

The strength of young people for climate protection

Raised in Ghana's capital Accra, Chibeze Ezekiel is a tireless advocate for climate protection and the use of sustainable energy resources. Between 2013 and 2017, he and other young activists fought against the construction of Ghana's first coal-fired power plant. Ezekiel was awarded the Goldman Climate Prize in 2020 for his successful campaign. Today, he is a board member of the Ghanaian section of 350.org and chair of the Youth in Natural Resources and Environmental Governance (Youth-NREG) Platform. He is also the executive coordinator of the Strategic Youth Network for Development (SYND), where he works to involve young people in climate protection through training, education, school programmes and other localised methods. Ezekiel believes that young people must be at the centre of climate solutions and environmental protection because of their innovative ideas, energy, skills and abilities.

In 2013, Ghana's government proposed the construction of a coal-fired power plant to counteract the ongoing electricity crisis. We know that coal is the most unsustainable form of energy generation. So you and other activists fought against the coal plans, pursuing something you call the "submarine approach". Can you explain what that is? How did you reach the people and involve them in your action?

Normally, when the government comes up with a policy direction or an announcement, you have civil society actors who are very quick to respond. They just publish or do a press conference without getting the full facts of the situation. Seeing that the coal plant was a very delicate issue, we wanted to be sure that we have enough information, we have our facts, we have everything verified before we can uncover publicly and share our opinion. So we travelled to the community, we spent about three or four days with the elders, the young people, the fishermen, the women groups, to ask questions and start engaging them on the coal plant. Clearly enough, they had various opposing views, they had their own fears and anxiety.

After we did that, we came back to Accra and reached out to all organisations working in the climate and environmental space because the whole idea was to build a strong base of alliances that can support our course. Sometimes advocacy also requires numbers to achieve your aim, so by the time we came out publicly to do our press conference and publications, we had enough support, both from the community and the NGOs that were already engaged. In short that was the rationale behind the submarine approach, which eventually helped us to achieve our vision.

In 2016, the government decided to cancel their plans for coal and a few years later, it introduced the Renewable Energies Master Plan - what a turnaround! Is there anything in particular you ascribe the success of your campaign to?

I think what really helped us to a large extent was that not only were we opposing coal, but we were offering an alternative. One of the arguments of the government by going the way of coal was that it was going to create employment for young people. And we argued that if it's about employment,

then clean forms of energy guarantee more jobs than coal. Because if you look at the value chain, it can create so many jobs for young people. So it helped us become relevant actors, to not just oppose coal, but to offer an alternative for the betterment of the country and for young people.

On the grassroots level, I try to contribute by making the conversation not forceful, but understanding and inclusive. If you are pushing things onto people, they might resist. We try to convey information that will benefit them. And once it's benefiting them, they're likely to adjust their habits. I see development as us all industrialising, growing and achieving our economic goals, while also ensuring that we are also protecting the environment.

What role can renewable energies play in fighting unemployment, especially among young people?

The Renewable Energies Master Plan, which the government proposed after cancelling their coal plans, has three phases. The first set of proposed interventions is likely to create about 40,000 jobs. By the end of the third cycle, they're likely to create around 200,000 jobs along the value chain. And that is just the renewable energy component alone. In one of our projects we run at SYND, a group of young dream entrepreneurs is forming a network to learn, share and help up-scale their businesses. Some of them are converting organic waste, for example. There are tons and tons of organic waste, which can be used to produce briquettes and pellets so that we can replace wood, oil and charcoal, which are currently major drivers of deforestation. Let's gather what people call waste and convert it into organic briquettes. They don't smoke and therefore we help address indoor pollution. So that in the villages, in the communities, we can cook without inhaling smoke.

So that chain alone, those who are gathering organic waste, those who are converting the waste into energy fuel and those who are producing clinical stoves, are chains of values that can create jobs for the young people. It's creating co-benefits: one intervention to tackle climate change, deforestation and unemployment.

Why do you think it's so important to involve the young generation?

There's a saying that you can't teach an old dog new tricks, which means that our leaders today are difficult to change. To stop them from crude oil, nuclear energy and coal may be difficult because they're making money out of the fossil fuel industry, so it's difficult to change their mindset. But we can engage the younger generation so they don't repeat the mistakes of their current government leaders. In the next 40 to 50 years we are likely to reset our whole environmental trajectory back in line because now we have a new group of leaders who are environmentally conscious. That's the whole rationale behind why we're involving children to that extent. And sometimes also we underestimate the capacity of children, because they can become great influences in the schools, in their communities, at home, at churches and all that. We try to work on simple habits that will help them to become conscious in the future, not to waste energy, not to waste resources and not repeat some of the difficulties we are going through at this point.

On the grassroots level, every person can make a difference and you are clearly advocating for a bottom-up approach. What role do international alliances play in your work, and do you feel that your voice is being heard in the global conversation around sustainability?

There is definitely an issue in terms of the quantum of resources that comes to those who are heavily involved in local and grassroots engagement. In the past, a lot of the big funders channelled their resources through what you call international NGOs before it goes to the local organisations. But increasingly they're realising that the international NGOs' overhead costs started to swallow up most of the grant. Because when they get the money, they must pay their staff, they must pay their overhead cost and by the time they have money for the grassroots work there's just a little bit left. We try to bridge the gap between the global framework and the local action. We try to package our own information, do our own documentary, share our own experiences and amplify our own words. At the COP meetings, for example, we go and showcase what we do and try to look for new partners. And even there, one of the key things we want to demonstrate is that young people should be allowed to run their own affairs. The states and non-state actors should not act on their behalf, we must give them the chance to explore. It is not just shouting advocacy work or shouting climate action now. Those who have ideas, those who want to enter the secular economy, let's support them with small grants. So as they excel and prove their worth, they will receive increased support. And that's how we can actually meet the Paris Climate Agreement and the SDGs, out of serious local action being led by the young people who have the solutions.

My vision is to have a world where we can all live our lives without jeopardising the integrity of our environment and ecosystem. We need to protect the environment, it's the only thing we have. The water bodies, the air we breathe, the forests and all that. Everything you see on earth comes from the environment, our dressings, our microphones, our books, everything. Any materials, our mobile phones, our laptops, are all made from natural resources, so it's important to protect the environment for the sake of sustainability, for future generations. And after all, our lives depend on it.

Interview conducted by Hannah Page

Support the Strategic Youth Network for Development (SYND)!

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The interview series “Globally just Visions of the Future” is part of “How Is That All Connected?”, a project by the Afrika Medien Zentrum e.V. that offers various educational programs on global interconnections. In the interviews, eight actors from different contexts and continents present their work and visions of the future. The interviews will be published in a brochure by the end of 2025. Six of the featured actors led interactive online seminars in September and October 2025, offering an international audience insights into their practices.

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