers to attend our congress to come and inspire other Africans to say, there are people that look like you, that are doing the most amazing work in conservation and in protecting our natural habitats and in science.

And so we reached out to National Geographic Society in 2018, and they sent their early careers grant manager to attend our congress. I think he was inspired by the energy of these young Africans coming together, wanting to tell stories about the natural world and about protecting the natural world. And then they came back, National Geographic Society came back in 2019 and they gave us a grant or supported our congress. And they did the same even in 2020 when during COVID.

And so the thing is how you become a National Geographic Explorer is if you are funded or you apply and are successful in obtaining a grant, then you become a National Geographic Explorer and you are supported in this community of explorers from around the world.

So, yes, it was absolutely aspirational, but it was one of the most transformational opportunities for both Pragna and I to become National Geographic Explorers to really start amplifying the work that we had already started to do.

I quickly want to go into 2018, 2019 by and 2020, we kept on providing grants for young and emerging filmmakers to produce short films about their environments or wildlife or scientists or conservationists doing work in their countries. We would advertise it all across Africa and recruit people to or inspire people to attend and apply.

By the end of 2021, National Geographic had said to us, we had said to each other, how do we take this to scale? They had seen the work that we were doing. They were happy about the work that we were doing. And they said, what would it look like to take this to scale.

SIGNÉ: Pragna, would you mind elaborating about the development of the community and perhaps the stories which has been the most impactful from your perspective?

[19:28]

PARSOTAM-KOK: When we built this collaboration with National Geographic Society called Africa Refocused, it's about exactly that refocusing the narrative of Africa so that the stories of Africa are told by and from the perspective of African people. And through that message, we were able to build community from the different regions of Africa. And every year we focus on a different region. So, for example, last year in 2024, the focus was Central Africa. This year, when we do specific call outs, we're focusing on North African countries, and we will host specific training programs, and labs is what we call them, from the North African region.

And that's how we try and build community in the different regions. And everyone is able to then come together at the annual congress. It's almost become this homecoming, this convening every year that brings all the fellows together from the various countries in Africa.

But I think another thing that really has helped us in building community and through this collaboration with National Geographic Society, it's allowed us to build a center that we called Ikhaya, which means "home" in Zulu. And it's where we host the majority of our labs and training. And we haven't touched on the dive program yet, but I think I think we're going to get there. But what that home has allowed us to do is really build community and allowed fellows to come together in a space that feels safe, where we talk about the industry, we talk about conservation challenges, we talk about life in general. And it really is a homecoming in a space that is for coming together and so important in building community.

SIGNÉ: I love this. So through the initiative, you have had the opportunity to amplify many powerful stories. And can you share perhaps one, and it doesn't need to be a single individual, but had a particularly significant impact? And perhaps, as you are talking also about conservation in terms of eventually changing policies and inspiring conservation efforts or shifting public perceptions.

[21:56]

KOK: Yes, there's a film called *Reformed* made by a young filmmaker in Zambia about a community member who was a notorious poacher, who had a rethink about his life and actually joined the park services and became a ranger. But he told the story in a way that humanized, because he told it from our perspective. He didn't tell the story about this guy who was just killing animals. He gave the background, he gave the reasons, he gave, he humanized the character so that the audience could understand and understand that why somebody could actually do that. Okay?

The impact that it has created in, what that film has created in Zambia particularly is increasingly since it's been broadcast, since it's been exposed to all the communities, there was a community from where this poacher came from, who had become a ranger, who have now gotten more involved and have been ... it was identified that they were not getting ... conservation was not working for them. They were not getting any support. And it allowed the authorities to identify that. They allowed the authorities to understand why people were actually doing it.

We also are starting to encourage people to change the language that they use. It's very sad in Africa that when people come in from around the world with guns and in luxury vehicles, they are called "hunters." And when our people go into the parks to hunt for food or stuff for their table or are even subverted to kill animals for other people, they are called "poachers." When other people hunt and eat wild deer and that kind of stuff, it's called "venison." But for us, it's called "bush meat."

So through our films we are encouraging people to think about the language that is used in conservation. To stop demonizing our people, but rather to humanize them and use that approach in dealing with conservation.

[24:13]

There's also another example, and Pragna mentioned earlier we haven't really spoken about the Ocean Access Program that we have as part of the work that we do. But you come from Cameroon. It's a coastal country. It has a beautiful shoreline. And Africa, as a continent, has 30,000 kilometers of coastline; 38 of our 54 countries have a shoreline. Yet what does everybody know about Africa? They know about the Serengeti, they know about all the big elephants and the lions, because none of those stories have been told. But there are marine biologists. There are hundreds and hundreds of young people in Africa studying about the ocean. Those are our oceans.

Unfortunately, back in 2018, when we wanted to have a panel at our congress to explore whether we as Africans were using the oceans as a storytelling resource and whether we were getting involved to protect the ocean. Right? We just assumed that

we'd put a Black African underwater filmmaker on the panel. Crazy, crazy stat: we could not find one all across the whole continent.

SIGNÉ: Wow!

[25:25]

KOK: What was even more shocking was we were coming across hundreds and hundreds of marine biologists, African marine biologists, who could not swim, let alone dive.

And so whilst it shocked us, it also excited us. Right? Because we saw an opportunity to bring filmmakers, marine biologists and solve a problem. We started a program called NEWF Dive Labs. And very quickly, I want to tell you of a young lady from Tanzania who, she was doing her master's, or she had just completed her master's. And the species of study was octopus. She was paying fishermen to bring her back live octopus to study in the lab. She couldn't dive. And we invited her to come and participate in one of our dive labs. It was just towards the end of COVID. In three months, she had left South Africa as a dive master.

Two months after that, she was leading a coral restoration project off the coast of Zanzibar. This is the kind of impact and the kind of change that we can drive in Africa with access to skills, with access to the technology, and those are just those are just two stories that immediately just come to mind. But there's been countless stories.

PARSOTAM-KOK: I just want to add to that last one. She is also now a National Geographic Explorer herself.

SIGNÉ: Wow! That's fantastic.

PARSOTAM-KOK: And through her program, she is training more divers in Tanzania to continue the work that they're doing. So training marine biologists through her organization. And I think to date, she's, in partnership with us, probably trained about 30.

KOK: Yeah, divers, mostly scientists and conservationists, but storytellers and science communicators as well.

SIGNÉ: I love this. And this year's *Foresight Africa* report focuses on Africa's outlook over the next five years as the deadlines for the Sustainable Development Goals approaches in 2030. And in my new book, *Realizing Africa's Potential*, released in January of this year, 2025, by the Brookings Institution Press, I dedicated a chapter to the often overlooked role of entertainment, cultural, and creative industry in driving economic growth and advancing African economies. How do you see the film industry as a potential benefit for the continent's economies and eventually advancing also progress toward the Sustainable Development Goals?

[28:10]

KOK: I mean, there are 17 SDGs, right? So many of them overlap. Gender equality, right? if we just take that, for example. In the film industry, right? a lot of the actresses are women. Increasingly through our programs, particularly, we have

female cinematographers who are paving the way, and underwater you're weightless, for example. So they are increasingly becoming great cinematographers. The water carries the weight of that camera for you. So men can't use that excuse that they, you know—

PARSOTAM-KOK: —they can't carry it.

KOK: Yes, that they can't carry it. Right? Life below water. The film industry, if you look at decent work and economic growth, all right? there are so many aspects of the film industry that contribute towards decent work and economic growth. From our perspective in terms of the stories of affordable, clean energy, right? clean water and sanitation, all environmental stories that if we continue—what do you always quote Kaitlin Yarnell, who's the chief storytelling officer of National Geographic Society?

[29:28]

PARSOTAM-KOK: Yeah, I think people are drawn to stories, right? So stories impact how we see the world. As humans we tell each other stories from the time we little till we're telling each other stories right now. And what Kaitlin always says is that science talks to the brain, but storytelling talks to the heart. And even with Sustainable Development Goals, if we talk to matters that affect the heart, it will impact change, it will impact economic growth, and the ripple effect of everything that that comes with it. And the more stories we can tell about everything in these Sustainable Development Goals, the more change we can make.

SIGNÉ: I love this. And you also mentioned earlier the critical importance of the National Geographic Society in supporting your initiatives. And as we know, many African filmmakers in the wildlife and conservation space face challenges such as limited funding, lack of access to equipment, limited intellectual property rights, and piracy, and difficulty to reach global audiences. So what solution have you found most effective in empowering African filmmakers and storytellers, including with NEWF?

[30:45]

KOK: Yeah, I think capacity enhancement through those labs. When we started out before National Geographic Society, we were looking for funding to do one cinematography lab a year. So there's two ways to look at it, right? One is you fund producers to produce their own stories. Two, you have all these international productions and crews coming to Africa. But so often they can't fly in with their own crews. And they say it's because we don't have the expertise. We don't have access to the gear.

Our partnership with National Geographic Society has changed that. Our labs, our lab system has changed that. We are able to purchase the equipment, the industry standard equipment, and create opportunities for African storytellers to learn so that they can become the technicians on these international crews. They can service these international crews. It makes us live lighter on the planet. You don't have to fly big crews from around the world to produce these stories. That's one immediate benefit.

[32:00]

The other is developing our own audiences. How are we going to build the industry? And you come from Africa, you come from Cameroon, you know that there is so little nature and wildlife content on our national broadcasters. If we build this army of storytellers producing content for our own local audiences, we will develop an industry just like Nollywood did. I don't know if you were part of that, but I know for us in South Africa, used to laugh at Nollywood, 20, 25 years ago, 20 years ago. Okay? Now it's the most powerful industry in Africa.

SIGNÉ: Do you have anything you want to add, Pragna, on this?

[32:47]

PARSOTAM-KOK: I was just going to add the importance of local audiences in this narrative. And one of our programs tries to enhance that. But I think what's so important as these as these films are produced by filmmakers is that the IP rights, we even if we provide the grant, we don't hold any rights to any of the content that's produced. The filmmakers own the rights and they're able to take these films and go back to their communities, their universities, their direct audiences and share these stories. And if it reaches global audiences, that's amazing. But the change is happening locally first.

SIGNÉ: You mentioned also oceans, and so according to the World Bank the blue economy, and I quote, "is the sustainable use of ocean resources for economic growth, improved livelihoods and jobs while preserving the health of ocean ecosystems." And of course, activities can include aquaculture, fisheries, renewable energy, maritime tourism, water, and disaster risk management, blue carbon maritime transport, among others. From your work, what makes the blue economy such a game changer for the continent's future, including conservation effort around the blue economy?

[34:09]

KOK: It's the most exciting thing for us right now. It's the most exciting time for Africa right now. As I was saying earlier, when the world thinks of Africa and they think of our wildlife and our natural habitats, et cetera, they think of forests, they think of the wildlife. Nobody seems to think that we are surrounded by the ocean. The same young lady I was telling you about, Nancy Iraba, who is based in Tanzania, she and her husband, they run an organization called AFO, Aquafarms Organization, of young Tanzanians working with communities all across the east coast of Africa. They run the largest seaweed farm in Africa. Okay? Why they also wanted to come and learn to dive is because as they are impacted by climate change, the water levels are rising. And so they are no longer planting seaweed in waters that were that were generally shallow. So they are also adapting. Okay? Seaweed as a protein source, we've not explored that.

But then the other one that excites me most is tourism. Where our storytelling research and dive center is based, Ikhaya that Pragna spoke about earlier, is based in Sodwana Bay. It pains me to say this, but that town's entire economy is driven by tourism and ocean tourism, nothing else. It's a world top ten dive site. Fishing. It's a

marine protected area. Beautiful beaches. Whales, turtles, sharks migrate there every year. But the local people, all they do is push the boats in the water. The local people are guards at the car park. That's their ocean. That's their heritage. Why are they excluded?

So it's not just about having access or knowing about the ocean or whatever or protecting it. It's about equity. And so, if they can have genuine access, that's got to come with equity as well. We've got to develop programs that make local communities genuinely, genuinely participate in the blue economy. It's not just about jobs. Jobs is transactional. People say, but we are creating jobs. It's that old adage of if you give a man a fish you feed them for a day, teach him how to fish, you feed them for the rest of their life.

We've got to change this thing, particularly with the blue economy of it mustn't be an aid approach. Because aid without sustainability models built in it creates dependency. And that's one of the things that we really need to shift away from. But there is so much opportunity in the blue economy for local communities across Africa.

[37:12]

PARSOTAM-KOK: There's a film that actually a scientist produced. And it's about mussel harvesting. And in that film, you see how even traditional knowledge has such an important role to play in the equity that we're talking about. Where you hear one of the women in the film telling the younger children, don't take any of the young mussels, only harvest the old ones. And that knowledge is so important. And whilst rebuilding that equity, it's important to also take those stories into account and those people into account.

SIGNÉ: I love this because you have anticipated my next question, which would have been on actions and strategies for success. But I see that you have emphasized the importance of inclusion, of economic opportunities. Is there any other point you want to mention there?

[38:04]

KOK: I think the critical thing and what we keep going back to, right? it is the storytelling that will change the behavior. Science speaks to the brain, but storytelling speaks to the heart. We encourage stories of resilience, stories of adaptation, stories of opportunity. What we try to do through our work is, yes, we are not naïve, and we're not blind, and we're not saying that there are no problems. But we also can't continue to portray Africa as this basket case and only with challenges.

You know, we've got to celebrate the magic of, like I was saying to you when we walked in, of Dr. Aristide Kamla in Cameroon. He's also a National Geographic Explorer, you know. And he's leading one of the cutting edge research in the blue economy, in conservation, in Cameroon. He came and did his Ph.D. in Florida, because his species of study was manatees. Cameroon is one of the few countries in Africa that has manatees. But at that point he could not dive. There was no dive schools. There was no dive operations happening in Cameroon. So he had to go to a

foreign country. And right now he's opening his own dive school for research, but then also for tourism, also to be sustainable.

SIGNÉ: I really love the emphasis made on storytelling and on creating a new narrative. That is also one of the goals of the Africa Growth Initiative here at the Brookings Institution to create a new narrative about Africa, shifting from the hopeless continent to the hopeful continent and sharing the opportunities, acknowledging some of the challenges but moving away from a narrative exclusively focusing on challenges.

I always like to end each interview by asking the guest two questions, as you may know. So first, building on your work and experience, what is one piece of advice you would give to African or global policymakers to ensure best outcomes on the continent, including in storytelling? Pragna?

[40:25]

PARSOTAM-KOK: So I think it's twofold. If we'd be talking to policymakers, I would say take a moment and listen, listen to the stories that are coming out and watch the stories that are coming out and take them into consideration as decisions are being made.

And for young filmmakers, it's share your stories. Share the stories that matter to you, share the stories that you are passionate about. And the things that you're searching for allow yourself that access so that you're able to tell the stories that you choose to tell and not the story that somebody has told you that you need to be sharing.

SIGNÉ: Fantastic. Noel?

[41:08]

KOK: I think I'll go back to policymakers as well. That the solutions lie in Africa, that our people have the answers. We are the youngest continent, alive with accomplished and gifted individuals. Let's look towards our people. Let's invest in our people. Let's invest and let's build proper equity. We need to move away from this dependency.

But it's through the stories; if we are able to tell these stories and highlight them. We are the only continent left with all its megafauna. Who protected it? Our ancestors. So we can do that. We just need to celebrate that. We need to build our own audiences. We need to empower the broadcasters and the national broadcasters, particularly, all across Africa to tell these stories that celebrate. Not propaganda, not news, just genuine stories that celebrate our connection to the natural world.

SIGNÉ: Amazing. And given your successful career and impact, what advice would you give to youth and women hoping to follow in your footsteps? Pragna, perhaps we start with you?

[42:35]

PARSOTAM-KOK: I think I answered a little bit about that earlier. But for women, don't let anybody stop you from doing what you want to do. A woman can do, and we all know this, women can do everything and more. And there are many, many, many barriers to entry that women face that men don't have to. And because of that, we've also put in programs, or I've insisted on programs, let me let me put it that way, that are targeted to women only. Because I think women bring a perspective that's unique. And I think it's important that they share that perspective.

SIGNÉ: Fabulous.

KOK: Yeah. To women, I wouldn't say anything. I would speak to the men. I would tell men that we have to stop this issue that we've carried and stop looking at women as objects or as threats. Think about your daughters. As men, think of how you would like your daughter to be treated. Think about the opportunities you would like for your daughter. And then take that and treat the rest of society and the rest of women in that particular way. That's the one thing.

The second thing, we might be National Geographic Society Explorers, and people have this idea and aura of what explorers might be. But we are a community. It is a community that discovers, that builds, that goes, and all our work is about building the team and building everyone up together. Because we say when we rise, we lift the rest of Africa up with us.

[music]

SIGNÉ: Noel, Pragna, thank you so much for joining me today.

PARSOTAM-KOK: Thank you for having us.

KOK: Thank you, Landry, it's been lovely to be here. And thank you for hosting us.

SIGNÉ: I am Landry Signé, and this has been *Foresight Africa*. Thank you, listeners, for joining me today. I will be back in two weeks with another episode, and I hope you will join me and my next guest.

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 Fred Dews, producer; Nichole Grossman and Nicole Ntungire, associate producers; and Gastón Reboredo, audio engineer. The show's art was designed by Shavanthi Mendis. Additional promotional support for this podcast comes from my colleagues in Brookings Global and the Office of Communications at Brookings.