
Prevention is better than cure: Youth and civil society as safeguards and drivers of climate action

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There is no denying that the time to act on climate is now. In 2020, climate-related disasters had a devastating impact on people all over the world, from locust swarms in East Africa to bushfires in Australia. If the impact on people's lives and livelihoods was not enough to move us to act, surely the financial impact must be? The cost of the 10 most devastating climate events in 2020 was over \$140 billion⁴⁸, and the people and places that were affected will be recovering for years to come.

Environmental activism runs in my blood; I am the third generation of female environmental activists in my family – my grandmother and my mother were environmental activists when they were young. Yet, I didn't start through them. At University I attended a lecture on climate change, given by Dr Ismail El Gizouli, who went on to become Chair of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). His talk showed the links between climate change and the things I was seeing first-hand in Sudan, and presented the facts so well and so clearly that I had to take action.

In a country like Sudan, where the large majority of our economy depends on

natural resources, you see the impact of climate change everywhere you look. Flooding is one example. We used to have a reliable rainy season with moderate rain over a four-month period, from May to August. But now the rains come later and last for a shorter period, but they are much more intense. In July 2020 we experienced the worst flooding in 100 years, with more than 800,000 people losing their homes.⁴⁹ My grandmother's house just escaped being flooded, by the grace of being on higher ground than the rest of the houses, but many members of our family and her neighbours were affected. As well as being evacuated and having to live in temporary camps, there were problems in getting people food and clothing. Many people also got sick when the drinking water became contaminated.

In some ways, this shouldn't have been a surprise. A lot of people I know are farmers, and I see them suffering from the growing irregularity of the seasons. When so much rain comes in such a short space of time, it's almost impossible to make use of it. Water harvesting projects in a place like Sudan don't work well because it's very flat and very hot, and it cannot be done naturally. So the rainwater drowns the fields, meaning farmers can't harvest their crops and they can't sow new seeds. Since the floods last year, many farmers have had a season without growing because the land has been so waterlogged.



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Although 2020 was the worst flooding we have seen in a long time, problem flooding became common in Sudan from 2013. In 2020 the transitional government welcomed collaboration with youth groups and supported people affected by the flooding, but in 2013 the government response was not sufficient. The voluntary response was incredible.

Nafeer is a traditional Sudanese word that has been used for centuries, and it describes people coming together to solve a problem. This is something that has always existed in our communities, but in response to the floods in 2013 the tradition was mobilised and became a youth-led social movement, called *Nafeer*. Young people came together and planned how to help citizens. Rescue teams were created, helping people that were stuck in their houses and villages. Huge stores were set up to accept and distribute food and clothes donations. A system was also developed for collecting data on a very large scale – to help understand who was being impacted and how, through satellite imagery and studies on the ground.

In Sudan, the impacts of climate change are difficult to ignore. But a lot of countries are still in denial.

Global leaders are still talking about achieving carbon neutrality by 2050, as if that will be a huge achievement. But 2050 is too far away.

The leaders saying this now won't be in power long enough to see this commitment come through.

Young people are special in this regard, and a key part of the climate movement. We don't limit our sensitivity to climate change on a calculation about how much it will cost, or the limits it will place on the economy. Our calculation is instead based on the impact of our current way of life on nature, and on having a healthy future for ourselves and the next generation after us. Younger people don't have the same conflict of interest. We know there will be no jobs on a dead planet.

I am pleased to see that young people are starting to get more of a seat at the table when it comes to climate change. This is evident in the UN setting up the Youth Advisory Group on Climate Change, of which I am Chair. Also, it is progressive to have a young woman like me addressing the UN Security Council on matters of climate change.

There are other signs that also make us hopeful. We are seeing growing numbers of people joining the climate movement around the world, and this will create pressure on governments and the private sector to shift towards being more sustainable. Civil society is also playing a growing role, with active efforts to increase the role they will play in COP26 in Glasgow later this year.

These things are positive signs that the global community is starting to take the climate more seriously, and open to listening to people. But we also need to walk the walk when it comes to tackling the causes and impacts of climate change. We are spending a lot of time debating the difference in impact between a temperature rise of 1.5°C and 2°C. The way things are going, we will reach a 2°C increase by 2040, if not 2030. Some countries may only be moderately impacted by that, but many countries, including Sudan, will be highly affected by increasing temperatures caused by climate change. In Africa,

regions within 15 degrees of the equator are particularly at risk, with the projected temperature increase higher than the global average, and expected to happen at a faster rate.^{50, 51}

We need to act now. This takes a collective effort.

The countries that are most committed to addressing the problem of climate change often aren't the biggest emitters, they're the ones who are most impacted by climate change but don't have the resources to finance their national adaptation plans (NAPs). Investment in adaptation is the key to stable, climate-resilient communities. Guaranteed finance for climate adaptation plans is much needed, to make sure the necessary support and resources reach different local communities and help them to protect themselves against climate change. Since 2015 African countries have submitted more than 50 Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs)ⁱⁱ,



ii Under the Paris agreement, every country that is signed up has set a target for reducing greenhouse gas emissions, referred to as nationally determined contributions (NDCs), with the goal of limiting global heating to below 2°C.

outlining their objectives to reduce national greenhouse emissions in line with the Paris Climate Agreement. But in many countries there is no finance to implement these plans, and we still don't have a definition of climate finance. The UN Framework Convention on Climate Change is built on us having shared responsibilities around climate change. There is still a lot to be done to turn these intentions into action.

COP26 provides a big opportunity to bring the global community together and take necessary action. There are some major things we need to get right. I particularly want to see progress on Action for Climate Empowerment (ACE) – Article 12 of the Paris Agreement – which focuses on increasing public awareness, training and international cooperation. This article recognises the importance of the work done by young people and civil society, and is very dear to my heart. Having a financial mechanism to ensure this work can continue is essential.

Another priority must be to reach agreement on how we can support developing countries and their economies – Article 6 of the Paris Agreement. We need to identify the most effective ways of lowering emissions, implementing plans and providing access to finance, to help produce a wave of green development.

These are big issues that require proper, inclusive debate, with all countries represented equally at the negotiation table. This is not currently happening. At the COP conferences there are many negotiations going on at the same time, and you can spend seven hours in a meeting room debating major decisions on climate action, sometimes staying up until 3am negotiating. The more resources a country is able to invest, the bigger their delegation can be, and the more actively they can participate in and influence the debate.

We need to see more investment going to less developed countries, to build capacity and ensure they are able to attend negotiations and are properly represented.

This question of participation is particularly important at the current time, when a global pandemic has created debate about whether COP26, scheduled for this November, should go ahead, be postponed or be moved online. I believe that holding COP26 negotiations remotely inherently disadvantages countries in the Global South, where technology, infrastructure and different time zones forbid us from participating most effectively in online negotiations. The COP26 Secretariat should be exploring how to hold negotiations where all parties can fully contribute, regardless of the current context. Because the climate crisis impacts all of us, and we all deserve a seat at the table. And because while we all have different perspectives on and experiences of climate change, it is only by coming together that we can negotiate a more sustainable world.

To me, a more sustainable world is one where we spend more money on preventing the climate crisis than we do on the humanitarian aid required after the climate emergencies have happened. It means that we speak the truth, admit there is a problem, and seek the right solution.

It means that we support the communities that need it most, even if that isn't going to benefit us personally, but in the name of the global good.

Climate action is all about ensuring the continued existence of this planet, and continuing to have humanity living on it. This is a moral obligation that rests on all of us.