Transcript 6: Greenpeace International

Conversation with Kumi Naidoo. Recorded 10 April 2024, online.

00:00:00 JE
So, just to get us started, just for the record, if you could state your name and just briefly summarize what you do. Tell us in your own words why thinking about global shocks matters to you.

00:00:12 KN
So, my name is Kumi Naidoo. I am currently a visiting lecturer for a year at Stanford University. I'm part of the Friedman Spogli Institute for International Relations. And I'm using my time here at Stanford to do a reflection on the question of why is activism not winning faster and bigger so that we are aligned to the climate crisis. I'm also the advisor to the Community Arts Network and a founding board member of the Ricky Rick Foundation for the Promotion of Artivism. The foundation was set up a year ago after the passing of a very popular rapper and hip-hop artist, who was my son.

And when I asked the question, why is activism failing or not succeeding to win on the scale that it needs to, the main reason I've landed on is that we have a serious communications deficit, that we are not able to communicate to people clearly enough, accessibly enough, and urgently enough. And there are two problems to this. One is the objective reality of the communications and media landscape, which is very much dominated and controlled by the very people who are making policy decisions and driving us closer and closer to the climate cliff.

So, the environment for us to be able to get our messages across. Any messages that go against the status quo, any narratives that seek to promote fundamental structural and systemic change, it's hard to get that penetrated in the mainstream media. But assume for a moment that wasn't a challenge, right? Even if it wasn't a challenge, activism would still screw it up, if you take the cultural ways of how activism communicates, right? Because a lot of, if you take climate activism, a lot of our approach is narratives that are aimed at the brain and the head, and we ignore the heart and the gut, right?

And if we look at the emerging fascists around the world, from Donald Trump to Steve Bannon to Bolsonaro and others, Orban, they are not concerned about the head. They are not interested in facts. Because for us, in the climate justice movement, we have tried to advance our struggles by using science, policies, rational arguments, proposals around specific interventions and so on. But the language that we use, the framing of it and so on, is way above the ability for most people to enter the conversation, including people who might have university education and so on.

Because if you're not a specialist in climate, then you struggle to get in. So, one of the solutions to the problem is I looked back at my own childhood activism, during apartheid in a country where the majority of our people were consciously deprived of education. One of the most powerful statements of apartheid policy was actually about education. The founder of the apartheid ideology, Hendrik Verwoerd, said, “blacks

should never be shown the greener pastures of education." They should know that "their station in life is to be hewers of wood and drawers of water."

And so, when I look at how did we mobilize, how did we mobilize in a context where people couldn't read and write? And actually, the answer is so simple. It was through song, through dance, through theater, through a range of cultural sort of expressions that connected with peoples. So, that is why a lot of my work right now is focused on how do we break through the communications hurdles and how do we actually draw on the power of arts and culture.

Let me just conclude by saying that I am not suggesting that if we harness the full power of arts and culture for social change on its own will deliver us the salvation from the climate crisis and its intersecting crises. However, I would safely say right now that without harnessing the power of arts and culture, we're almost guaranteed not to have a chance to break through the communications hurdles that we have.

00:04:36 JE
Right, fascinating. It sounds like you are drawing so strongly on your long and distinguished career as an activist, as part of the anti-apartheid struggle. You've worked for Greenpeace, you've worked with Amnesty International. These are different, very different issue areas where those challenges of communication that you just laid out must be quite different, right? What really led you from your sort of earliest involvement in activism all the way to a big organization like Greenpeace?

00:05:04 KN
When Greenpeace, you know, folks had hunted me for this position, in fact, there's a funny story about it. When they called me, I had just finished a hunger strike. [Corrects himself] No, no, no – I was in the *middle* of the hunger strike, well, towards the end of it, to put pressure on the South African government to act on the worsening situation in Zimbabwe. And part of it was a hunger strike that Archbishop Desmond Tutu had called for. And I was the first person that anchored it for 21 days and all of that.

And in the middle of it, I got a call from Greenpeace sort of saying, would you be interested to be a candidate? And I said to them, you know, thanks very much, deeply honored, but the timing is really bad. And my daughter, who I spoke to a few days later, sort of said, "Dad," she had seen me on a television interview and she said, "Dad, why are you so, why are you still doing interviews and so on? Aren't you supposed to be conserving your energy?" And I said, "no, you know, I made an exception. The only two people I spoke to were these BBC people and these folks from Greenpeace who called." And she said, "what did you tell them?" And I said, "no, I told them bad timing, you know, I can't make a decision like that." And she said to me, "you know, dad, I won't talk to you if you don't seriously consider this when you finish your stupid hunger strike, because Greenpeace is addressing one of the most critical issues of our time."

But when I spoke to the Greenpeace board and so on, it became clear that the reason they were keen to have somebody like me was they recognized that the organization couldn't continue as it was, which is having an international claim by calling themselves Greenpeace International, when in fact there was not an equal balancing of power

between the Global South and the Global North. And it's important to recognize that when we're talking about international organizations and their role in the world, is that actually there are very few truly international organizations. We use the term “international” very loosely, and I can tell you an anecdote to bring this point to life. The Secretary General of Amnesty, while I was the head of Greenpeace, was a guy called Salil Shetty, and he brought his senior management team to meet with my senior management team at Greenpeace, you know, about six months or so after I started.

And then he said, “you know, Kumi, I've come to realize why all the organizations we know, whether it's Greenpeace International, Amnesty International, Save the Children International, Oxfam International, and so on, is that we use the term international to mask how uninternational we actually are, right?”And so if you talk, you know, when we say Global South, Global North, what we should be saying is the overwhelming global majority and the global minority. If you look at the countries that we have often referred to as the international community, right? So the word “international” has been abused for far too long.

And so, when I was approached, both by Greenpeace and Amnesty, it was very much part of how does the organization become as global as the challenges that it seeks to address? And how does it ensure that it looks like how the world looks like? Now, the difficulty we have is that in international organizations in the governmental space, G20, G8, UN, and so on, they don't have a fundamentally different analysis from the crises that we find ourselves in, right? Because, for example, as early as 1997, after the Asian financial crisis, the president of the World Bank, [and] Bill Clinton was [US] president then, Secretary General of the United Nations Kofi Annan, and many others said, the world needs a new international financial architecture. We would agree with that.

But then once some band-aids were put on the Asian financial crisis in 1997, which obviously proliferated beyond to Argentina, Russia, and so on, as we saw after the 2008, 2009 global financial crisis, and as we are seeing now after COVID, right, all of these crises have shown how bad our current systems are, right, in terms of being able to take care of the majority of people in our societies, within the Global South or in the Global North. So, what we would have expected, say, after the global financial crisis in 2009, was that there would be an approach of system innovation, system transformation, system redesign. But what we got, and as we're now having with COVID, post-COVID, is all you get is system recovery, system maintenance, and system protection.

The other important thing to note about the failure of the international system at the moment is the failure to embrace a wisdom from the feminist movement that was given to us decades ago, when we were urged to embrace the power of intersectionality, understanding that, you know, environment doesn't exist in a silo, development and poverty doesn't exist in a silo, human rights doesn't exist in a silo. But both on the civil society side, right, you know, Greenpeace and WWE, Friends of the Earth are focused on environment, Amnesty, Human Rights Watch on human rights and Oxfam and Save the Children and so on, on poverty.

But on the governmental side, you have exactly the same thing. When we look at the global system, you could say that we have four deficits, right? And let me now talk about the governmental system at the global level. We have four deficits. We have, firstly, a democratic deficit, right? So, if you look at the World Bank and IMF, it's governed by a $1, one vote system. The president of the World Bank has to be an American, the managing director of the IMF has to be a European, and two parts of the world in population size are relatively modest, when we look at population size. So, or even you take the Security Council of the United Nations. Yes, you know, why should those five countries have the veto power? France and the UK, for example, at the time, at the rules that were being drawn, were on the right side of the victory in the Second World War, right? But you could say, well, all those countries have nuclear power and therefore they should have a veto, right? But if you use that logic, then Pakistan, India, Israel, North Korea, others should be on the Security Council. So basically, you've got a Security Council that is fundamentally undemocratic, right? So, the first deficit is a democratic deficit.

The second deficit is a coherence deficit. And the coherence deficit resonates a lot with the incoherence we see on the part of civil society, in the sense that you have your finance minister, going to the World Bank and IMF, your foreign minister going to the UN, your health minister to WHO, your culture and education minister to UNESCO and so on. And try and imagine what this means for small countries and medium-sized countries even, especially in the Global South and the resources it takes to just service the international system. And quite often at the national level, some of these ministers are shooting off in a different direction, without necessarily coordinating what are the intersections within – what are you saying at the World Bank? What am I saying at the UN? What am I, you know, what is somebody else saying at the UNESCO or WHO and so on? Obviously, some countries are better at dealing with this incoherence, but most countries, I would say, get embroiled in territoriality and political intrigue and so on and leaves us with a pretty incoherent situation.

The third, I would say, is a compliance deficit, right? If you go and do an analysis of resolutions taken, whether at the G8, G20, UN Security Council, UN General Assembly, and so on, or from UN summits, if you take the Beijing summit in 2005, for example, and you look at what has been complied with and followed through, if you look at what the commitments that the G8, G7 made over time and what they deliver on, the compliance is very, very low.

And so, these three deficits of democratic deficit, compliance deficit, and coherence deficit combine to give you a legitimacy deficit, right? And so today, the failure of international NGOs like Greenpeace, Amnesty, and others to be as global as the challenges that we seek to address also means that there is, because sadly, you know, I, for example, during my time at Greenpeace, did a lot to push this agenda forward of balancing the power and so on. But like people everywhere, nobody gives up power as easy as we would think they would.

So today, all international NGOs without exception, sadly suffer from a deep reality of structural racism, right? Because if you look at, you know, like, for example, when I joined Greenpeace, you had a governance arrangement where like Luxembourg had

one vote and China had one vote, all of Africa had one vote. And I don't want to pick on Luxembourg, because also you could say Belgium or other smaller countries in Europe, the Czech Republic had one vote and, you know, India I had a single vote.

So, basically, part of the problem is not dissimilar to World Bank and IMF sort of $1, one vote system. It's money that actually drives it, right? So, I might have been the Secretary General of Amnesty International or the head of Greenpeace, but it was common knowledge that the people who really had the power were those that were from powerful countries in the Global North, which had the ability to raise significant amounts of funding. So, as happened often, if there was some transformative idea that I was trying to push, it can easily be blocked by the people who had, who controlled the offices, whether it's the US, UK, Netherlands, Germany, and so on, who were the big fundraisers. They could block you and kill anything that you want to do. And they didn't, and they can blame their boards and they can, you know, they can say, oh, my board didn't want me to support that and so on.

And so, the challenge, Mahatma Gandhi once said, be the change you want to see in the world. And sadly, all international organizations that exist on the governmental side, on the civil society side, and so on, don't reflect that deeply.

00:16:12 JE
It's a tough, tough verdict, but I think I would love to hear more about your experience working at Greenpeace and dealing with those deficits that you just sketched out. And I have a question about how Greenpeace is different from other international organizations. Of course, it's an international NGO. That's one major difference, of course, if we compare that to intergovernmental organizations.

But Greenpeace also stands out as a civil society organization that is really committed to direct action, to civil disobedience, to very particular kinds of tactics and sort of means to achieve its goals. And that's, of course, included not shying away from confronting powerful multinational corporations responsible for major environmental harm. And if I'm not mistaken, in 2012, for example, you occupied a Gazprom oil platform in the Arctic, as part of a Greenpeace campaign. My question to you is, in this kind of world marked by turbulence, marked by these deficits that you sketched out, so a kind of simultaneity of crises multiplying and a fully equipped international system, in that world, do we need more civil disobedience?

00:17:20 KN
So firstly, one of my attractions of joining Greenpeace, I had spent ten years working internationally before that as the Secretary General of Civicus World Alliance for Citizen Participation, which was a global umbrella body for small as well as large organizations like Greenpeace and Amnesty and all. If history teaches us anything, when humanity has faced terrible injustice or a terrible challenge, those struggles only move forward when decent women and men stood up and said, “enough is enough and no more. We prepare to put our lives on the line. We prepare to go to prison if necessary. We prepare to make sacrifices necessary.” And by taking action that is peaceful, but which actually breaks unjust laws, right?

And I would say laws that protect the fossil fuel industry, given that we know that the fossil fuel industry is dabbling in a poison called carbon dioxide emissions, which is killing the future of our children and their children. If we look at the extreme imbalance of power, let me give you a practical example. So, if as head of Greenpeace, we were engaged in a campaign around Shell, right, to encourage it not to go into the Arctic, for example, right? Now, the Arctic is actually one of the front lines of the environmental challenges that we face at the moment. The Arctic is telling us clearly we are in deep trouble, right? The incident you talk about when I occupied a gas oil rig in 2012 in the Barn Sea, very much on the top of the world, if you want. At that time, there was a clear recognition by the science. There was [sic] very few governments that were still questioning the reality of climate change.

But what we saw is, yes, you can't blame people who work in the fossil fuel industry for being in a dirty energy industry that's driving us to destruction, because they've been told that they are providing an important national service by generating energy. But none of those workers particularly say, “oh, I only want to generate dirty energy. Please let me generate dirty energy.” They want to generate energy. So, they would be happy to do it through cleaner means that doesn't impact the children's futures.

Now, the fossil fuel industry were ahead of the International Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, the IPCC, in terms of their own scientists told them much earlier that burning of fossil fuels is going to create the problem. What they opted to do was to bury their own scientific findings in terms of public discourse, but they changed their practice. So, for example, when rigs were being put in the sea, right, they took into account sea level rise as a result of climate change and they put the rigs higher. But in the public, they were spending hundreds of millions of dollars saying fossil fuels is absolutely fine. And so, when you look at the imbalance of power between Shell and Greenpeace, for example, Greenpeace's entire global budget of close to 400 million euros is not even one-tenth of the advertising budget of one fossil fuel company like Shell.

And so, the power of civil disobedience, you know, which we learned from Mahatma Gandhi, from Martin Luther King, from Nelson Mandela, from Rosa Parks, Harriet Tubman, you know, many, many people in history around the world, is as relevant today as it's ever been because when power does not shift, you have to shift power. And so, the other purpose of why civil disobedience is important is that some of these crimes, environmental crimes, are happening far away from the visibility of the vast majority of people on the planet. Whether it's the slavery practices we have seen in the Amazon, whether it's the murders of nuns and others who are working to change things around, which we've seen in the Amazon.

Greenpeace's work in the Amazon. Oftentimes, the federal state of Brazil had no capability to find exactly what was going on and to intervene. Like for example, once when a popular nun was murdered for her work, Greenpeace folks had to be there on the ground, bringing in the federal government into these remote places because they didn't have the direct capability on their own. Then if you take the Arctic or the Antarctic,

they are so remote from where the majority of people live, it seems so far from the reality. But as I like to remind people, you know, people say what happens in Vegas stays in Vegas. Sadly, what happens in the Arctic does not stay in the Arctic. Its impact is global, right?

So therefore, civil disobedience is also about bearing witness to injustice in places where it's hidden from people. Now, nobody relishes the idea of going to prison or putting your life at risk when you, you know, occupy an oil rig where potentially Russian agents could be firing at you has happened the year after. In 2013, thirty Greenpeace activists were thrown in prison in Murmansk for doing exactly the same protests that we did. But where we are right now as humanity, it's important to understand that civil disobedience is one important and powerful tool in the toolbox of social change.

And like any tool, if you don't use it strategically, with good timing, with sensitivity, and so on, it can actually backfire really badly. Civil disobedience is very contextual. What I mean by that is what works well in one context might not work well in another context. So let me give you an example. I hope many of your listeners will know what mooning is, but if they don't, let me just offer a definition. If twenty people want to make a sign say, stop climate change, but they have to enter a venue where they cannot carry in placards and so on, what has happened sometimes is people will paint on each of their bum cheeks one or two letters, and at a given point, they all pull their pants down and it'll say, act now to stop climate change, for example.

Now, that might work well in London or New York or San Francisco. It might not work so well in Saudi Arabia, Indonesia, or Egypt, right? So, it doesn't mean that it was bad. And it becomes more complicated in a global environmental space because nothing stays solely within one country. And that was often a challenge for Greenpeace because, for example, whenever there was [sic] atrocities committed by the Israeli state against the Palestinian people, and when those were happening, you would have a lot of Greenpeace wanting to take action and take a position, and then others would be very hesitant about it. And those that were hesitant would not even allow, or those individual countries where it was easier to do, or it was appropriate to do, to offer that solidarity to the Palestinian people, because they would say, it will still reflect in our market because when you do social media and so on, people will still say, hey, that's Greenpeace, we did that, and in our country, that'll play bad. So there's quite a challenging thing to actually manage.

And let me give you another example. When Extinction Rebellion – who I fully support, their message is absolutely right, the urgency is right – but that doesn't mean that I support every single protest or tactic that they've used. So, in October 2020, they did some, I mean, in 2020, they did some amazing protests, which kept, during COVID, kept the climate struggle alive, more so than any other campaigning group in the world. But for example, when they choose to block tube stations, right, public transport used mainly by working class people, at a time when we have to win over working class people, we're struggling to put food on the table for the kids to eat, we are pushing people away. That might have got media coverage, might have got the issue to be talked about in the media. But on the other hand, it's alienating a critical constituency. And

bear in mind, one of the problems of the environmental and climate movement that it's far too white and far too middle class.

And the challenge for us is, how do we include those that have been excluded and those that stand to suffer the most? Because one of the realities of climate change is the people that are paying the most vicious and brutal price for climate impacts now are those that have contributed least to the problem in terms of emissions. You know, if you look at the impacts in Africa, in the small island Pacific states and so on, these are communities where the emissions are largely negligible compared to the historical emissions of countries like the United States and countries in Europe that built the economy on dirty energy.

So yes, it's a rather long answer to say that civil disobedience is something that we need, but we need to be strategic in how we deploy it, and not be self-serving in any way in how we, because it might mean that you might get a fundraising bump if you do a certain action in certain fundraising sort of context. But if that doesn't actually broaden the constituency of people who are participating and so on, then I would argue that that's not helpful.

00:27:33 JE
So, you were International Executive Director of Greenpeace International from 2009 to 2015. In that time, what was the most challenging global shock that challenged the organization, that challenged Greenpeace?

00:27:45 KN
I think the Fukushima nuclear power plant's vulnerability after the tsunami in, I believe it was 2011. And it's at a time also when people were trying to make a big push for nuclear energy because they said it was carbon neutral, which by the way, it's not 100% carbon neutral. And there's major questions around water and resources and so on. So, I always say to young activists, if you want to be popular, try to become a sports star or a musician or something, because activism is not a popularity contest, right? You have to go against a broken status quo, a broken economic system, a broken energy system, food system, transport system, and so on, right? And if you want to succeed or you want to do good in the world, you have to have the courage to say, that the current reality is not the best that humanity can do for itself.

And so, we were struggling right until Fukushima to get movement on countries like Germany and Italy, for example. But six months after, so we turned that crisis into an opportunity. And this is just to be very clear why I and many others don't think nuclear energy is the solution to the current situation, because to put it simply, it's too expensive, it's too dangerous, and it'll deliver too little, too late to address the climate crisis. Let me just quickly walk through those terms.

Too expensive today – there's absolutely no question the unit cost of electricity can be generated much, much cheaper than through from solar, wind, and other renewable resources then. So, there are multiple studies that show that now. Secondly, on too dangerous. Now, too dangerous people might say, well, you know, Fukushima happened and yes, there was some impact and Chernobyl happened and there was

some impact, but you know, the world didn't end and the impacts were manageable, right? But let's say the nuclear industry comes to us and say, we can guarantee you that there will never be any human hero in any nuclear facility. And we agree with them. They come and say, “We can also guarantee there will never be any technical failure”, and assuming we agree with them. And then they say, “there'll never be any extreme weather events like a tsunami that could have an impact on a nuclear facility.” And let's say we agree with them.

The one thing that they cannot put before us, that reasonably they can expect to shift us, is on the storage of spent nuclear waste at the end of the nuclear cycle. So just for those who don't know, the spent waste at the end of the nuclear cycle, depending what exact combination of materials used in it, can take at least 200 to 1000 plus years before it's no longer toxic and dangerous, right? And so, all we're doing is we are then storing these things underground in the northern part of Germany, for example, and we're just passing the problem on to future generations.

So, imagine today when archaeologists go and prospect and so on, they're finding temples and cities and artifacts and so on. The archaeologists of the future could stumble on this most toxic reality that has just been passed on by previous generations. And on the too little, too late, how long does it take to build a single nuclear power plant, right? [We are] talking between seven and ten years when it's done in country, like when Russia builds it in its own country, that's what we are talking about. But when Russia is building outside of Russia, it can take up to 30 years. The same would apply to almost any other country.

So, for all of those reasons, the global shock of Fukushima, which was put the world on anxiety and not just in Asia, because you see, the Chinese have the same character for crisis and opportunity, right? That's what activism has to be about. It is about how you turn every global shock or global crisis into an opportunity. I also faced other global, which to us at Greenpeace was like a global shock, but probably not to the world as a whole, which had to do with the culture and the reality of international organizations. And I'll tell the story because it's a painful one.

So, in 2014, the climate negotiations were taking place in Lima, Peru. And I hate going to those negotiations because it kind of always is very frustrating because you seem as if you are doing the same thing every year and each year you're just like moving the agenda like one centimeter in the right direction.

00:32:24 JE
Groundhog Day.

00:32:25 KN
Yeah, exactly. So, my colleagues in the Philippines kindly said to me, “hey, why don't you rather than go to Peru, come and be in the Philippines because another horrific typhoon is on his way and thousands of people are going to lose their lives, and there'll be millions and millions of dollars in infrastructure loss, and let's stand with the people on the ground and we can message in to Lima and the COP that was happening there.” And, you know, we didn't have cell phone reception and so on and we were kind of

chasing the typhoon trying to get ahead of it so that we could get to communities and support them with temporary solar installations and so on so they could call their families, and so on, and we would interview them and tell their stories, and we'd use a satellite phone to send the stories to the negotiations in Peru.

When we come out of it, we get a shock to discover that Greenpeace Germany had led an action on a sacred site in Peru called the Nazca Lines, which allowed a corrupt political elite in Peru the president and the people around him to then turn that into attention away from the corruption investigations and so on that were going on to say, oh, Greenpeace disrespected our culture. By the way, the Peruvian government was not doing anything substantial to protect the Nazca Lines. So, it was complete opportunism on their part. But should we have done it? We should not have done it, right? No question.

And, in a situation like that, where indigenous peoples around the world were criticizing Greenpeace immediately, people in the world of archaeology and cultural protection of historical sites and so on were so upset with us, as well as the climate movement, because suddenly, nobody was talking about what was happening in the climate negotiation. [For] everybody, the news became saturated with who [are] the people, can we arrest the people? You know, that's how the government played the agenda. And even though I was kind of fully exhausted, when I was not able to get the leadership of the German office to go and be on the ground, to answer for it, to apologize appropriately and so on, I then went, and I've never witnessed, I never had tomatoes and eggs thrown at me in my life.

But that, you know, what I see when there are global shocks is that people in leadership don't actually step forward and say, we've made a mistake, we made a miscalculation, and we take responsibility. Part of what I was trying to do when that for us was like, for me was emotionally, because bear in mind, right, the inequality of it. Can you imagine a bunch of Peruvian activists coming to Germany and occupying a church in Germany? The German office of Greenpeace would never agree to that, right? But the Global North can parachute into Global South places with complete immunity and arrogance. And that has to shift.

And so, we had INTERPOL arrest warrants for some of our activists that had engaged in the process and so on. And you can't blame the individual activists. It was a failure of leadership. And even though I was not aware of the decision and I had to deal with the aftermath of it, I felt it was responsible, the right thing for us to do as Greenpeace was to go and apologize and say, this is not who we are. We don't disrespect the cultures of people and so on.

00:35:47 JE
Would you say that part of learning the lesson is to really think more carefully, as you said at the beginning of our conversation, about how to truly be a global organization? Is that part of the answer to these moments?

00:35:59 KN

Absolutely. Because if, as a global organization, you're choosing to do something. in one national space, then we should evenly say that we will do that in all national spaces. So, like with COVID and the vaccine apartheid that most of us in the Global South had to deal with, they were saying, the powerful nations of the world were saying, we need to get people vaccinated, we need to get people vaccinated. And they developed the vaccines because they have the resources on a scale that the Global South could never have done it, with the exception of India, which caught up and played a big role.

We have to have equity in how we act in the world. And basically, the global system has very limited equity in it. The people that dominate decision making, it's, you know, you would say, okay, it's changing a bit now. And I think that the formation of BRICS and its recent expansion is an attempt to balance the power that exists. The difficulty for many of us in the Global South is that some of the leading governments in BRICS are not the shining examples of democracy or of justice or of anti-corruption and so on.

You know, like my country, South Africa, which is a leading figure in BRICS, is one of the most corrupt countries in the world with one of the most corrupt political leaderships that you can find, right? And so, while I agree with a lot of the words coming out of their mouth about the changes we need in the international system and so on, there is this difficulty that what they're saying and why they're saying it is not necessarily what they're going to follow through on. Right. And so that's the other huge problem we have with the poor state of our politics at the national and global level, where politicians will easily say that which they know is right and what they need to say.

But the compliance of those decisions are so lacking in the extent to which they are implemented. It's fraudulent, really. And so, for civil society organizations, you know, we cannot be on the one hand, for example, saying people who get elected to government should do their two terms or whatever the constitution says they should do and leave, right? Which is correct for us to be saying, and we say that a lot, that people, nobody's indispensable and so on. But when you go and you look at the NGO community in some parts of the world and even internationally at Greenpeace, you know, you had executive directors of offices that were there for 20 years plus, and they embraced a notion of indispensability.

So, what I'm saying, I'm using this example to say that we have to live up to the criticisms that we are making about the injustices in the global governance system. Right. If we are making critiques about, you know, people should not stay in positions, they shouldn't develop a culture of indispensability, then we need to reflect that fully. And of course, some organizations in the broader civil society community do better at it than others. But the fact that people can do that and it doesn't get challenged as much as it should be within civil society is a problem that says that we have embraced the culture and the logics of the mainstream status quo in many ways.

And another small example, you know, the one thing that international organizations, national governments, and international NGOs have in common is that over time, they've ended up all using the same consultants, right? No, seriously, they're using, Accenture, KPMG, Deloitte and Touché, and many of these organizations have built

major global practices, right? All the major consulting firms in the world, Boston Consulting Group, Gemini, name them, they all now have significant sort of non-profit practices as they call it, or non-profit arms. So even when I was at Greenpeace, you know, that was the logic. Many of those contracts were in place, and of course, if you've designed the organization to look like corporations and you're mimicking them, then you're gonna need the same consultant to help you figure out how to make those institutions run more effectively.

Yes, and so, it's a big question for people who believe that the current system is not simply one that requires incremental tinkering and baby steps in the right direction, but people who believe that the current system is broken to an extent, that it requires substantive structural and systemic change. If you hold that view, then you have to recognize that it's a fraud to suggest to people that "if we just improve things year and day, it's all going to be okay. Don't panic." Right? And that's the approach we've taken to climate since 1992, since the first Rio summit, right? We have continued to just, you know, it was one step forward, two step backwards type of thing since 1992.

The powerful thought, we can get some nice words in the final declaration and show that we are going to do something that responds to what the science was saying, we'll be okay. And now we are at a situation where we are right at the climate cliff, right? And let's be blunt, as we, you know, people ask me the question, is it too late to address climate change? And this is a question, by the way, people were asking me ever since I was at Greenpeace from 2009. And my answer is always an optimistic one, which is to say that the window of opportunity to prevent catastrophic, runaway, irreversible climate change is small and shrinking, but the opportunity is still there.

You know, one of the popular lines we used to say was, we can't change the science. We only can change the politics. And the political world, thankfully, is a renewable resource because hopefully we can elect people out of office and so on. But the contamination of the political class globally in accepting the status quo as given, because what you see with the most progressive or radical of political parties, when they're out of power, they can be very transformative in what they say. But when they get into powers, you know, understandably, the constraints of power is very, very limiting within certain current global rules. And those very global rules continue to perpetuate more and more global shocks, right?

I mean, COVID itself is a result of us not addressing deforestation. And so, we then continue to generate more and more, if you want, crises or global shocks that each time we are more shocked by and each time appear to be more incompetent in addressing it as a global community. And the last thing I would say is that climate change, I've been arguing since 2009, can be an opportunity. Well, in 2009, it could have been an opportunity, right? Which is for us to recognize for far too long, we've lived in a world that's been divided between north and south, east and west, developed and developing, rich and poor.

What climate change is saying to us, hey, folks, get it together, get it together and get it together fast, because you'll either act as a united global family and community and hopefully you can reduce the amounts of deaths that are happening. So, for the people

who are dying, like the 450 people that died in my city in Durban in 2022, it's too late for them, right? From two days of like crazy rainfall that created massive infrastructure losses and took 450 lives, it's too late for those people, surely. But I still want to believe that we are still in a moment where we can actually prevent the worst losses of human life and the complete destruction of countries, and so on. Even though parts of Africa are becoming depopulated as a result of climate change as we speak, I still want to believe that it's possible for us to deal with the biggest global shock.

00:44:13 JE
Right.

00:44:14 KN
And it's interesting about whether you could even call climate change a global shock in the sense that a global shock sort of suggests that something that was unanticipated came out of nowhere and so on. The terrible thing about it is that climate change is the biggest global shock that we face, but we don't treat it as a global shock. We treat it as, oh, it's just one other issue. And therefore, it's important for us to recognize that the struggle to avert, to address climate change is not an environmental issue. Climate change is a cross-cutting issue. It's a failure of our economic system, energy system, and so on. And we have to deal with it in a more intersectional way than we've been doing in the past.

00:44:54 JE
If we think about the past, what we've been doing in the past, how Greenpeace is trying to achieve climate action since it's been founded, a lot of things have changed, of course. There's been lots of different individual shocks in the past that Greenpeace has been dealing with. Geopolitical tensions have just shifted a lot over the last decades.

And at the same time, global governance itself has changed. You mentioned the role of consultancies, for example. The way global governance is being done has changed over the last decades as well. So, if we take all of that, how would you say can Greenpeace as an organization learn from its own past? And how can it sort of deal with this diversified and fractured global governance landscape that we have today?

00:45:40 KN
The real imperative of Greenpeace and other international NGOs is to recognize that they cannot continue to operate the way they've operated historically. They cannot continue to call themselves international when they actually, the decision making, the finance, the control, and so on is very much in the global now. That needs to change. And while everybody in those organizations have been putting a lot of effort and so on to make it happen, the level of urgency to make that change is very, very less than what it needs to be.

So, there's a big contradiction here. We cannot say to governments and businesses, “We need to transition to an economy that's driven by clean, green, renewable energy rather than an economy that's driven by dirty fossil fuel-based energy.” Because when

we say that to governments, we're not saying to them, “it's a walk in the park for you to do that.” We recognize that it has to be through a just transition, that it's complicated, that it'll take time, and all of that. So, we can't be saying, “the science says you need to change in this substantive way” on the one hand, and then on the other, we say, “oh, for us to become, to balance the power between the Global South and the Global North with international NGOs, we need about 10, 20 years to do that,” and put a different timeline of what we need to do to be fit for purpose versus what governments and business need to.

We should be ahead of the game anyway, because we are supposed to be the ones that are driven by public service in a much more fundamental way and that we're not compromised by either profit or by power. Yes, that's the logic of it. Therefore, we should be significantly performing better in how we look and so on. The sad reality is, there are senior management teams of most international NGOs, if you were to look at them with a couple of exceptions. They are all led by very good people, let me just say, good people from the Global North. But that doesn't matter how good they are. It's sending the wrong message, that we still live in a colonial world, which still means that the voices, perspectives, expertise, capabilities of people from the Global South are not valued in the same way as people who come from significantly more privileged, better education systems, more opportunity and so on, because the pathway for somebody like, and do with Greenpeace, I'm the first and the last person from Global South to be the head of Greenpeace, which is a 60-year-old organization. That's just not good enough in my judgment.

Right. So yeah, the ability to be as consistent with what you say and what you do is a critical success factor for the international NGO community going forward. I think that they need to be shrinking their bureaucracies, putting more resources to frontline communities who are facing whatever issues that they're facing, especially on climate, but all the intersecting crises, and start moving in that direction.

Because the reality is that the power and impact of the international NGO community is on a decline right now because if you look at, say, the Arab Spring, for example, and you look at some of the major sort of societal mobilizations for justice and fairness and equity that has happened with its Indignados, with its Occupy movement, with its Extinction Rebellion, all of the Fridays for the Future, all of these starting points are not the international NGO community that at one stage add pole position on many of these issues. And I think it's good that power has been disrupted, but I genuinely feel that international NGOs still have an important role to play, but that role can only be played if they look and feel as global as the challenges that they seek to address.

00:49:45 JE
Kumi Naidoo, I want to thank you so much for your time, for generously sharing all this really, really interesting experience and sharing your thoughts on where climate action and climate cooperation might go in the future, might have to go in the future. Thanks so much, Kumi.

00:49:59 KN
Thank you very much.