

Climate Protection

An Interview with Ghanaian Climate Activist Chibeze Ezekiel

Chibeze Ezekiel, based in Ghana's capital Accra, is tireless in his advocacy for climate protection and the adoption of sustainable energy sources. Between 2013 and 2017, he and other young activists fought against the construction of Ghana's first coal-fired power plant. His successful campaign earned him the Goldman Environmental Prize in 2020 in the U.S.

In Ghana, energy demand is rising, driven by population growth and urbanization. Yet, power outages, known locally as "Dumsor," are common. Today, around 15% of the population lacks electricity access, a significant improvement from 30% in 2013. At that time, the government proposed building a coal-fired power plant along with a new port to import coal from South Africa.

We know that coal is the most harmful energy source and the single largest contributor to emissions. You and other activists opposed these coal plans using what you call the "submarine approach." Could you explain what that means?

When the government takes a political stance or makes an announcement, civil society organizations typically respond quickly. They issue statements or hold press conferences without thoroughly understanding the situation. Because the coal plant was a sensitive issue, we wanted to ensure we had solid information and had reviewed everything before going public. So, we travelled to the affected community, spending three or four days engaging with elders, young people, fishermen, and women's groups to ask questions and discuss the coal plant. They expressed diverse perspectives, fears, and concerns.

We then returned to Accra and connected with environmental civil society organizations to build a strong alliance that could support us. By the time we held our press conference and shared our position publicly, we had significant backing from both affected communities and engaged organizations. That was the essence of the "submarine approach," which ultimately helped us achieve our vision. In other words, to work in the background first before going public and showing up.

In 2016, the government decided to abandon its plans for the coal plant, and a few years later, it released the Renewable Energy Master Plan—a remarkable shift! What do you attribute the success of your campaign to?

I think it was crucial that we didn't just oppose the coal plant but also offered an alternative. One of the government's arguments for the coal plant was job creation for young people. We countered that clean energy forms could create even more jobs than coal. Looking at the value chain, so many opportunities can be generated for young people. This positioned us as relevant stakeholders who were not only against coal but also advocating for alternatives that benefited the country and its youth.

In 2022, the unemployment rate for 15- to 24-year-olds in Ghana was estimated at 5.4%, down from 15.2% in 2015. How can renewable energy play a role in addressing unemployment, particularly for young people?

The Renewable Energy Master Plan proposed by the government after abandoning its coal plans consists of three phases. The first phase alone was projected to create 40,000 jobs. By the end of the third phase, around 200,000 jobs could be created along the value chain. And this is just within the renewable energy sector. One of our projects at the Strategic Youth Network for Development (SYND) in Ghana involves forming a network of young entrepreneurs to exchange ideas, learn from each other, and support the expansion of their green startups. For instance, some of them process organic waste, which is abundant, into briquettes and pellets to replace wood oil and coal—currently major drivers of deforestation. This value chain—from waste collection to converting waste into fuel and producing sustainable stoves—can create many jobs for young people. At the same time, this addresses three problems: climate change, deforestation, and unemployment.

The renewable energy sector clearly offers vast employment opportunities, and you also empower young people to develop their own solutions and green businesses. Why is involving the younger generation so important to you?

There's a saying that you can't teach an old dog new tricks, meaning it's difficult to change the mindset of current leaders. Many are deeply tied to traditional energy sources due to entrenched views and financial interests. However, we can engage the younger generation to ensure they don't repeat the mistakes of today's politicians. In the coming years and decades, we'll likely see climate policies move in the right direction because we now have a new group of environmentally conscious leaders. This is why we involve children so extensively. We often underestimate their influence, but they can drive change in schools, communities, homes, churches, and beyond.

So, on a small scale, everyone can make a difference. You advocate for a civil, democratic approach. What role do international collaborations play in your work, and do you feel heard in global climate discussions?

There's a notable gap in funding available to local-level actors. Historically, major funders have channelled resources through international organizations before they reach local groups. Over time, they've realized that these large NGOs consume a significant portion of the funds for overhead costs, undermining grassroots efforts. We aim to bridge the gap between global frameworks and local action by collecting and sharing our own information, creating documentation, and showcasing our efforts. At large COP meetings, for example, we present our work and seek new partnerships. One of our central demands in these forums is the inclusion of young people. Governmental and non-governmental actors should not merely act on behalf of youth; young people must be informed and actively involved in climate action. Those with innovative ideas for entering the green economy should receive grants to support their work. This approach is essential to implement the Paris Climate Agreement and achieve the SDGs through meaningful local actions led by young people who have the solutions. Protecting the environment is critical—it's the only one we have. The air we breathe, the water we drink, the forests, and much more all sustain us. Everything around us—our clothes, books, microphones, mobile phones—originates from natural resources. Protecting the environment sustainably for future generations is vital because our lives depend on it.

Interview by Hannah Page