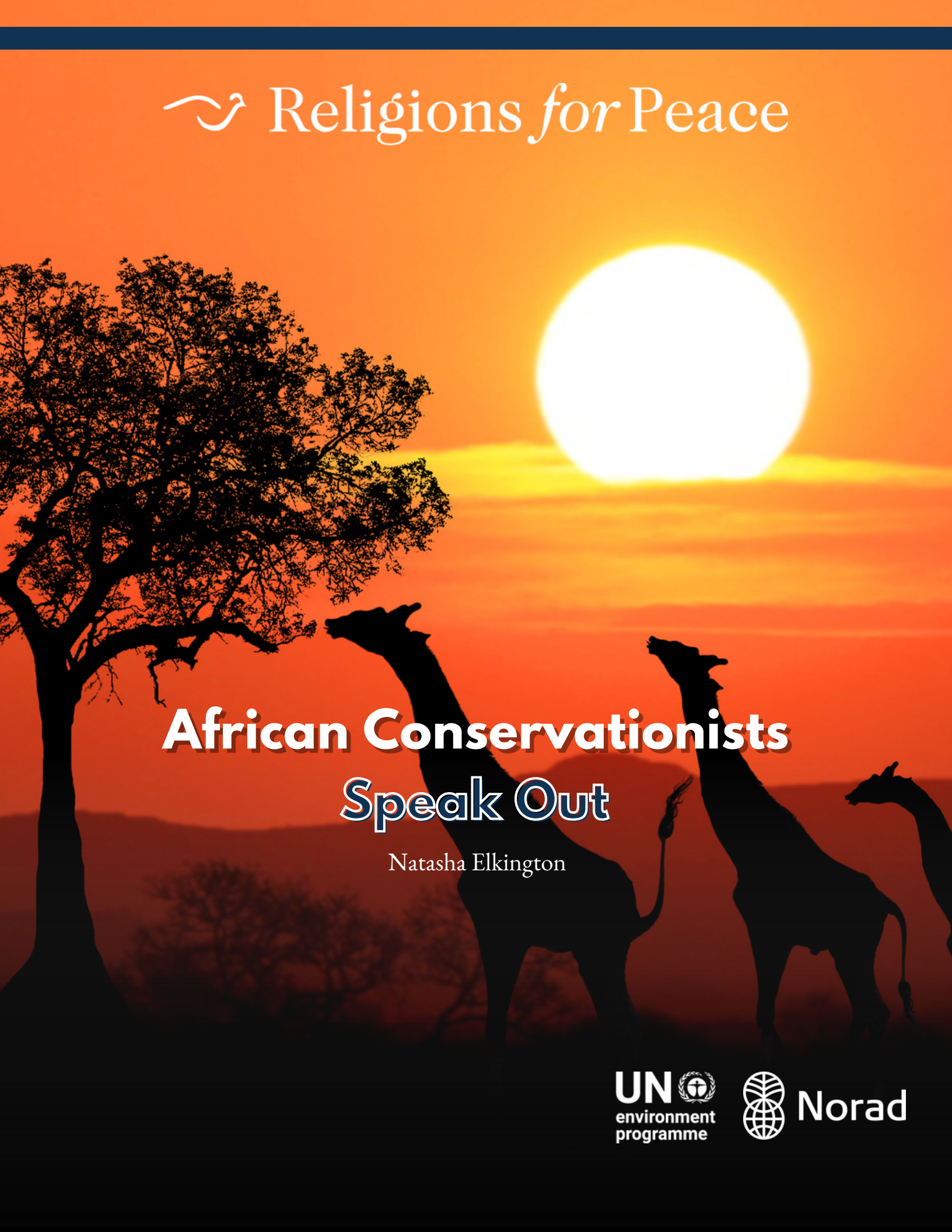


~ Religions *for* Peace



African Conservationists Speak Out

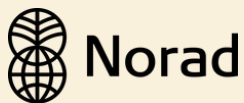
Natasha Elkington

UN 
environment
programme



Norad

∞ Religions *for* Peace



Copyright © 2022 *Religions for Peace*

Select photos courtesy of Canva, Pexels, and Pixabay, and Sebastiano Leddi, Kind of Leddi S.R.L.

The opinions expressed in this article are not necessarily representative of the positions of *Religions for Peace* leaders, Secretariat, or institutions.

This project was done in partnership with the United Nations Environment Programme with NORAD as the funding contributor.

ISBN: 979-8-9868906-2-3

Foreword

On 2-3 June 2022, Stockholm+50 celebrated an important milestone for humanity's relationship to the Earth: the 50th anniversary of the 1972 Conference on the Human Environment. This landmark meeting launched decades of work—and many successes—to address our planetary crisis. However, Stockholm+50 also recognised new concerns that must be urgently addressed.

H.E. Ms. Inger Andersen, Executive Director, United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) was the Secretary-General of this International Meeting. Ms. Andersen, the meeting's co-hosts (Sweden and Kenya), and the Stockholm+50 Secretariat were advised by the Stockholm+50 Advisory Group. The advisory group included ten eminent people from different geographic and sectoral backgrounds who provided guidance on matters such as visioning, leadership dialogues, and stakeholder engagement.

Prof. Dr. Azza Karam, Secretary General of *Religions for Peace*, served as a member of the UNEP Advisory Group, where she filled a critical gap in multi-religious outreach and advocacy by including the perspectives and expertise of faith leaders from Indigenous communities; religious institutions; faith-based organisations; and grassroots interfaith youth and women's organisations. In addition to drawing attention to their contributions to environmental policy and ecological justice, she also ensured that a special focus was placed on the contributions of Indigenous communities.

This paper is one of a five-part series that focuses on how Indigenous Peoples' knowledge can help us all move toward a more sustainable way of life. The series reflects the thoughtful conversations and various perspectives that were shared during and post Stockholm+50 on topics such as protecting the rights of Indigenous Peoples, local communities, and environmental defenders; amplifying the voice of women, girls, and youth in climate solutions; and protecting those who are most vulnerable to—and most impacted by—climate change.

African Conservationists Speak Out

NAIROBI, 17 February 2023 (UNEP): United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres highlighted his priorities for 2023 at the UN General Assembly (UNGA) this month describing this year as “a year of reckoning” that needs “a course correction” and “it must be a year of game-changing climate action.”

Guterres urged Member States to commit to start thinking long-term as “this near-term thinking is not only deeply irresponsible—it is immoral.” This year also marks the 75th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), one that the Secretary-General says is “the distillation of our shared mission to uphold and uplift our common humanity.”

2022 marked two important milestones related to global conservation. Five decades ago, in 1972, Stockholm+50 was first convened to put poverty and the environment at the top of the global agenda. Three decades ago, in 1992, UN Convention of Biological Diversity (CBD), known as COP15, began convening government leaders and decision-makers from around the world to address biodiversity loss. 2022 ended with the last Conference of the Parties (COP15) taking place in Montreal, Canada. The conference’s bold aim was to negotiate the Global Biodiversity Framework and create a roadmap for the next decade and they succeeded in making a historic deal with almost 200 countries agreeing to “halt and reverse” biodiversity loss by the end of the decade - an ambition to conserve 30% of the world’s land and 30% of the ocean by 2030.

The author spoke to six highly recognised conservationists from the African continent to share their honest views of the realities on the ground that go beyond roundtable discussions and bureaucracy and what they deem as actionable steps to actually reaching our targets as humanity facing a severe climate crisis.

Several themes emerged from these conversations, including: the importance of involving local communities and of tapping traditional knowledge; the importance of providing funding in equitable and effective ways; and an urgent need to move beyond discussions to take action.

Africa shares a story with most of the Global South, all Indigenous Peoples, and local communities (IPLC) worldwide. It is the story of people whose homes and livelihoods are connected most closely with nature and who for generations have spoken the language of the Earth and adapted to her changing cycles without harming her biodiversity. It is also the story of people whose traditional knowledge and deep expertise have historically been ignored or dismissed, even as Earth’s temperatures continue to rise and the reality of this “silent (biodiversity) crisis” becomes clearer by the day.

The news stories are frightening: homes burning in forest fires, islands sinking into warming waters, and ancient river beds turning into deserts that swallow entire ecosystems. The statistics are sobering: In the last 50 years, humans have wiped out nearly 70% of Earth's wildlife; currently, one million of the estimated eight million plant and animal species are threatened by extinction.

“The things we said in 1972 and at Stockholm are the same things that we are saying today. So, if we place our hope in governments, we are not going anywhere,” says **Dr. John Waithaka**, the East and Southern Africa regional vice-chair of the IUCN's World Commission on Protected Areas. “We do not have much time. If we succeed, it will be because we supported and equipped communities and Indigenous Peoples, those who are actually conserving but are not properly supported or equipped.”

COP27 was held in Sharm-el-Sheikh, Egypt, the first time in over a decade that a COP was held on African soil. The participants acknowledged the irony that Africa, the continent that has contributed the least to climate change (only 2-3% in global emissions), is also the one paying the highest price in terms of climate change and only receives 5.5% of climate financing.



Dr. John Waithaka. Photography by Mr. Mattia Zoppellaro.



Mr. John Kamanga. Photography by Mr. Mattia Zoppellaro.

“We are creating only 4% of the problem, yet we only get 4% of the resources. We should get 96% of the resources to actually reverse the trend if we are serious about it. Otherwise, we are wasting money,” says **John Kamanga**, co-founder and Director of the South Rift Association of Land Owners (SOLARO) and elected leader of his Maasai community. “We have to develop champions at the local level so that more resources can be directed to where we can make a difference. I wish we could have a COP for local people to talk about how to further their cause of conservation, because local groups, local communities, and Indigenous People have been conserving nature for centuries—not because of climate change but because that is the basis of their survival.”

As an example, he suggests convening regional COPs of communities that face similar issues. The members could come up with solutions more quickly and cost less based on their collective knowledge, a result which he terms “the politics of conservation.”

He adds, “A lot of our conservation work is actually based on community frameworks of thinking, rather than bringing in ideologies from outside. You have to understand how people have worked in a landscape, whether they are the Raika in India or the Maasai or cowboys in America. People who have made a living in a landscape understand a few things about that landscape.”

In a similar vein, **Dr. Susan Chomba**, Director of Vital Landscapes at the World Resources Institute (WRI), suggests looking at local success stories for inspiration about how to address the climate change crisis.

“Although there are many conferences and discussions about what should be done, she says, “When I go back home the question is ‘What is the action? What do we do on Monday morning?’ So, let us start to recognise what the African continent is doing. We have fantastic initiatives on nature. For instance, the African Forest Restoration Initiative, AFR 100, is capitalising on political momentum to restore 100 million hectares. We have soil and water conservation methods that we have seen work spectacularly even in places like the Sahel, so we do not have a shortage of solutions. What we need are resources that ensure that we are doing it at the scale and pace that is needed. Let us restore our degraded lands, let us restore our riparian areas, let us restore our degraded ecosystems, let us compensate local communities that are protecting indigenous forests.”



Dr. Susan Chomba. Photography by Mr. Mattia Zoppellaro.

The theme of sharing and using knowledge for different disciplines also came up in many conversations. For example, **Lucy Mulenkei**, Executive Director of the Indigenous Information Network (IIN), says traditional knowledge and science need to work together and learn from each other to create new technologies that help humanity safeguard our natural resources and create early warning systems to navigate through extreme weather in fragile ecosystems.



Ms. Lucy Mulenkei. Photography by Mr. Mattia Zoppellaro.

For example, Indigenous People have developed their own methods to identify when it was time to leave a particular area so the land could regenerate. Mulenkei adds, “And today, if their livestock is not doing well because of climate change, they are able to say, what do we do as an alternative? Do we keep goats or camels or what do we do?”

That adaptive, creative approach is also being used as leaders in climate change interventions consider how to develop fresh ideas and solutions.

“We need a complete rethinking and a new narrative about wildlife and the importance of wildlife as a national asset and as our heritage, as a part of our identity,” says CEO of Wildlife Direct **Dr. Paula Kahumbu**. “We need to find ways to make sure that the people who live with wildlife benefit from it. In the same way that you can get carbon credits for your trees, you should be able to get credits for the biodiversity that you protect on your land.”

“We are still in a patriarchal (society),” says Mulenkei. “Women have to keep saying, ‘Hey, I am here! Can you see me?’ It is the same thing with Indigenous People. Governments do not really focus on what is happening out in the remote communities. They tend to look at those communities like they are survivors, they can continue with their way of life. But if you really want development to take place, if you really want us to achieve the sustainable development goals in 2030, even in 2050, we have to have Indigenous Peoples, women, youth, and our local communities involved. And, we need money to go directly to communities, to the Indigenous Peoples’ organisations, so they can act on their own.”

She points out that Indigenous People are innovative because they have had to adjust to changing conditions for years.



Dr. Paula Kahumbu. Photography by Mr. Mattia Zoppellaro.

However, Dr. Kahumbu argues that, if and when funding does come through, it must be put in the right hands in order to achieve actual impact. Furthermore, she notes that no amount of money can reverse the damage that is already done.

“Even if you give Africa a ton of money, billions or trillions of dollars, nothing will bring back the northern white rhino! No amount of money will replace the destruction of lions or our Indigenous forests or the Congo,” Dr. Kahumbu points out.

She adds, “Restoration and conservation are one of the very few industries where human inputs are very minimal. If you want to make iron sheets and cement, enormous amounts of human work have to go into it. You cannot turn on the factory and walk away and think it is going to produce anything whereas nature will take care of itself so long as we do not beat it down. Nature is the only thing that will produce for us for free if we take care of it. All we have got to do is avoid overexploiting it, manage it well, and let it recover when it is damaged. We could probably have very productive ecosystems if we just allowed nature to recover, enlisted the help of local communities, and rewarded them for their successful outcomes, such as more biodiversity, more biomass on the ground, and recovery of species.

However, restoration needs to be done in a very holistic way. People need to understand why we need to restore landscapes and how to do it properly. We need to get universities and governments to buy into it. We also need to reward people who restore their landscapes.”

In terms of simple and actionable steps policy makers can adopt, **Dr. Musonda Mumba**, Secretary-General of the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands, highlights the need to understand how everything—from science to policy to nature—is interconnected.



Dr. Musonda Mumba. Photography by Mr. Mattia Zoppellaro.

“Land, biodiversity, climate, do not operate in a vacuum. People are also part of the planet, and we should be part of the solution,” says Dr. Mumba. “How we govern our natural resources, our justice systems, our legislative frameworks, all of that is interconnected with how we deal with the natural environment. So, if something is out of sync, everything falls apart.”

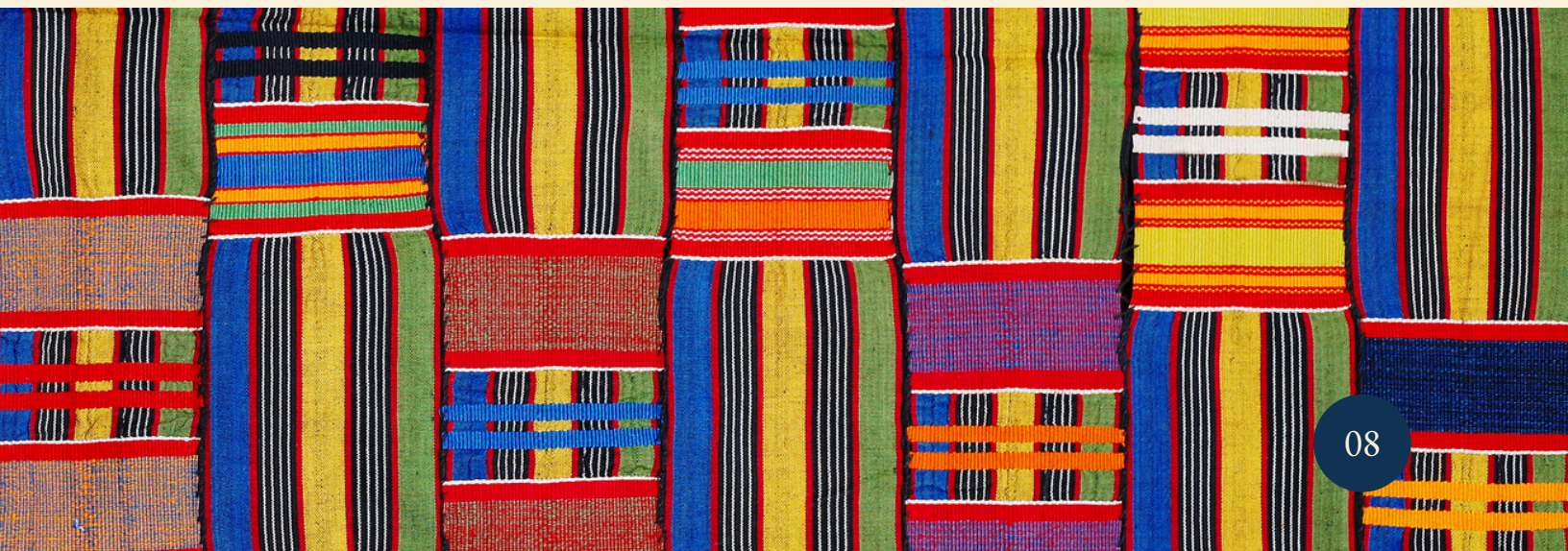
However, Dr. Mumba believes that more conservation education is needed in Africa and that resources need to be made more accessible to African populations so they can see and understand the value and wealth in the nature that surrounds them.



In terms of protecting nature, Dr. Mumba points out, “Most of the biodiverse places on this planet are managed by Indigenous Peoples in the Amazon, in the Congo, in Asia—name the place and you will find that they are the first ones to respond to this crisis. When disaster hits, the first responders are members of the local community. As a result, they are also the ones thinking, ‘How do I till my land? What do I do differently? What seed systems should I use so that I do not kill the soils?’”

Finally, Dr. Mumba relates a conversation she had with a friend who works on human rights and environmental justice and whose hopeful attitude encouraged her. Her friend said, “I have to inspire a lot more women to remain hopeful because so many of them think, there is nothing I can do. How do I save that forest? How do I save that water point? Then they come together and they feel the power of congregation, the power of community, the power of giving each other hope and saying, look, here is what I did in my corner. Let me tell you how I did it. Perhaps you could try it out.”

Dr. Mumba concludes, “That is what helps me say, let me just go for it. Let me stay in this race. I want to be part of something that is game changing.”



Natasha Elkington (@indianmaasai) is an award-winning, independent multimedia journalist, producer, photographer, writer, host and moderator based in Nairobi, Kenya. With over 15 years of professional experience in the international media arena, she has worked and trained with several recognised global organisations including Thomson Reuters Corporation & Foundation, Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC), the European Union, United Nations, Centre for International Forestry Research (CIFOR), HBO, MediaStorm, Facebook and ActionAid, to name a few. Human impact stories, environmental issues and Indigenous Peoples rights fuel her fire while bringing a truthful, creative and global perspective to storytelling.

John Kamanga is co-founder and Director of the South Rift Association of Land Owners (SOLARO) and elected leader of his Maasai community.

Dr. Paula Kahumbu is CEO of Wildlife Direct

John Waithaka is the East and Southern Africa Regional Vice Chair of the IUCN's World Commission on Protected Areas

Dr. Susan Chomba is Director of Vital Landscapes at the World Resources Institute (WRI).

Lucy Mulenkei is Executive Director of the Indigenous Information Network (IIN)

Dr. Musonda Mumba is Secretary-General of the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands



777 United Nations Plaza
New York, NY 10017 USA
www.rfp.org