

Welcome to Turning Conscience Into Action, the Earth Charter podcast. Join Mirian Vilela, Earth Charter International Executive Director, in her fascinating conversations with great thinkers, scholars and activists from around the world who are working in the fields of sustainability, ethics, education and social transformation. Our purpose is to generate new insights on how to face current global challenges and inspire informed action.

Hello everyone. Today we'll have an opportunity to hear from someone who I would say is iconic in Zimbabwe.

Have you ever wondered what's happening in Zimbabwe when it comes to climate change and rural development? Well today we have the opportunity to hear from a remarkable woman who has been at the forefront of leadership across multiple field zines in Zimbabwe, from rural development to environmental policy. So stay with us as we dive into her inspiring journey and the work that has been done on the ground. Let me start by introducing you to our today's very special guest, Sithembiso Nyoni. Nyoni is founder and president of the Organization of Rural Associations for Progress, ORA, which was established in 1981 to support rural development in Zimbabwe.

And it is through this outstanding community-based organization work that I first met Sithembiso Nyoni. Nyoni also served in the government in multiple cabinet positions, including minister of small and medium enterprises development, minister of industry and commerce, and minister of environment, climate change, climate and wildlife until April 2025. One interesting thing, or one interesting fact, is that in 1999 when we had a consultation on the Earth Charter drafting with several people from different countries in Africa, she contributed to that.

I clearly and vividly remember when Sithembiso Nyoni entered in the room of that regional meeting we had, we were having Cape Town, South Africa. Sithembiso, thank you so much for joining us today. Thank you, thank you so much. It really is a privilege and an honor for me to speak to you today. So we are going to start with the first question. You founded ORA, the Organization of Rural Associations for Progress, many, many years ago. So can you share with us what you had in mind back then and what was the purpose and how did you see ORAP evolving in its impact?

Yes, thank you very much. ORAP was founded by myself, being assisted by a group of other like-minded Zimbabweans, men and women. It was soon after the war. And you know, when people go through trauma, go through the war of liberation or any war at all, they go through violent mental violence, psychological violence. And this affects people and their ability to engage in development. So I started by doing a research into really what was the impact of what the rural people in Zimbabwe, especially in Matabeleland, had gone through.

And having gone through all this trauma and, you know, shocks, what did they really need to engage in in order for them to take off in development? That was one reason. The other reason was that I had been involved in community development. And then I went back to university. And I came back, most of what I had done had disappeared. So it made me question why was what I did with such vigour, enthusiasm, commitment? Why hasn't

it made an impact among the people? So I came to realize that when you go to do development with the people and you impose your own ideas, usually it doesn't stick.

And also, if you don't help people to connect to their own culture, to connect to what the Earth Council says, the community of life, the community for life, for people to live a life together, together with the environment, together with anything that lives around them. And if you separate that from the people, they get disoriented and development doesn't stick. And I think Orapi has proved this fact, because you remember we linked it together and we were really talking about Earth Charter, the way that it connects people to nature, to all living beings must live in harmony with each other.

And therefore, people after the war, they were full of fear, they were full of uncertainty, they had trust and they had gone through this trauma that has really thrown them off. They didn't know whom to trust. So Orapi was formed as a community-based and a culturally rooted organization to try and help people reconnect and rebuild social fabrics. Because without rebuilding social fabric, it is very difficult for people to connect to anything else, because they will be fighting, they will be mistrust, they will not be working together properly.

And social fabric, when it's broken, it manifest itself in so many ways. It could even generate new conflict, internal conflict, if the social fabric is not strong. Very correct. Very correct. People will be unstable, insecure. And you know, insecurity will make you respond and react to things that you could think rationally and engage each other on. So therefore, Orap developed a methodology of engaging people. It was articulation of who you are. And then we used our own language, our own cultural background, that you need to start with yourself.

And we called it the shu ze, which means you enter into your own life, your own psychological standing, your own spiritual social connection. Who are you? And from there, you then say, what are the qualities you have as a human being that makes you who you are? And how can you use those to connect to others so that together you build a society that you want? So that process was very powerful and very important, especially soon after the war. And then people started talking to each other and we were following cultural gatherings, which we call Amalima.

In our culture, you don't do the field alone. Then you have a lot of work to do in your field, in your garden, in any project. You then invite others over a meal. Then you work together. So we used that structure in order for people to connect not just with themselves, but also with each other. That is very important because development does not happen where there are no relationships. We believe that you need to have relationships, a relationship of trust, of having confidence in each other. You have a common agenda.

You understand each other. And therefore, when you then work together, you are moving together and you are solving your problems and you are solving each other's problems. So all up then, because it was culturally rooted, we could not separate it from environmental issues. So we were dealing with what is it that you use in your agriculture, in your preserving of crops, in your cooking that does not destroy the environment, that does not also cause ill health. Like, for instance, if you use a lot of chemicals in growing vegetables

and then you use a lot of chemicals to preserve your grain, all those chemicals end up in your system.

And then we went back into our roots in terms of what were the crops to grow, went back to our own traditional crops and also traditional ways of growing crops. And I'm very proud to say up to today Zimbabwe government has taken up the ideas of what we called *kan chompo*, which is a smart agriculture. You don't till the land. You just dig the holes and in Zimbabwe now we call it *fumbuza intuasa*, which is smart agriculture, conservation agriculture. And all up started doing that years back and it really did help the people.

So up to now people, all up is very rooted in the communities. And I'm happy to say, during the time when I founded all up, there were so many indoors that were operating in the country, local and international. Most of them were folded up because they were depending on donors to come and give them the money and even give them the ideas of what to do. And when donor money was pulled out, a lot of them fell flat on their face. So for sustainable development, the all up approach has proved to be indeed sustainable.

You don't develop a person outside in, but it's better to develop people inside out because everybody was created to say, not just to survive, but to live, to grow and to be a better person. And everybody was created in an environment, nature, that should take care of them, but they also should take care of that natural environment. So for that reason, all up is still going strong today because it is culturally rooted and it is rooted in the realities of the people and it also networks among people, they help each other and they call for outside help where they can't help themselves.

Amazing. I love this idea of you don't develop a person from outside, but from inside out. And also the idea of smart agriculture that Aura has started from decades ago. And I'm happy to hear that it's still its impact and it's still there and it continues to evolve. Very important. Well, thank you so much for sharing with us a little bit about the methodology that Aura developed to engage with the local communities. Amazing. Thank you and congratulations for that. Now let's talk a little bit about Zimbabwe's climate commitments and what's going on there.

Zimbabwe has submitted its updated national determined contributions, as I understand, under the Paris Agreement. How is the country progressing in meeting these climate commitments and what are the government's top priorities in implementing them? Yeah, thank you very much. That is a very important question. Zimbabwe, after the new dispensation, after the coming in of President Idem Nangawa, he formed a separate Ministry of Environment and Climate Change to deal with environment, climate and wildlife, which I headed.

The Ministry of Environment, when was the Ministry of Environment created in Zimbabwe? It was created in 2003. Amazing. Okay. Thank you. It used to be a Ministry of Tourism together with environment and wildlife. So his excellence in his prudence, he then separated the two. And I tell you, I ran that Ministry for over a year and he made the right decision because what can you do without your environment? Global issues are very important and climate change is here with us. So Zimbabwe is very, very committed to its NDC and under the Paris Agreement.

And as you are aware, the government is committed to have 40% reduction in emissions by 2030. And this is the government is working very, very hard to achieve. We also wanted to make sure that by 2030, we have about 26.5% installation of renewable energy. And there is a lot of programs to have lithium batteries instead of using fuels. And Zimbabwe also is trying to get technology so that we measure the emission that is happening in our companies, in our industry. Because that is not measured. And companies or industrialists are not taken to account.

We are focusing on renewable energy. We are also focusing on forestry to make sure that we keep deforestation. We are focusing on smart agriculture, like I said. And smart agriculture has two advantages which we have found in Zimbabwe. The first one is that it is environmentally sound and it contributes towards the preservation of our environment, our soils, for instance. But it also produces better yields. I'm sure you are aware that Zimbabwe, we are not now food sufficient. We are now self-sufficient in grain.

It is all because of our presidency policy that all the rural people, the farmers in the communal areas, should now adopt this methodology of smart agriculture. Amazing. Congratulations. It gives you for a country to be self-sufficient and strengthen the farmers' capacity to undertake smart agriculture, as you say. Yes. And also we used to import wheat. We used to import some maize. But now we are self-sufficient in both wheat and in maize. And I think a few years ago we were also able to export some wheat for the first time in many, many years.

So Zimbabwe is really committed in that. But also forestry, we are planting a lot of trees. We both, through government and through the private sector. And you remember that Zimbabwe had depleted some of our forests because of the growing of tobacco. And now that has changed. You can't grow tobacco until you show a plantation that you have planted, that you will harvest from. So there is an aggressive tree planting program. Both commercially and also in the communal areas. And we want now to replace clinker with fly ash because cement is very popular in Zimbabwe.

And we wanted to also now develop new ways of making cement. So legally Zimbabwe has set a bill. There is a bill that we have set on the climate change bill for 2025. The climate change bill has been passed by cabinet and is now certified. And we also have a national climate fund. It's also going to be helping people. In industry also we are making sure that emissions are measured and we're possible controlled. I think Zimbabwe is really very committed. But Maria what is amazing is that Zimbabwe is among the lowest emitters in the world.

I think we're about, and yet we are about the fifth most vulnerable among the 182 countries. So we need to really do more to defend ourselves. We emit less and yet the climate change has really affected most of our people, especially the vulnerable in the rural areas. So it's a very good example of a country that is among the lowest in the meeting CO₂. But still it's experiencing the impacts largely of climate change. I was impressed with what you said about the country's commitment. Even though you are one of the lowest emitters you still have the commitment to reduce the CO₂ emissions by 40%.

By 2030 it's a very big commitment. So thank you for sharing all of this. And also very happy to hear the commitment and what's going on in terms of reforestation in Zimbabwe. So we'd like to hear from you the challenges. What could be the challenges in implementations? If there are key challenges in Zimbabwe what are they in facing the implementation of climate resilience and sustainable development, particularly in the rural and vulnerable communities? Yes. The challenges for implementation they are really diverse.

As you are aware I believe in people's engagement. If you are to implement anything sustainably you need to engage the people that are affected or the people that are going to implement the program. So we have a lot to do to try and educate our rural people in terms of environmental awareness and the impact of climate change on their lives. The implementation cannot take place remote control because you can now go and plant trees and then the rural people will come and destroy them because they don't understand why you are planting those trees.

So the challenges we are having is to try and go back to the drawing board. Let's have a dialogue with our people. We are facing a national which is also a global risk or disaster. So we need to take care of our environment. We need to take care of all that we have. We need to relate to nature differently. So but you can't just go and talk to people like that. You have to understand why in the first place if they cut down those trees, why in the first place if those things happened. The climate change is brought about by so many actors.

For instance those that are in mining, those that are in commercial agriculture and the rural people themselves cutting down for fuel, for building, for whatever they want to do. So the challenge then comes when you have to coordinate all those people to correct themselves. Because what has been happening is that people blame the rural people, the poor, the vulnerable. When they go to an area and find a whole lot of trees are cut down. They don't understand why. So our challenge is that we have to go back to the drawing board and make sure that our people understand.

And secondly we need also to connect with those that are causing the emission to really try and help. And help technologically to see if there is any technology that we can share. Also we need financial support. What is it that we can do? On technology Zimbabwe has a lot of lithium. So why can't we have technology come to Zimbabwe to have lithium batteries rather than run cars on fossil fuel? Because we have the resource. All we need now is technology. I'm here to really to share that. And to announce that Zimbabwe has got you, our president has commanded the universities to do a lot of innovation and to be creative.

And among those creative ideas is developing lithium batteries so that we run our cars on batteries. And he also has formed an environmental management agency, EMA, that monitors any environmental damage. And we have the Ministry of Mines is now having a bill to show that we are all moving towards one direction to have the whole of government approach and the whole of society approach. That is still a challenge because industry is working on its own. The social movements are working on their own and government is working on its own.

And we need to pull all these forces together so that we minimize on the resources because resources shared, resources spared. You save a lot if you share and you collaborate. So that would really be one of the challenges, especially when you talk about vulnerable people. How do we connect to them? How do we bring them on board so that they don't undo whatever the top does? And also to make sure that whatever the top is doing doesn't affect negatively the rural vulnerable communities. How do you see or how does Zimbabwe balance the urgent need for economic development with climate responsibility?

I think you just mentioned some of it, especially, but now I would like to hear a little bit in the context of democratic stability and economic reform. I understand this is to evolve economic reform in democratic stability in Zimbabwe. And how do you bring all of these urgent needs to address economic development?

Yes, economic development in a lot of cases has happened at the expense of environmental soundness. And also politics sometimes is overridden the need to think and do things the way that preserves our environment. So I think it's important to have the political will because without the political will, a lot of things, policies will not be made to respond to what is needed. And I'm glad to say in Zimbabwe there is the political will. Our president is well aware that environment is key and that climate change is a reality.

But I think when you are now trying to marry economic development and the preservation of our environment, then that's where now the struggle arises in that some people may want to over exploit the natural resources at the expense of the generations to come. So the struggle continues. We still we have to really have that balance. How far do we go in exploiting our resources to meet the needs of today? And what do we sacrifice today so that we meet the needs of the next generation? Great. Good. Thank you.

I'll ask you a question because I think it will be in the minds of our audience who will be listening to you today. You mentioned about the fact that Zimbabwe has a lot of lithium and wants to further develop technology on batteries to make use of lithium within electric batteries within Zimbabwe. I know this is something that's going to spark the attention of people because there's so much talk around the world about how bad to the environment lithium might be. Have you thought about within Zimbabwe finding ways to further develop this technology for national use in a way that doesn't damage the environment?

Yes. Like I said, our universities are working on this. We have research departments and they haven't reached some conclusions yet. And they are aware of all the negatives and the positives around lithium. But I don't think that something untoward will be done. We can't manufacture lithium batteries that will save the same polluting papers as what we are trying to solve. I think what we need to come up with as universities in Zimbabwe is a solution that prevents emission rather than replace. What is the kind of support?

Could it be technical, financial or political support that Zimbabwe needs from international partners to accelerate its climate action and meet its NDC goals? I think the starting point should be that we need to take joint responsibility, both Zimbabwe and the global partners. Because we share these global commons and the atmosphere belongs to all of us. We all want air quality. We need just to share knowledge. And before, we used to clamour for technology transfer. But in Zimbabwe, we are saying we want technology sharing.

Because our universities are now alert. They now have the responsibility to do as much research as any other university. So what we need really, the partnership we need is the partnership of sharing knowledge, partnership of sharing technology, partnership of raising money together. And these days, before I left the ministry, we were working on carbon credits marketing. And I think if that takes off, that will be another way of sharing. And while I'm on that, the carbon trading in Zimbabwe, you cannot trade them unless you fulfill certain criteria.

And one of the criteria is to work with communities. And therefore, the help we need or the partnership we need is what maybe ARAP has done with a company called Olythera. This company has come to invest with communities to do multi-cropping for exports. So that multi-cropping includes agroforestry. So that you don't cut down trees, you plant other food trees among the trees that you have. And Olythera has transformed some of the ARAP villages. And they now feel a part of the global solution. So that's the kind of partnership that we want.

A partnership that comes to strengthen what is happening on the ground. So ARAP communities have availed part of the land they are not using for multi-cropping and for agroforestry, for exports. And I tell you, Mirian, that is one project that I am very proud of, because investment is coming directly to the people who need it. And it's solving many problems there. The first problem is it is environmentally sound. It's contributing towards our global commons, the atmosphere. It's contributing towards elimination of carbon outside.

And secondly, it is putting money in rural people's pockets, preventing them from exploiting their environment in a way that depletes trees and interferes with ecosystems and interferes with their biodiversity, because they will be trying to make a living. But this kind of making a living is in sync with environmental practices and also contributing to what Zimbabwe is doing, afforestation and reforestation. Wonderful. Wonderful. It's a very good example of even system thinking through global partnership and that it's really empowering, strengthening the rural communities' capacity to develop their own autonomy in food security also.

Yes. Thank you so much. It contributes to the economy, to addressing reduction of poverty in many ways. Thank you. Let's talk about the COP30 and the idea of the global ethical stocktake that the Brazilian government launched earlier this year. It's a unique opportunity to engage different actors in thinking and addressing climate change. And how do you see the Eushara serving as an instrument in addressing this effort? I think I want to start by thanking Eth Chat because I'm aware that they were part of this very grand initiative.

And it is very important because it's now going to bring together different players. And it has an inclusive approach so that it coordinates different regions and different areas for people to think together and to do the stocktake together. So I think it's a very, very grand idea. And as you also are aware, Maria, that COP30 convenes in the heart of the Amazon. COP30 is also taking place when you look back that 24 was the hottest year. The temperatures were very, very high. And the global climate risk now is visible and it's affecting all the globe.

You can tell from the fires that are taking place in the north and the droughts that are taking place, the lack of water. And I think this stocktake is going to be very, very important in bringing the various actors together and also bringing a new knowledge on what is happening on the ground among the different actors. Thank you. We came to the last question for today's conversation. What message would you like to share with other African leaders in the global community about Zimbabwe's vision for a climate resilient and sustainable future?

What real progress has been made, but what is lacking is action. So, like the Brazilian presidents said, we need now to really act rather than keep talking and talking. And no nation can solve the climate change issues alone. It belongs to all of us. And then no region can do it alone. And then no groups of people can do it alone. So we need the communities. We need the academia. We need to do more research on the challenges that we are facing. We also need the politicians. We need the political will from all nations.

So we came to an end of our conversation today with Sithembiso Nyoni from Zimbabwe. We are extremely grateful. I am really grateful for you for taking the time to be with us today here for the Earth Charter podcast. Thank you, Sithembiso. Thank you very much. I really appreciate the conversation. Keep up the good work.

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