



Roots of Resilience: On the Frontlines of Climate Justice

Episode 1: GFC on the Frontlines

INTRODUCTION: Welcome to Roots of resilience on the front lines of climate justice, a podcast by the Global Forest Coalition. GFC is a feminist coalition of organizations around the world supporting forest conservation with a focus on gender justice, human rights and social equity.

In roots of resilience. We talk with coalition members and allies about what they're doing to advance real solutions to climate change and forest loss. In today's episode, you'll hear host Chithira Vijayakumar interview three GFC team members who are doing important work in the defense of forests.

CHITHIRA VIJAYAKUMAR: Climate change is one of the most hotly debated topics in today's world. But interestingly, in some ways it is also one of the most neglected stories of our time. This is because lots of energy and resources are being spent on arguing that climate change isn't real, while vastly less attention is paid to the fact that it is not something that might happen in the future, but rather, it is happening now, and it is currently devastating many parts of the world.

I'm Chithira Vijayakumar and I'm speaking from India, where as I record this, a record-breaking heatwave has been scorching us and our neighbors in Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and several SE Asian countries for the last two months. Interestingly, at this time last year, these same places were being devastated by catastrophic floods that left thousands dead and millions displaced. This is only one example of how the reality of

what is happening around the planet is rarely reflected in global climate change discourse and policy spaces.

We at GFC are taking a closer look at some of the most well known so called solutions to climate change, deforestation and biodiversity loss, because when we speak to climate, forest and land defenders from all around the world, who are the people most impacted by climate change, they say that the solutions currently being pushed in policy-making spaces like the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and the UN Convention on Biological Diversity at the global level as 'false solutions'. Why are they false solutions? And in that case, what are the real solutions?

In this episode, we are going to meet three experts who have decades of experience in climate change policy, advocacy and organizing. First we will go to Togo, to meet Kwami Kpondzo.

CHITHIRA: Could you tell us a little bit about where you're coming to us from today and what it looks like around you?

KWAMI KPONDZO: Thank you. I'm joining from Togo, West Africa. I'm right now in my office, the sun is up bright, very bright.

CHITHIRA: Kwami coordinates the Global Forest Coalition's extractive industries, tourism and infrastructure campaign. He is also the executive director of the Center for Environmental Justice in Togo, which is a nonprofit which fights for environmental, social and gender justice.

They help defend the rights of communities whose livelihoods and ways of life are being threatened by climate change.

Could you tell us a little bit about some of the false solutions that are particularly affecting your region in Africa?

KWAMI: The false solutions that we are facing mostly are plantations, offsetting. And they are very much impacting communities. If I may start with the plantations, we have industrial plantations. We have monoculture tree plantations like eucalyptus, where some companies come to take land in Mozambique, for example..

For instance, we have port to sell port to sell that conducting economic activity there with a huge amount of land with eucalyptus destroying livelihood of communities. As I said,

eucalyptus is a dangerous species that withdraws water in the soil. And displaced where communities used to have agriculture has been taken by, by the company that is 1st, 2nd displacement, displacement is something that destroys totally the, the livelihood of community because they, they are displaced from where the livelihood sources are to another place and it generates conflict because they going somewhere they don't know and they are mingled with other people and those people who were there before also are angry because they don't want to, to share their resources with the displaced people. So it generates conflicts.

And apart from that, you see clearly that the monoculture tree plantations are affecting households; the whole village is destroyed, the whole village is taken because of commercial activities with one company. Instead, the government should protect the people. But if you check the relationship clearly, the government has a broken relationship with communities. And the government is more friendly with the companies and it's all over, it's all over Africa.

If you go to South Africa, for instance, there is a, a huge biomass power plants and monoculture plantations there to feed the biomass power plants. And the same thing is happening with communities in South Africa; displacement of the source of livelihood because land has been taken from communities.

In Nigeria, you see also in Nigeria, Ghana, Côte d'Ivoire, you see monoculture tree plantations, especially palm oil or oil palm plantations where communities are denied to go to their farm. Because if you see the plantations, the plantations occupy the road where communities used to pass to, to go to their farm. So it's a restricted area. Women are mostly impacted because in Africa, women are the ones who use mostly lands to cultivate. They go to the farm to harvest some wood for energy and they are very much impacted.

And what I've seen in Liberia was shocking. In Liberia, one of the areas If you go there, if you want to go to some of the communities are surrounded by palm oil plantations and the company fixed the gates. And if you want to go to that community, you have to show your ID, your ID card. Even if you are from Liberia, you show your ID card, you prove that you are going to that community. That's very shocking. So what are we saying? If we say those plantations are solutions to climate change and it's affecting more communities, then it's not a solution, then it's not a solution. If communities cannot go to their own places, if communities cannot go to their, to their farm, and you are saying that you are bringing solutions to climate change, then it's not a solution, actually.

CHITHIRA: Actually, the situation you are describing is in fact, sounds like a continuation of a colonial project. It's like a neo-colonial project where local communities no longer have any agency over the lands on which they have lived on since time immemorial, they no longer sound like they have any say in what happens to the water, what to cultivate, how life will progress there. Because now the land suddenly belongs to somebody else. That sounds like a frightening situation and it's from what you're saying, it's all over Africa. And the problem is getting worse and you touched on this a little bit earlier, but you mentioned how women in all their diversities are some of the most severely impacted in this process through these very severe social, cultural and economic changes.

You mentioned how women used to have access to farm lands and they used to be able to, to grow food and be we join us. So, can you tell us a little bit more about how gender dynamics are also changing in these regions?

KWAMI: Yeah. As I said before, women are mostly impacted by climate change by force solutions of climate change. And youths are also impacted because in, in Africa, most of the youth and women, they have in their mind to have a, a small land to cultivate. But because of those projects, because of the plantations, because of red projects, those solutions that taking land from people, people move from their communities to the town. But in the town, it's difficult for them to get a job. So it's very important to highlight this because it's happening everywhere in Africa, people move from the village to the town hoping that if they get to the town, they will have a better job. So why they are coming to the town that, that I was explaining that they don't have any more interest in the village because their land has been taken from their father, they, they were displaced, so they have to, to, to seek their way. So having that said even in the villages where those projects are happening, those force pollutions projects are happening. You see clearly that women are left behind because men are the one mostly picked by the company to work.

And if they are working, they work hard, the men work hard but they are paid less. And if the men were taken away from their family to the company field, you believe with me that the Children and we, the the woman they are left alone in, in, in, in, in, in home and the charge or the load of children is upon upon the the woman then so the, the the struggle to get food to, to, to kids, to, to children. And if those projects also destroy the livelihoods of the communities, then the source of income also is gone. Then it's difficult for the family to pay the school fees for, for, for, for children to go to school. So the income is low. So it's becoming difficult for families or for communities to live in a decent way. So this is second

Third, is that this one I will give, I will give one example with Nigeria, one of the Nigeria projects where it's happening in a community in Nigeria where the communities are protesting against the restricted areas that the companies put in place. What happened is that the companies called for police or military and they shoot the, the, the communities that are, that are protesting. That's the situation in Africa with those false solutions.

CHITHIRA: The description you give is very important because a lot of the times when we hear the word plantation, we don't realize what that, what it really means is the mobilizing the state power, all of the state's power, including often the military or the police or other paramilitary forces against Indigenous peoples and small communities, local communities. Often the word plantation is not equivalent. We don't equate that with this sort of machinery that is being like you said, used against the people. But that's the reality is what I'm hearing from your response.

So and so this leads really nicely to the next question which is so far we've sort of been talking in the abstract, we say, you know, this plantation or this false solution project sort of just appeared in these communities but who are these people? And what is the machinery that enables these false solutions? Where do they start? Who are some of the people behind it? Who are some of the organizations behind it?

KWAMI: The main, the main channel that are promoting those false solutions is the UNFCCC Spaces where the negotiations are taking place, negotiations on climate change are taking place. What happened or what, what is happening there in that space, particularly that space is that instead of giving the voice to communities who are impacted to speak, they don't give that voice to communities. And what is going on there is you see, the government mainly and the private sector and the, the, the private sector is there and the representatives of multinationals are also associated with the private sector. So they promote their own projects, they promote what can benefit them.

CHITHIRA: If you had the attention of world leaders for one minute. And they had to listen to what you said and they had to implement it. What would you tell them? What would your message to them be?

KWAMI: Yes, the world leaders, they, they become leaders because of communities, people because of citizens because of people, the people elect them. So they should listen to people, they have to listen to people, they are there. As the leaders to serve people not to destroy the livelihood of people. So, what I'm telling them now is to hear what people are

saying. We don't want to sell our land, we don't want to sell our forests. We want to live in harmony with nature. So leaders should hear that collective interest is better than individual interests. So leaders please, we elect you to be there to serve the collective interests, not only your pockets, but please hear our voices, hear, hear us as we are speaking, we don't want to sell our land.

We want a better life. We want to live in healthy environments. That is my message to the leaders. Thank you, Chithira.

CHITHIRA: Thank you so much Kwami for sharing your ideas and experiences with us today.

Now listeners, we're going to take you to a different continent to meet Souparna Lahiri, who is joining us from Kolkata in India. Souparna is the senior climate and biodiversity policy advisor for GFC. So I've heard you speak in earlier instances about the need to demystify the concept of false solutions. Could you tell us a little bit about why that is important?

SOUPARNA LAHIRI: You know, that nowadays, there is so much confusion around this term False Solutions. And I really feel for those people, the frontline communities who are affected by climate change and every day they are looking forward to a kind of how one can overcome this crisis. How one can look forward for a more certain future, future generations, you know, and does not have to live a life like, oh the next day it will be heavy rains. What will happen after that?

A storm is coming right now in Kolkotta, we have a storm or cyclone coming next week. What will happen then? What will be the impact of that storm or somewhere down in the US or somewhere down in Africa, you know, a drought, a hurricane. Now this for this, the life is becoming very, very uncertain. And for those where you, you have their livelihood, depending so much on land. What is there on the land? What is there on the water? How the climate is changing? What is the weather pattern? Everything is now affecting those people who are in the front lines, who are the communities on the ground and their livelihoods. And so this whole climate mitigation and the terminology is coming out of here like false solutions, real solutions zero, net zero. It's becoming increasingly confusing and that's not good. We actually want to demystify and, and let the correct scenario, the correct terminologies reach, with all its correct meaning, to the right people.

So at present what I personally prefer when I say, what is a false solution to me? If you ask, I say that the IPCC in its report have clearly said that we are reaching that tipping point. We are very close to the tipping point, which is 1.5 degrees Celsius. And by 2030, we

need to reduce our emissions by half 50% to keep around 1.5 and not get over that tipping point. And so any solution, any climate action or solution that does not contribute to reduction of gas emission by 50% by 2030 is a false emission to me today.

CHITHIRA: One term that I've heard a lot come up a lot in in these discussions is the term divestment. What can you tell us about this idea? Is it a solution? Is it a false solution? What is the story there?

SOUPARNA: I think divestment has come out in terms of, you know, specific sectoral issues and it is being focused more towards the banking finance sector like divest from coal mines, from financing coal mining or thermal power plant or divest from right now, the campaign is going on from factory farming, you know, or divest from financing something else. What we are kind of trying to tell now and this will be our main focus while going into Bonn, is divestment from false solutions, which essentially means that any public finance that promotes in any way a false solution needs to be divested, needs to be stopped. So divest from promoting false solutions because in climate finance, as you know, climate finance is something which we are struggling for almost the last 15 years - referring, I can refer to get \$100 billion of climate finance from the developed north to south, which is not materialized - and now we are hearing that, you know, there wouldn't be enough private finance if the private sector or the private finance does not add up to it. But we know that the public finance has been used both and hugely in the Global North and also in some of the middle income and middle income developing countries in the South to promote solutions, which does not contribute to climate action.

The simple thing, the amount, the billions of dollars that go to plantations, planting monoculture trees from bilateral funds in Europe to the World Bank to you know the GEF, which is the main funding agency for CBD related decisions - so a global environmental facility - the financing which has come out for promoting bond declaration in re restoring forest and restoring ecosystems, the UN decade, which is now from 2020-2030, promoting re reforestation. This is all public money public finance which has been promoting this kind of false solutions. Even if you see, go to REDD+, whether it's a, whether it turned into a carbon offset, whether it's a results-based payment as piloted by the Green Climate Fund. But REDD+ to us is essentially a false solution, not a solution to reduce deforestation and conserve forest and REDD+ readiness has been funded from Sweden, Norway, Germany, UK, France, a lot of these rich European nations for for almost the last 12 to 13 years in a in tropical forest in Africa in Southeast Asia.

Now, the Green Climate Fund is promoting REDD+ and the finance essentially is public finance. Then, we have the Green Climate Fund promoting plantations through private sector players, like the Arbaro Fund. The Arbaro Fund, the Green Climate Fund has contributed 25% of the entire budgeted proposal as an equity just to de-risk the private finance that is coming. And this is completely towards false solutions. Another round of monoculture plantations contributing to timber harvesting, bioenergy. And so increasingly we are seeing that public finance started promoting this kind of solutions and now what they are saying is that add private sector to it and private sector will never come, private finance will never come unless you de-risk through public finance. So public finance is guilty of promoting false solutions. And we just want to reiterate that in our campaign and say divest public finance from false solutions.

CHITHIRA: That makes a lot of sense actually. So, demanding a more comprehensive divestment than just divesting from individual things like divesting from fossil fuels, divest from you know, but to divest from anything and everything that contributes to climate change, worsening climate change, ok. That is, it is loud and clear. When we say that there are false solutions, it implies that there are real solutions. Can you tell us in your, in your decades of experience? What is a real solution to climate change that you've seen that really sticks with you? That's really been a powerful response to the existing scenario.

SOUPARNA: You know, we say we are increasingly talking of real solutions, but it's, it's, it's not a very straightforward kind of discourse. When we say look towards real solutions, what the communities are doing, what the communities are thinking, how their traditional practices and you know, wisdom, traditional wisdom contribute to what they are today, how they are fighting climate change, how they are being resilient increasingly from the kind of impacts and effects of climate change. But you know, you need enablers. Real solutions to some extent are practiced for centuries by the Indigenous people. All that they do kind of contribute to real solutions; the way they conserve their forest, the way their livelihood is entwined with nature and conservation, the amount of regulation that they themselves follow within their community in terms of extracting things from the forest, extracting things from nature to balance the the amount that they barely need for their living everyday life and their livelihood is something which actually contributes today.

If we see that to the real solutions, we are talking of. The best example would be the agro-ecological practices. These are real solutions on the issue of food systems and agriculture that is facing a huge crisis. And industrial agriculture contributes a lot to the

climate crisis. But we should ... we have to go through a process of enabling these real solutions and enabling these real solutions means a real struggle to decolonize the whole land sector, the whole ecosystem, the forest, the way the colonized think powers have appropriated the natural resources that were in the domain of the community for and the communities had their collective and individual rights over the natural resources have all been vanquished by the colonizer state and they became the property of the state.

And so now in terms of, we are talking of climate solutions, we are talking of communities. We are talking of climate solutions that exist on the ground, but these communities don't have the right to participate in the decision-making, planning of these solutions. They don't have the right to be part of the governance even in the land sector, in forest, in agricultural land or even pastoral land elsewhere.

So the first thing is to restore the rights of the Indigenous People and in many areas, the local communities so that they not only become a part of the decision making planning, but they are part essentially of the governance mechanism and governance is essential for any kind of climate solution today, specifically real solutions on the ground. And so we need to see that an increasing number of nation states are restoring the rights of the IPLCs, the rights of women, women's access to land, recognizing women's contribution to forest conservation and restoration. And these are some of the enablements and these are also some of the ways and actions moving towards real solutions to really let the communities practice, find, and implement the real solutions.

Right now, I would talk less of what the communities would think of real solutions. But I know that these enablers are essential when we talk of moving towards real solutions and real zero. One example I gave you is right in front of us that has been, you know, talked about a lot which is the agro-ecological practices and then resilience, the climate resilience that the communities practice. And we are seeing it in front of us, how they are fighting climate change with resilience.

But essentially we need to restore their rights. We need to recognize women's contribution, we need to have action on gender equality. We need to have women's access to land and women's participation in governance where the IPLCs are also part of the governance, a self governance mechanism of the IPLCs and with a kind of a quorum or majority of dividing the share of governance between men and women will be kind of enablers to move towards real solutions.

CHITHIRA: Absolutely. And I think at this juncture, it's important to note that many of these false solutions actually weaken even the existing, whatever existing control that

Indigenous Peoples and local communities have over their lands and sovereignty to live their lives, their lives, the way that they would like to. So we really, I think that the points you mentioned are really key Souparna.

Our final visit for this episode is to Andrea Echeverri who's from Colombia. She's a feminist and environmental organizer and has dedicated the last 12 years of her life to environmental justice, mainly in Colombia and Latin America. Andrea is currently the coordinator of GFC's Unsustainable Livestock campaign. Andrea, hello and welcome to the Pod. Could you tell us a little bit about how you approach the concept of false solutions to climate change in your work?

ANDREA ECHEVERRI: Well, hi, everyone. I'm really glad to say hello to everyone from Colombia. I live in a little village called Guarne that's nearby Medellin, the second main city from Colombia. We are located in the Andes Mountain range, so we're surrounded by forests - what's left of them actually with people who have really interesting connections with the land and from a really beautiful place I'm talking to you right now. I get to see the birds. I get to see the forest. I get to listen to a little creek nearby. So I feel pretty connected with the topic that we're discussing right now.

Well, I feel like when we're talking about the climate crisis. We're not only talking really about climate, we're not talking only about emissions. We're talking of a symptom of a comprehensive crisis of a, of a, of a civilization model. That is we have a water crisis, we have a food crisis, we have an environmental crisis and we also have the climate crisis. So if everything is going wrong, basically in our system it is because the system itself, it's not working. So we can't ask the system itself to solve the problems that it has caused itself. And when I'm talking about the system, I'm talking - that might sound cliché or something - but when I'm talking about the system, I'm talking about taking into account the main issues, the main causes of this, the state we're at the state of, I don't know of global panic because the world's going to an end. We're heading to the apocalypse of something because you can't hear sometimes things like that.

But you can't just keep saying that we are all on the same ship and everything because that is true. But there's also something that has, that has to be taken into account. And that's the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities, responsibilities that said we can't blame someone who lives in the Colombian countryside or in the Peruvian countryside, a woman, an Indigenous woman who is harvesting the land or everything as we can blame the, the big polluters and the big polluters can basically incarnate the profound roots of this environmental and climate crisis. So that is the patriarchy, the

colonialism, and the capitalism itself. So those, those features have made that in our narratives, in our imagination, we separate what is bonded in nature, what is in reality bonded; that is like, I don't know, we have some differences and some and we separate, I don't know humankind from nature, women from men, emotion from from thinking and everything.

So that way of thinking has led to the solutions that they are proposing. Who the one, the people that incarnates, capitalism, colonialism and patriarchy. So they keep separating everything that is not really separated. So they try to face only one symptom of the problem. So the problems of climate change do not rely on nature itself, they rely on the ways that we are relating to nature. So the problem that has been reduced to equivalent carbon is really a political problem of a political system. So the solution cannot be that narrow. We have to discuss the relations between humankind and nature and between human groups. We can't face, we can't tackle the climate crisis if we don't take into account social and environmental injustices that also this climate crisis is deepening. So these false solutions only take into account one little part of the problem.

We can basically measure everything on carbon right now. We can measure your way of life, your way of eating, your way of transporting, but only as individuals, not only taking into account the whole system and that's a whole problem ... not thinking about everything that's going on, talking about this little coin that allows people to limit nature to only one of its main ecological, well not made to one of their many ecological features. And that allows them to put, to limit it and to put owners to them to ecological function that is like the carbon cycle. And then if you can put owners, you can also put it into the market. And that's what we are doing right now. We're thinking of, well, they are thinking of the climate crisis as yet another market opportunity, rather than thinking that on the planet on people, they're thinking on how to make profit from this environmental crisis that's affecting every one of us.

CHITHIRA: What I heard from you is that essentially a binary model of thinking has reduced what is really a complex political problem that involves real people and real lives and real nature, to a problem of a, a purely technical problem or a purely carbon-based problem, something that really reduces it, and removes all the complexities that really are at the heart of the issue, right?

So it also sounds to me like what you're saying is that the same people who benefit from not only the things that created the climate crisis and the environmental crisis and everything, the same people who benefited from that are benefiting also from these false

solutions. So they're really in a win-win situation, where the only losers, the only people who are losing out in all of these scenarios are the people, is the wilderness, is life is water, right, is an interconnected way of living, really?

ANDREA: How come the people that has created? The problem is the one that is coming with this new solution. So women are really going on the front line for redefining the approach of the climate crisis.

CHITHIRA: What are some of the ways in which women are being impacted by false solutions?

ANDREA: Well, I feel like is one of the most important one and there's also somehow like a political exclusions in their own communities because when they dare to talk about false solutions, well, they're just being so somehow mistreated and they're being like not taken into account for this scenarios of discussion worldwide and, and everything. And I feel like there's a political affectation on women, there's also an economical affectation on women. But also, and this I have been told several times, there's like, Indigenous women are really concerned about that because they feel like there is somehow like an spiritual erosion and they know that the thing that has allowed Indigenous communities to resist the colonization after more than 500 years and keeping a lot of time, their languages and their, their ways of life and everything has been their spiritual strength. But if they're starting to recognize themselves in, I mean, Indigenous communities as carbon guardians, that's something that has never happened before. They feel like those spiritual values are being lost and that threatens the, like a really structural part of the community.

CHITHIRA: Yeah, absolutely. And I think that's, this is also why it's not just simply recognizing the political rights of communities, but the economic rights of communities, local communities is not enough. It is very vital to recognize the spiritual and religious rights, the rights that people have to live, to continue their ways of life, their traditional practices, life is vital to managing the climate crisis and in fact, our environment crisis, economic crisis, all of it. Actually, this leads beautifully into my next question, which is can you tell us a bit about how, how are people resisting these projects on the ground? What does resistance look like? This can be political resistance or cultural resistance can be anything but what, what are some of your favorite, what are some of the most powerful moments of resistance you witnessed or you read about that you'd like to talk to us about today?

ANDREA: Imply, I also think resistance from people on the ground is really important, not only in a material way. Like the grassroots movements are not only important for what they're doing and to oppose things, but to show alternatives and like to show that it's possible to grow food without thinking of carbon, to take care of forests without thinking of money, taking care of the wild animals and wilderness without thinking of money. I feel like that's also important when we talk about non-market solutions or non-market approaches. And in that way, I think that it's a moment to think in a really creative way. I mean, right now we need all the creativity of peoples, of women, of Indigenous people of local communities, of students, of researchers, of everyone worldwide because we can all contribute to thinking ways of unraveling this whole mess but also in proposing a no a no ways and people is doing so from art, people is doing so from research, people is doing so the is doing so also. And I think that's really, really important from this spiritual resistance. And this gathering for, I don't know of Indigenous women of Indigenous people just like to try and heal the planet, I feel like something really powerful because we can't think of any rationality without thinking that it has to be solid and solid means also acknowledging the power of spirituality, the need that this community, this Indigenous community says to, to have the spirits on our side. I know that might somehow sound esoteric or something. But that's a way that people have resisted.

There's an example here in Colombia where the U'wa community in the 90s danced for 45 days a night and the Occidental Petroleum company that had been going and that had found oil in their sacred places, just lost it. I mean, they had the studies and everything for the oil that they were going to extract and then the oil got lost. So it might sound esoteric, but it is truly powerful and it also helps to bond the communities that have been separated by these proposals of the system itself, of the patriarchy of the capitalism of the colony, colonialism. So it helps bond communities.

And I also feel like art is really important because you have to understand something to, to act for something, you don't only have to have it in your mind, you also have to have it in your heart. Everyone, the person that's harvesting their own food in the local community, the politician that is trying to promote a gender equality law in their own countries, the people that are advocating at the UN scenarios to kill these false solutions. So we all need each other and we all need our languages, we need art, we need research, we need advocacy, we need nature on our side. And I feel hopeful because I think that people are coming together, we are coming together and we will make a future possible for all forms of life.

CHITHIRA: That was beautiful, Andrea. Thank you so much for speaking with us. That brings us to the end of the first episode. Join us in the next episode as we find out more about what went down at the UNFCCC climate change conference in Bonn and hear from forest defenders who are implementing real solutions to climate change in different parts of the world.

OUTRO: Thank you for listening. Roots of resilience was produced by the Global Forest Coalition with support from Bread For the World.

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