



Conversation with Joshua Amponsem

Ashley Hopkinson

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Ashley Hopkinson: Can you introduce yourself? Tell me a little bit about yourself and what brought you to your work with the Youth Climate Justice Fund.

Joshua Amponsem: My name is Joshua Amponsem. I'm from Ghana. I work mostly as a climate activist, supporting international and regional institutions and how they engage on climate justice, particularly with local communities and young people. I founded Green Africa Youth Organization, which works across Africa with local governments and youth movements on environmental justice issues. I'm the co-director for the Youth Climate Justice Fund, which provides core flexible funding to grassroots climate leaders from historically underfunded communities and builds their capacity on inclusive leadership.

Ashley Hopkinson: What do you think is distinctive about the work of Youth Climate Justice Fund?

Joshua Amponsem: First of all, we acknowledge that the climate justice movement is not recent. The challenge is that language and technologies have a way of resurfacing things and making them feel new. The climate justice work has been going on for many years, since historical inequalities have existed and climate change became one of the issues in the Industrial era. Since that time, it's been a struggle for many communities where resources have been obstructed and climate impacts are being felt. These communities are at the intersection of these two things: they feel the impact, yet their resources are needed to fuel industrialization and to solve the problem as well. Their leadership and their role in the struggle have not been acknowledged as much. They are not trusted, and that has led to their ownership and leadership being suppressed.

The Youth Climate Justice Fund realizes that we need intergenerational partnerships to help fix this, and it starts with empowering and resourcing young people in these historically underfunded,

under-supported communities to reclaim their ownership in redefining their own future, redefining what a climate solution is, and redefining what their own community development looks like and the intersection of the climate issue with other social injustices that they have experienced in their communities over several decades. That is our unique position in this ecosystem. We are providing that capacity development, that direct trust of flexible and core funding to grassroots movements. We are respecting them, going into a partnership with them, and making them aware that they are the owners and the leaders of this era.

Ashley Hopkinson: Tell me more about the role that partnerships play in your work. How do they come about? How do you maintain and nurture them?

Joshua Amponsem: Partnership is trust. The challenge is to acknowledge this gap. I've been a grantee, I've been a grassroots leader looking for funding, and I've acknowledged and experienced so many times how funders did not trust my leadership. Because they have resources, they can easily manipulate grassroots leaders to get them to do what they want. That is where partnerships can be unhealthy.

What we have experienced is that the most fundamental thing is building trust at the very early stages, and understanding the different interests that the different stakeholders in this partnership have. What do they want to achieve? Because, a funder, a grassroots leader, a local government, NGOs, municipalities — they all have something they want to achieve. They want to do something good.

Building a collective vision becomes very important. That vision could be very diverse, because what a grassroots leader wants might be different from what the governments want, and it could be different from what a funder wants. What is the bigger picture and how do the different visions all fit into one collective vision? That plays a very big role for us.

The other thing that plays a big role for us is care and joy. In approaching a partnership, we acknowledge that the work that we do is a struggle for many communities. Either it's long hours of work, or a community is going through extreme heat, or the foundation is having a lot of different requests. Everyone is going through some sort of struggle one way or the other. We approach this with providing care for our community and for the people we are hoping to go into partnership with, being compassionate and understanding.

It allows us to be better partners and allows them to appreciate the kind of organization we are. It creates a space of vulnerability, which allows people to share more than they [might otherwise] feel

comfortable to share with a partner, either because there's lack of trust or they are not ready to share what might jeopardize a partnership.

Doing all of these things really helps in creating an enabling environment that allows for trust to be built, that allows for care to be given, that allows for people or organizations to be a bit vulnerable and to really get the help that they want from each other. These are some of the pillars that I find very important.

At the same time, we try to find the most healthy partners that we can work with and not those who are not ready to partner, because then it's too much effort. We take a pause on that so that we can actually nurture [the relationship] until we know that it is a critical time to partner. There's the readiness for it.

It's an ecosystem, and even the word "ecosystem" itself should make it very obvious that it's a place where you cannot exist by yourself, because you wouldn't achieve anything. The more partners are on board, the more healthy partnerships you have, the better are the chances for succeeding.

Ashley Hopkinson: What are the indicators of a healthy partnership?

Joshua Amponsem: One is a certain level of interrogation. If you don't ask me what my pain points are, if you don't question what my theory of change is, if you're not questioning my values and principles, then it seems to me that you probably don't hold those values, or you don't have a sense of empathy for the work that I do. Interrogation and questioning is a very big part of it. Of course, overdoing that would definitely lead to a distasteful potential for collaboration. That's definitely unhealthy. A fair amount of that is very good, to give us the understanding that you have questions, to help you understand where we are, what we do, where we are heading, and to allow you to come on that journey with us. That's very important.

The second thing is empathy. If a potential partner does not have empathy for the movements we work with, for the communities we work with, for the staff, for the team, I think that tells us that this could be very difficult, because then there'll be no flexibility. Empathy is a very important part of every collaboration. It allows us to be flexible and adaptable when working with any partner to achieve our goals while maintaining our core functions of people in society.

A very good example is when COVID happened and there was lockdown and companies were forced to apply certain empathetic procedures, whereas before that, most companies wouldn't do that. Even if someone had two kids sick at home, they were still supposed to show up at work. We needed a catastrophe to trigger our sense of empathy, to some extent.

The third part is identifying your role. We feel the prospect is there when we're talking to a partner who has very strong clarity of their role in the partnership. [For example,] "I am a funder, and I'm never going to be a farmer, and I'm never going to be an agroecologist. That's what I am and that's what I can do. I cannot tell a community in the Congo Basin or in the Amazon rainforest how to practice their farming and their agroforestry. My role here is to provide the financing and the strategy on how to keep an organization sustainable financially." Being very succinct and clear on that is very important for us. What are they coming in with? What are their intentions? How do they identify their roles? That makes it very clear: this is what we're going to get. We will probably get financial support from this partner, but we're not going to get expertise on agroforestry for the local organization that is doing this work. We will need someone else to do that. It is super important to have that clarity.

Ashley Hopkinson: Are there any insights or takeaways from your work that would be valuable to share?

Joshua Amponsem: A bunch of things. One, not being afraid to push back. It's quite important. Most often in the youth movement or the climate justice movement, we come from a place where we are challenging narratives, we're challenging the status quo, we're not happy with the way things are. That's probably built into our DNA, because we grew up in a system where there's so many things that we think need to change, and we're questioning that.

But in some instances, all of a sudden our questioning and our pushback reduces significantly, particularly when there's a very soft power dynamic, where it's not necessarily [challenging] an authority but a relationship with one of our own partners or with an institution that has resources.

While in most cases, that's good, because we want to access resources, I found that healthy questioning and pushback on how a partner wants to engage with you is very important. They believe in your call—that's why they want to work with you—but you need to be able to push back on how they want to do it, to make sure that it works for you, and we don't do that enough.

There are countless times I've met executive leaders and directors of different initiatives and NGOs, and they're semi-happy in a partnership. The reason why they are semi-happy is because they know it's the right partner they want to work with, but they've agreed to something that they were not entirely happy with.

The first question I ask is, Why couldn't you push back and say this is all great, but I would prefer if we wouldn't do this, or wouldn't add this to the package? That is something I had to learn at a very later stage of my work, that that level of pushback allow you to really have joy in your work, because then

most of the things you're doing are things that you really want to do, and it's not because someone else is asking you to do it.

The second thing I've learned is our framework around inclusion. I had the United Nations Secretary-General's office set up the first Youth Advisory Group on Climate Change to the Secretary-General. We created a bunch of teams to make it happen from 2019. It took a while, and afterwards a lot of other agencies and institutions embraced the idea. Now there are advisory boards everywhere.

But when is inclusion [just] to show that they're including people? When does it become effective and applied inclusion, where it actually influences the organization? What I've learned is that in most cases, it's inclusion where you prepare the external person who is coming to join. You prepare the new person, the Indigenous person who is joining your company as a board member, or the young person who is joining the foundation as a board member.

What the current ecosystem doesn't do is prepare the existing staff, the existing board members, the existing leadership on how to receive a new person.

It's so underestimated, but it's so important, because a lot of people have had bad experiences being on board as a minority leader or minority representative, because they were taught how to behave when they get there, but everyone there was not taught how to behave when the new person arrives, how to make them comfortable, how to make them feel at home, and how to make sure that their input is actually influencing them. It's really underestimated.

Ashley Hopkinson: Even when there are a lot of young people who are clearly active on social issues, there's still this narrative around apathetic youth. What do you think about the assumption that it's hard to engage young people?

Joshua Amponsem: It's a very important question. First of all, youth is a mixture of different people. For instance, in some contexts, "youth" are people below the age of 24 and no less than 15. In many places it's 15 to 24, in other parts of the world it's 25 and below, and another part is 35, also 18. It's so diverse. And there's another thing, which is about how much experience people have had, and how that made them, whether they're youth or not. There is a 24-year-old who has finished their master's degree and is already a young professional and wouldn't feel like they are youth per se. They wouldn't identify and associate with other young people who are even older than them, who might be 27 and still in school or still do other things that make them feel that they're young. Then there's a 32-year-old who just entered their higher education, pursuing postgraduate studies, and it's the first time they

moved out of their parents' home and have their own voice and are able to do things independently, so they still feel young. There's so much diversity there. When people say they're trying to reach young people, what kind of young people are you trying to reach? Which category? Within the diversity of young people, which ones are you trying to reach, and what is your approach in reaching them?

At the Youth Climate Justice Fund, we define youth as 35 and below, across the whole world. We acknowledge that there are differences and diversity in those young people. There are students, there are young professionals, there are workers, there are employees, there are young people within the informal economy, there are teachers who teach other young people and they feel good because they're perfectly surrounded by teenagers and they feel part of them. They feel like they need to be within this community and to raise the next generation of young professionals. We consider a wider range. We have an open process that allows different groups to reach out to us. We work with regional teams who identify groups that fit in with our objectives and goals and recommend them to us. We offer different language options for making an application to us. There are multiple ways that we put in place to ensure that different people can reach us and be in touch with us and communicate with us.

We started a new initiative this year where we are reaching out to non-climate youth movements. Who are the young people working on gender issues and feminist issues? Who are the young people working on trade issues? Who are the young people working in the building and construction sector? Who are the young people working on informal settlements and slums? Because all of them have a role to play within this climate justice fight, and sometimes they don't feel part of the climate movement because they're within a different spectrum. You can reach them if you know exactly what you want, and you then come with another strategy on how to reach the category of young people that you want to engage with.

Ashley Hopkinson: What is your measure of progress?

Joshua Amponsem: It's a spectrum of different things, and it's difficult to say one thing, unfortunately. For instance, I get very excited when all the groups that we supported finally find their voice. When I say find their voice, what I mean is that they get to a point where they know that they can work on the issues that are important to them locally and there's a partner who is ready to support them and not coerce them towards something else. That, for me, is one of the most important things, because it's the biggest risk within the sector.

Many groups on the ground are working on an issue that is important but is not the issue that they would ideally be working on, because that is what funding is available for. I find that very dangerous,

because that is what happens in the system. You have people with different skillsets and interests working on other issues because that's where the resources are.

It makes me really happy when I know [for example] that there's a group of young people in Mexico City who are very keen on seed diversity, and that is what they want to work on, and they're funded for that, and then they come back to us and they're like, "We were always nervous that we would have to do agroforestry or something around carbon markets because that is what's attractive in the space, and we feel so confident about our work now because we have the resources to do it, and we're doing it the way that our ancestors and our elders have been doing it. We don't feel that pressure of having to do things another way." That is how we ensure local ownership and leadership.

The second thing is jobs. There are so many people in Global South countries and the global majority that do incredible work for our planet and it goes unpaid. I consider it progress when our partners get to a stage where they've put their organizational structures in place, they're hiring people, they're signing contracts, they're paying Social Security, they're getting health insurance for their employees. That, for me, is significant progress, because those are the instances where I know they're working on issues that are important to them and for the planet as a whole, and they're not going hungry, they're not getting stressed, and their wellbeing is taken care of.

Then the third part is when we have partners on the ground who realize that they are the actual leaders in this work on climate action. We live in a world where whoever has the most money and the most funding is considered the perspective for many community people, and they forget that they have the wisdom that we need. Those with the most wisdom for this work are the ones with no resources. It is a brilliant moment when they start seeing themselves in that way and recognizing that they are the experts, that they have the wisdom and the insights we need, and that they should hold on to that and apply it for the better of all of us. For me, that is progress.

Lastly, when we started this work, 0.76% of climate philanthropy was going to young people. This was three years ago. In less than two years, we've been able to mobilize about \$4 million to grassroots organizations across the world in several countries, working with donors who before would not feel very comfortable putting resources directly in the hands of local communities and young people because they were not sure if they could manage it.

Over the last two years, through our work, we've seen that the mindset is changing, and funders and foundations understand. When we do our donor-influencing workshops, they ask the right questions, and we are able to provide them with insights together with our partners on the ground. They are beginning to provide those resources, and they are being flexible with their resources. They are not

giving restricted funding. Even if they give restricted funding, they attach it with unrestricted funding that allows the communities and the groups to do additional things that are good for organizational health and wellbeing. Those are fundamental changes that we've seen, which is enormous progress within two years, and we want to see more of that moving forward.

Ashley Hopkinson: What challenges come up in your work, and how do you manage those challenges?

Joshua Amponsem: One of the things I find challenging is patience in the ecosystem. We are all in a hurry to get the system to work the way we think it needs to be working. The thing is, if we all go too fast and we don't check the direction in which we're going, we will end up in the wrong destination.

Patience is one of the things that we all struggle with. Everyone has run out of patience at this point. At the same time, you still need to exercise patience in other places. It's finding that balance between when we have to be impatient and when we have to be patient. It's very difficult, honestly.

The second thing is, I don't want to underplay the difficulties in building trust. It's very important to our work, but securing it is very difficult. It doesn't come easy. It's a lot of work, and it's difficult to reach that point with different partners based on their past experiences and based on our own past experiences, too. Once that is achieved, everything else gets better from there, but getting to that point is very difficult.

The last thing I would say is that wellbeing is difficult. We're practicing joy, taking care, and being empathetic. At the same time, it's difficult, because we always have a million things on the agenda that need to be done. It's always a battle, a competition, a struggle to prioritize, knowing what to leave for the following year, the following month, for the next quarter, what to do now, what did you miss out on? This feeling is very difficult.

Also, there's always a limit of how much support you can give. We have a range of different stakeholders we're in touch with, and we struggle with that, and it's difficult. You say no to a group because at that moment you're unable to provide them with support, but you know they are doing amazing work. Unfortunately, we are not able to provide the kind of support or partnership that is required. That also is part of the struggle.

Ashley Hopkinson: What do you think is missing from the current conversation on climate and environmental justice? What do you wish people were talking more about or doing more about?

Joshua Amponsem: The only thing I would say is that we need all options and solutions on the table, and all of them are important. We need to go full-on with as much capacity and resources to all the different diverse solutions.

One of the struggles we've had and are still having is the number of debates among those of us who are already within the movement on what is more important to pursue. I think we've been having that for way too long. The bottom line is that all those things are important, because everyone in the movement is concerned about the same thing.

We want to secure a better future and a better planet that is good for humanity, that underpins the struggles of the past, and that leverages that moment to liberate those who have gone through all the struggles in the past and make sure that justice is secured, equity is secured, and equality is ingrained.

We literally want the same thing, and there's not one way to get there. Whatever your theory is, go full-on and find ways where we complement each other. We spend a lot of time just trying to push this thing out or bring this thing in. By doing that, the situation doesn't get any better; it gets worse by the day. Let's go full-on with whatever gets us towards that vision. Pursue all of it.

Ashley Hopkinson: Given the right support—the financial resources, the people you need—what would you like to see grow, expand, and be replicated within your sector?

Joshua Amponsem: What I would like to see is getting the balance right in that we can acknowledge the leadership, the knowledge, and the expertise of the people who actually have them. I know that sounds very, very faint, but we still live in a world where literally 78% of all climate-research funding dedicated for Africa ends up in Global North institutions.

We still live in a world where a majority of the most referenced climate papers are authored by Global North researchers, even though a lot of that research was done with communities in the Global South and the knowledge was extracted from them. Who are the bearers of knowledge? How do we rebalance that? Who are the bearers of resources? How do we balance that? Who are the bearers of solutions? How do we balance that? If I could make magic happen, I would love to see that.

I gave a TEDTalk just two days ago about this wicked problem. It's almost like we've just accepted it. It doesn't really get talked about. It's just normal that a good research paper is going to come from a Global North, Ivy League situation. No questions asked.

Ashley Hopkinson: How would you define collective wellbeing?

Joshua Amponsem: From my perspective, collective well-being is being able to understand each other's ways, both granularly and also at a big-picture level, and understanding how complementary that is. Once we have that, we will appreciate each other so much that there'll be so much joy within this work.

The challenge we have, and why that collective well-being is difficult to create, is because we lack the trust to be able to share true intentions and also have resource solidarity. There's an assumption and prejudice that there's so much competition between organizations and all a struggle for scarce resources, which feels so real.

Deep down, I really think that is because we lack clear intentions, resource solidarity, and a good understanding of how our work complements each other. If we had that, we would be able to complement each other so much that we'll feel so happy doing this work and we will just make so much progress. We are missing that, and that is where community wellbeing and collective well-being is falling short.

Ashley Hopkinson: Is there anything you think is important to add to our conversation?

Joshua Amponsem: The only thing I would add is that my role in this ecosystem is getting more people to put this into practice. The problem is not going anywhere. We are here, and we have to get it right. The more we can understand each other and be complementary and appreciate each other and be empathetic to each other's cause and situation, we can really go far.

Ashley Hopkinson: Wonderful, thank you Joshua.

Ashley Hopkinson is an award-winning journalist, newsroom entrepreneur and leader dedicated to excellent storytelling and mission-driven media. She currently manages the Solutions Insights Lab, an initiative of the Solutions Journalism Network. She is based in New Orleans, Louisiana.

** This conversation has been edited and condensed.*