**Conversations in Social Justice:**



**Youth, Education and Environmental Activism**

**Podcast transcript**

Series 2. Episode 5.

*Dr Olalekan Adekola is joined by Conservation Scientist, Educator and Community organiser, Dr Salamatu Jidda-Fada to discuss her environmental conservation work and mentoring African youths to be active in global environmental governance. The discussion also explores what universities can do to support youth climate activists from the Global South.*

**Olalekan Adekola**

Hello, I am Olalekan Adekola, a senior lecturer in geography at York St. John University. I present to you this month's conversation in social justice podcast brought to you by the Institute for Social Justice, at York St John University will be discussing on the title youth education and environmental activism. And I'll be discussing with Dr. Salamatu Jidda-Fada, Dr Salamatu is a conservation scientist, educator, and mentor. She has mentored hundreds of youths with an interest in global environmental governance. Salamatu is a lecturer in the Department of Geography, University of Jos in Nigeria, and she is also an external lecturer at the School of Natural Sciences Bangor University. Her research focuses on ecology and social safeguard, and She adopts interdisciplinary approaches to understand access changes on threats to conservation and general environmental issues. She has been working with local communities across Africa to protect the dwindling elephant population. Salamatu is the director of the north Wales Africa society, and oversees the Bangor Africa Caribbean centre. Welcome Salamtu and thank you very much for joining us today. Can we just start Can I start by asking you to begin by telling our audience a little bit about the invaluable education and conservation work that you have been doing that you've done in the past and the ones that you're currently undertaking?

**Salamatu Jidda-Fada**

I would say I have put in about 20 years in education and conservation work. And now community development. I started my early years as a lecturer in, University of Jos, which then brought me to the UK to do a PhD, and then did a postdoc. In this year, I have taught courses related to conservation and biogeography and research methods. When I came to Bangor, I still enrolled on the higher education course, for teachers. I qualified as an Associate Fellow of the Higher Education Academy in the UK, I have done a lot of conservation work, starting from the classroom, then teaching to practical conservation work on the field in the UK, here and back in Nigeria. So I have been engaging, and very much interested, I have been engaged with following and researching on elephant population. And people populations, especially the ones in that in Dadin Kowa in Gombe state, the elephant population, I was particularly concerned about the elephant populations in Yankari Game reserve, which has the highest elephant numbers in Nigeria. And it's also very important population for West Africa. But now I am interested in the whole populations of elephants, whether they are Savanna or forest, because IUCN just reported last year March that both populations at risk. So I am, you know, interested in both in Wales. I started as a student Greener Gwyneed volunteer, so I was a leader of Greener Gwyneed, volunteer of the Student Union. And we let you know students, undergrad masters students, PhD students that were interested in conservation to do to embark on different conservation work and has exposed me then to removing some of the invasives from Snowdonia National Park and also guiding and monitoring different nature reserves in Wales. So both in classroom and outside of classroom I have been engaged with conservation work and educating, educating I see as part of my life so in class and outside of classroom, I educate as much as in fact, I call myself an educator, I always want to teach, I want to correct, I want to guide.

**Olalekan Adekola**

Thank you very much for that. And I believe we'll be able to delve a bit into some of the education work you do. And the way you do that, together with youth and mentor them, we'll be able to get a bit into that, just to pick up on some of the things that you said earlier, can you tell us a bit about some of the social justice related issues that you probably have come across within your conservation work, the research and a project that you've done that relates to conservation, are there social justice related issues that you've come across in those projects?

**Salamatu Jidda-Fada**

Absolutely. I'll give you an example. I was invited by the Bauchi state government in Nigeria to help update in management plan in 2015. And I said, Okay, conservation is not done. Now, like you are used to, so is not top bottom approach I use not at all, I invite the people, this plan is made for to be on the table, and to be partners. So we have to hear them out. I am tired of a cyclical approach of keeping people out of nature areas, and put in some laws that are not realistic. Because these people end up breaking the laws, and you arrest them, you take them to prison, sometimes you fine them and they go back home. And when they are hungry, they come back again to do the same reoffend is not working is cyclical. So we are going to do something different. We are going to talk with these people and hear them out. And so the governor then saw reason with what I said, and he said, Okay, you go ahead, so they engage me. And what I did was to go to all about 18 local communities that were at least five kilometres from the border of Yankari game reserve. In Nigeria, I visited these communities, I sat down with the leaders with the people and engage them with women with you engage them. And we did the first round of just visiting them to say, Oh, this is who we are, we're going to be working with you for two years. And then when I came back, I invited a social ecologist from Mexico, Dr. Tuyeni, she came, we sat down. And we were able to do workshops to train these social communities, and then continue the development of that management plan. But what happened was, when we were visiting the communities, it now became very glaring their needs. And then I saw that it is actually not realistic to just focus on just conservation bothered about elephants, and lions, and hippos and antelopes. And then this people are at the bottom, their livelihoods are threatened. So I said, No, in fact, I went to Kargo is one of the 18 communities I visited. And I saw that their primary school had collapsed down to the ground completely. And it was even a threat standing there. It was supposed to be a three block of classrooms, and it it had collapsed. And they said, Doctor, help us, help us, please. We don't have our children don't have where to go to school. And so what I did was I tried to engage the government to help them. But of course, the government have their agenda, and they have their own pressures. So they didn't act immediately. And when my contract finished, I had the burden all through. When my contract finish, I came back and decided to establish an NGO cartel of UK and using that platform to intervene in that community. And as of today, I can tell you, we have got funding, and we have been able to build a school, a block of three classrooms. We have been able to provide solar panels in the community. We are now working with a British Nigeria Education Trust to provide rainwater so its a scheme that they will sponsor it to help provide water for that community. And we keep engaging them, we have been able to do some training for the teachers, and some of the pupils in mathematics last year, we took them to Alkaleri local government, and we just use them as a pilot. And now we are developing a more sustainable workshop. So this is an example of how my work has sort of is focusing is becoming more and more focused on social justice. So I'm not doing conservation alone for wildlife, but is for people and wildlife. At the same time, I believe that you can have a win-win. For both.

**Olalekan Adekola**

Thank you very much for that, I think it's quite interesting to hear how conservation is not only about the environmental side of things, but also the sort of focus on the social. And it was interesting when you talked about the sort of community that women the gender dimensions, the issues around the youth, I believe we'll delve a bit later into the youth side, I just want to check with you. Are there any challenges that you face, you know, when you try to bring the social side the social dimension of conservation, or the importance of looking at the social side into your work? So are there opposition? Are there challenges you face, either from the local community or from the governance side? And how do you manage those sorts of challenges? If there are any?

**Salamatu Jidda-Fada**

Yes, yes, yes, it is a big yes. And I can tell you, the most challenge I encountered surprisingly, came from conservation professionals and NGOs, it is funny that people actually feel that conservation can be done without having a human face. I don't know in what, In what world that a child that cannot feed, cannot go to school, cannot have medical attention when he needs it cannot have those basic things in life is not an important aspect of a conservation intervention. I don't, I can't get it around my head. But there are many conservation, NGOs, surprisingly, some of them International, you know, that not that we believe should know better. They have their interventions, they have their strategies, that does not include social safeguards at all. And when I started, the strategies they use some of them is, okay, this is the big bigger picture. For the local communities, we are going to send a vehicle to get the children from school, from the primary school to come and we take them for viewing. So you they go and see wildlife, and we give them some rice, we probably give them T shirts, and we take them back home. And that one off thing, you will be shocked to see it on all social media as something that this organisation or that organisation is doing in as a way of intervention. And I feel that it is really degrading and insulting to the people, for you to use them. Because I feel they're being used. Just put t shirts on the children and take a picture. And ethically is wrong, because you're promoting your NGO. But, um, in the real sense, there is no benefit for these people. So most of the time, the people that I had had on collusion sort of to say are conservation NGOs, they don't believe that our strategy would work. In fact, I have sold to some of them. That Okay, let's start with co-management. Let's start with co-management. I don't like the top bottom thing. Let's just start with co-management. The government and the people manage this government reserves together, but they're not interested in that. They believe what they know is good for everyone. No co-production, in design, or implementation or anything. So they bring whatever they bring and agree on. And you know, they sort of put it on the table as this we are helping you and I'm tired of this slave master relationship. I don't like it. I am big on Aids. I don't like hearing aids. I don't I don't like it. I believe that both partners can benefit. Let us be partners. We both can benefit Let it be mutual benefits, and everybody can win. But nothing like what I have thought of for you, is good for you and is being developed without you in the centre, it doesn't work. So yes, I have had challenges with government, because of the bureaucracy definitely is expected, especially in Africa. And then, of course, logistic challenges, maybe of bad roads, or weather conditions and things like that. But the most challenges I've had in terms of social justice is related to conservation, NGOs, and practitioners.

**Olalekan Adekola**

Thank you very much a lot of insight there. I mean, one of the key things you highlighted is the fact that if we have to ensure a socially just approach to conservation or managing environmental resources, it has to be through partnership, it doesn't necessarily need to be one side dominating over the other, thank you very much for that.

**Olalekan Adekola**

Thank you very much for sharing your thoughts around a project that you do with conservation, especially in Nigeria. Next, I want us to look at some of the work that you do regarding education and climate activism. And the question is just to explore your work with the youth and some of the challenges that the youth face when it comes to contributing to redressing some of the negative impacts of climate change. So that could be based on your work in Nigeria, and some of the work you do with climate activists, both in wells and on the African continent. The second part to that question, if I can put that across as well, is, what do you think universities like ours, what can they be doing to help youths to contribute best to redressing some of the challenges of climate change?

**Salamatu Jidda-Fada**

So I'm going to start with education, and then lead into climate activism, and being a mentor to young African climate activist. With education I have experience of not only reading education, myself, and being a lecturer for many years, but I have been on the board of adult learning Wales, this is the third year running in August, we will make it three years and been on the board has exposed me to a lot of the ways the learners behave and how they interact. So I have the experience of actually being able to guide adult learners. Now, the youth however you define youth, the youth of Africa and the youth in Europe, I think it's a bit different. There are different ways you can define what youth is, some people will tell you from maybe 14 to 25, some people would say is just 16 to 24, it varies. The youth I have been dealing with, from teaching under graduates to actually having mature learners under my care and teaching and mentorship. I have engaged with them in various forms. Because what it is is all of them come to the table with different issues because of their lived experiences the climate activist. Actually, I didn't know them from anywhere, somebody recommended that they talked with me. So they have organised themselves and needed some sort of guidance. And I was asked to speak with them. It was supposed to be a one off arrangement. But when I talked with them and guided them, I realised that they asked me can this be a formal arrangement? So let's open a WhatsApp group and have regular meetings and things like that. And we began to engage in that way to the point that you know, building up to COP 26 I was able to help some of them to attend COP 26 And that also happened to be the opportunity I have serving on the the advisory committee of Royal Society for the Protection of Birds Cymru, I was able to get them forms youth forms sent to them. And they filled and got sponsorship to attend COP 26 in Glasgow. Now, there are many challenges that our youth face, especially I would say, climate activist in the Global South. And these challenges sometimes have are not things that you can easily fix. There are things you can do, and there are things that you cannot do. For example, most of the African governments, or I would say, generally, there is the authoritarian regime in Africa, to a large extent disregarded, so culturally, where youth talk, speak, and speak their mind sort of is seen as be rude, or coming across as Oh, where are you coming from? We don't do that here. So you are expected, even in the family structure, that your father and your mother know it all. So when a youth begin to speak out his mind and begin to challenge things, at serious levels, like the government level, it becomes a challenge, I would, I can tell you that I have a youth now a mentee that had to flee from Congo, and now lives in Malawi, because his life is being threatened just because of activism. And now I'm getting a colleague of mine, that we met in Europe here I'm getting her to take care of him. So that he is not, at least he has a form of livelihood, and things like that. So there is that, that is a top issue of everybody's telling you shut up with the culturally we don't do things here. Secondly, there are the issues of lack. So the funds to enable, and to propel this youth to do the things they want to do are not there. So at the grassroots, most of them want to they have their interventions, they know the problems, and they want to fix the problems. Some of them have written proposals and sent to me very strong ones. But again, they have to compete with others to get funding. And most of the funding comes from the Global North. And it's not all the time that global North trust that these youths will use the money accordingly. In quote, you know, so there is pressure of them actually needing the money, the funds to be able to intervene in their communities. And then because other people have done wrong in the past, there is a history of lack of prudence, and mismanagement and looting, it is affecting these youths. And even when they get the monies, they need also permissions and consents. And this consents comes from where from the big guys, they begin to ask them, Where did you get the money? Who are you working for, you know, we don't trust you and start putting all these negative things in these youths. So there is that that case, the third one is one of the youth are mentoring right now on African activism in climate actually said, I've never met anybody like you. You are so factual. You're so open. You don't hide anything. You tell us the truth. Many people just take advantage of us. There is no mentorship. I'm not saying that I'm the best mentor. No, no, no, not at all. There is the lack of genuine mentorship, people that will guide these youths in the right direction. And not only guide them. Also use your influence to open doors for them. So for example, I'm here in Wales, and if I recommend this youth to RSPB, for example. Match them, North Wales Wildlife Trust, and other NGOs. They're able to believe that these guys are genuine. And then I'm also able to guide them. So there are quite a few things. I can go on and on. But they suffer a lot because the challenges are on ending. So there's a second part of the question where you said what can the universities do for them? Now if I'm talking about the guys in the global south. So the girls and boys, most of them are actually ready to further their education, some of them to start their education. And if they can get scholarships, even if they are not full scholarships, part scholarships, you know, they are hardworking some of them to farm. You know, some of them, they engage in all different kinds of businesses, you know, at the local level, the lower level, and come and be better educated, and also have the opportunities for proper partnerships so that their voices can be heard. The other thing that you can do, for example, I'm talking to you from University of York [York St. John University], or your institute directly, you can have the youth that I mentor and other people mentor, as an extension of your institute. So we can be affiliated with you, which then makes us look genuine to some people that will ordinarily not believe or trust what we're doing, you see, and in doing that, the doors open for these youths to enable them carry out their work effectively and sustainably. And it can go on and on the resources you have of materials. So books, newsletters, library materials, they all can use them. They don't have to be physically here in Europe, we can send it to them, we I have sent 10 boxes of books, to a university in northern Nigeria, two years or three years ago, all they did was paying for the shipment. But I got this 10 boxes of books over the years and sent to them, as I'm talking to you. I've already packaged books, and some toys, and whatever I'm sending to Kargo, that community, I told you that we build a school I'm sending there to help the children have books and resources. So we can send them physical materials, as well as online materials I can download and find a way to send to them. So there's so many ways we can engage with institutions, with other NGOs with with the government, even of the UK.

**Olalekan Adekola**

Thank you very much for that Dr. Salamatu quite a lot. You've said that. I think a lot about the mentorship work you've done and also a COP 26. We'll comeback to the issue of COP 26 later on. I just want to check Have you seen any sort of issues arising from working with diaspora youths in the UK, especially in north Wales, I know you've talked about those within the African continent. Are there similar issues arising when you work with youth within the UK, especially in north Wales, are their youth groups also, within those communities sort of like working for climate change issues and your involvement in that as well.

**Salamatu Jidda-Fada**

It is really different. You know, in Europe, when a youth shows interest in climate issues, that youth is projected in a way that you want to give them a voice. That is typically what is obtainable here. I can tell you that I am on the steering committee for climate Cymru. And we run campaigns. In fact, we run the campaign leading to COP 26, gathering the Welsh voices and took to our Senate, which then took it to the meeting in Glasgow. And we set out to gather just 10,000 voices, we ended up with over 13,000 voices. And I can tell you that the youth amongst us, if you go to the website, you'd see many infact. I think more than half of us half of them on the half of us on the US ambassadors are youth and Poppy and her group. They have an organised group and is impactful. They engage politicians, they engage partners, different partners that are relevant to the campaigns of climate change. They go to schools and engage schools at basic levels and universities. They are doing great jobs, you know, to raise the awareness. In fact I remember Were that during the the elections, some of them ran sessions, to engage the politicians to actually explain how they can help us transit to a greener economy, they will use the way they interviewed them grill them, I attended several of the sessions. And it was beautiful. And they did it with confidence. So we need to give the global south that kind of platform, that youths can actually engage the politicians and all the policymakers to say this is what we are thinking. And to be realistic, is the youth that will feel the more the impact of climate change more than us how much have we got to live, so they know what they are talking about, don't keep on doing what you're doing carrying on with business as usual, and causing problems to this world. Because you will soon leave you will soon checkout. And we're here and we're going to feel the impact more. So it is really the difference is just too much. Look at what Greta Thunberg is doing. And everybody is supporting her. And she is not really saying anything different from what our youth are saying, you see what she has been provided with a platform to be able to use her voice and use it strongly.

**Olalekan Adekola**

Thank you very much. And on that note, I will delve a bit into COP 26. And you talk really about the youth. And you did mention earlier that quite a number of youth, I think about five or six of them, came to Glasgow as a result of the mentorship that you were engaged with with them. I just want to check in your own opinion looking at COP 26, do you think the outcome address key social justice issues for you?

**Salamatu Jidda-Fada**

You see when it comes to the big guys talking and taking decision. Sometimes you just listen to them. I was big on just seeing whether the presence of the youth, no matter how few, they were, would count. I think it was a good experience for them. And they have learned how to do things better in some way. But the decisions that have been taken. And the outcomes of COP 26 is something that I keep reflecting on. Because most of them are not realistic. It is easy for you to go and sit down and have a big meeting and come out with outcomes. The reality on ground is different. Now. Nigeria, for example, there is the big ambition of planting trees by the government. The reality of insecurity alone in Nigeria is not going to make it an easy task to do. And I'm talking about Nigeria, because I know that they are no go areas. Now in Nigeria, I also know that there are places that if you most of the travel anywhere in the northern part of Nigeria is done by air unless you can't afford it. And if you can't afford it, you sit still. Now when you say that you want to go out and plant trees, and every day people are being kidnapped, people are being killed. Who then would go out and plant the trees. Do you have robots that will carry out that task? Or who will do it and plant the billion of trees that you're talking about? So talk is is actually cheap. But the reality on ground is what strikes me as okay, this is just gist [discussion] and I think the most powerful speech I would say I love David Attenborough and he the realities he brings always to what is happening to in connection to nature, you know, climate impacts on nature, but the most powerful speech was the one of the prime minister of Barbados Mia [Mia Mottley] wonderful speech. Our realities are different. We cannot the global south the difference between the global south and the global north is too wide. The impact is done by the guys in the Global North. The impact is on the global south and it's irreversible. So how much billions would you give to fix the problem that is there? So I think it is cheap to talk, but when you walk the talk, I would respect you. But if you cannot walk the talk, I think you should just keep quiet. So I think of my role, I would say, as usual, is not to condemn the big guys, they have done their talk. But to guide the youth, what can you do better? What can you do with what is on the table? What can you do with what is within your reach? I think that is more important to me, than all these global meetings are important, but I think it's this is overrated, based on what it realistically does afterwards.

**Olalekan Adekola**

Great points you've made there. And which comes up also in some of my own research as well, that often when we discuss environmental challenges, we can fall into the error of coming up with solutions that does not reflect reality in of people that we are developing those policies or institutions for. So it's essential to look at what happens on the ground. And how some of those policies or even technology that have been designed will be useful in terms of solving the challenges on the ground, I mean, the issue and also the interlinkages, between different challenges, like you did mention conflict and the possibility of maybe planting trees, that's a big one, my last question would just be to go back to the youth engagement work that you do, and environmental issues being mutually inclusive. I know you touched on this a little bit earlier. But could you build further on that how do you see working with youth, or the challenges facing the youth either in the global south or the global north, and also environmental issues and environmental challenges both now and looking forward into the future?

**Salamatu Jidda-Fada**

We have one planet one. And whether you live in Antarctica, or you live in Australia, or you live in Africa, Madagascar, anyway, there is just one planet, one Earth where there is life, the workforce is the youth, the youth engaged with the environment, in many ways. And the youth led engagement can directly lead to social change directly. Now, the strategies would vary, of course, depending on local conditions. So different views in different we have talked about Wales, and Africa, and how different they engage, and how the platforms are different. And so the strategies for work may be different, would be different for both. Now, you talk about the youth in Africa, engaging on environmental issues, activism, the strategy they may choose to use, would probably have to do a lot with communication, and social media engagement. Because that is a platform, the youth actually use a lot. And that engagement platform can enable other people to see them and hear them out. It doesn't have to be their leaders. When we brought some of them, our youth to Glasgow, it had nothing to do with the president of our countries, African countries, nothing to do with them. It was organisations in Europe that decided to engage these youths directly and brought them here and they had that experience and learned a lot of strategies they can use to engage and I am sure that within a short time, you will begin to see a change that they are going to cause you know a social change based on some of the strategies they have learned from here. So the youth continues to engage with the environment in various ways, and is able to use his voice During using social media and other platforms to create his own initiative, and probably they'll be impactful for his country or his community and things like that.

**Olalekan Adekola**

I think that's great. Yeah. It's been a pleasure. I mean, listening to you sharing your experience from the work you've been doing with conservation in communities in the north of Nigeria and working with different governments, working with NGOs, and also the work you're doing with youth across the continent. It does appear your work is quite very practical and community focus and I guess he also speaks to your focus on ecology and safeguarding. So it's been really brilliant having in this discussion with you, Dr. Salamatu thank you very much for this opportunity that you've granted us and I believe you've shared a lot of insight into issues around conservation, environmental activism, and youths. Thank you very much.