



Conversation with Mafah Cornelius Kuta

Ashley Hopkinson

August 20, 2024

Ashley Hopkinson: Can you tell me a little bit about yourself and about the work you do? How did you come to this work with regenerative agriculture?

Mafah Cornelius Kuta: I grew up on a farm. My intention actually was to do (something different). I decided to go on for secondary education with a minor in seminary in Boya. So everything was going on well until I was advised to withdraw in the fourth year, for reasons that were best known to the institution itself. I cried for the whole day. I refused to eat. But my father spoke with the Bishop and I was transferred to St. Joseph's College, Sasse where I earned a general certificate of education in Cameroon, advanced level certificate in sciences.

I did not go to university directly with my classmates because my parents died. So I had a frustrating life for two years in the village. I had nowhere to go. The only solution I had was to go back to the farm. So there, on the farm, I cultivated so many crops and raised some money to go on for tertiary education. In the end, I became a secondary school teacher.

The opportunity for me to become a full-time farmer was in 2006 when I was appointed to a secondary school in Buea as a principal. The school was almost closing its doors because of bankruptcy. The students attending the school were unable to pay their fees because their parents were from poor backgrounds. So I suggested to the proprietor of the school that if we could integrate small agriculture in this school, then we would be able to raise enough funds to provide education for these very children. And at the same time, teach them farming as an advantage.

This idea wasn't accepted by the authority of the school because they had private ownership. And so, I resigned and I went back to the farm. There on the farm, I created food in a natural forest that I

inherited from my father. And so, it became a training ground for young people who were school dropouts in my community, especially secondary school dropouts.

Ashley Hopkinson: That sounds really promising. How did you decide that you wanted young people to be involved in farming? Were you seeing something that led you to this direction?

Mafah Cornelius Kuta: Yes, I saw that these young people were going through the same problems that I went through because my parents came from poor farming backgrounds. And even if you like education, you will not have any money to pay for it. So they should not have to go through the suffering that I went through. Things I don't talk about because they are very negative.

Ashley Hopkinson: So you created this agricultural program, what do you think makes the agricultural school and the work that you're doing special and unique?

Mafah Cornelius Kuta: For the past 20 years, I noticed that the farmers have had to degrade the soil. So when I look at what industrial agriculture has done in my community—they came and occupied all the best places to farm and the most fertile areas and caused our parents not to have their own land, because they have to employ them and they work eight hours for these companies and have no time to produce their own food.

In my life people were saying 'Kuta is intelligent in school, he should go to university and study to be an engineer.' But I saw the need that if we continue allowing this to happen in our community, they will not have food in the future because all our land will be destroyed. So I decided to remain on the farm.

In my life alone, many people have witnessed this pain because in 2016 a war broke out in the English-speaking regions in Cameroon known as the Anglophone Crisis. I had to run away from the farm and many other young people ran away from there. Some became non-state fighters and they inhabited that farm. Today, all have been killed. These are people I was retraining in the farms. But for political reasons, I don't have them again. All the farms that were created have grown into bushes, so I think it's an open lesson for the community.

Ashley Hopkinson: What is a challenge for you in this work?

Mafah Cornelius Kuta: The greatest challenge is to be able to help transition those who are already farmers to regenerative farmers. That is where I have a lot of work. But our flagship program, which is the 9-month training program in Wandusoa, we train young people to become regenerative farmers,

every year with a 6-month intensive course, which includes practical and theoretical at the same time, then they have three months for a mentorship program.

We'll be producing food for ourselves, healthy food, protecting our soil, protecting the environment, and solving a host of problems while living a healthy life.

Rather than rushing and believing in the massive production of monocultural activity like tomato cultivation, which is really rampant in my area, using chemical pesticide and toxic fertilizers. Through this work, you can eliminate the number of sicknesses that have emanated in our community like diabetes and renal issues. This is what we are seeing now.

Ashley Hopkinson: How do you get people in the community who are already farmers involved in regenerative agriculture? How are you reaching them? Is there a strategy that has worked?

Mafah Cornelius Kuta: Our solution, we have two approaches; the school-based approach, which is actually the nine-months training course for the young people in the regenerative agriculture school. It's our flagship program.

Then to scale the work, we have a community-based approach. This approach will work with already existing farmers' cooperatives. So we (conducted) talks and surveys with these 100 farmers' cooperatives with the aid of the Pioneer Young Parliamentarians of the Senate in Cameroon. They visited Wandusoa because our program was published in the newspaper, which works with the Parliament, the National Assembly in Cameroon. So this opportunity opened up for us through this parliamentarian in their constituencies and with the leadership they were able to rally these farmers' cooperatives who were creating awareness about farming in Cameroon, our Indigenous farming.

So this term "regenerative" is very grammatic, but we always tell them that you have to go back and do what we were always doing and we were successful in doing. And because the ground is degrading now, the yield is too, you see for yourself, it cannot give us as it used to. So you have to force this plant to produce with chemicals, which are offered to you free first by those who are planning to come and buy your plants and your crops.

It's not the right way, first of all, because it puts you in debt. And then all your products are carried away by agents who came and supported you by giving you these chemicals when you had no money. And so if you start farming naturally, with the help of natural manure, with the help of natural pesticides like the urine of a rabbit that is used as a powerful fungicide and insecticide, it creates awareness that there is another way.

But in order to transition to regenerative, the farmers need to be aided, they need to be supported with funds so that they will not be using chemicals to boost their production for the next three years. For at least three years, they will have less yield. And then who will give them food for that time? That's the question. Those are the challenges.

So now in Wandusoa, we developed a project called the Revolving Fund Project. We are seeking funding for that. This fund is going to support farmers to transition to regenerative in a very smooth and nice way. This project is for people who would like to join us in this journey of healing our planet and healing ourselves.

Ashley Hopkinson: How do you think the Revolving Fund Project will help with the transition? Can you share more about why you wanted to create it and what it will do to help people?

Mafah Cornelius Kuta: The Revolving Fund actually works as such; the first 10 farmers decide to go regenerative, subscribe to Wandusoa. Once they subscribe to Wandusoa, we ask them as a condition to be members of the Revolving Fund to get two youths to work with them in their farms. So 10 farmers who are supported with small funds of about \$1,000 for one season per farmer, that farmer is able to work with these two other young people in the farm without crying, without poverty. And then because they're working in 10's they revolve the work on all the 10 farmers' farms. So nobody is discouraged because they are all going to each farm. Only farmers can teach farmers. Farming is not done in any school. It's only on the farm.

That is the challenge that we have for young people and even for the farmers themselves. So this Revolving Fund works as such; so for the first year of harvesting, they don't pay back anything to Wandusoa from the money that we gave as funds because they have not started making any profit. The second year, the same. The third year, they pay back 10%, then next 30% and (after that)they don't pay back anything, they gain back autonomy. By that time, they're working naturally. And so all the profits come back to them and it's their farm.

So this payback of 40% (10% and 30%) serves now as funds for the next 10 farmers that subscribe to the program. So it is evolving from the finance to the working system, and then it is actually regenerative because it is refreshing.

They breathe air. The breathing is in and out. So if you always send out and you're not taking in air, it's not breathing. So they have to interchange and work and learn from each other's farm. And we'll be producing healthy food for thousands of people, and at the same time, healing thousands of hectares of degraded land and that's an exponential progression. So that is the Revolving Fund.

Ashley Hopkinson: What have you learned from the work that you've done with Wandusoa that you think is valuable to share?

Mafah Cornelius Kuta: When I was living in the city, in Douala, like all other young people, I was a customs clearing agent. I fell seriously sick because life in the city is very artificial. I made a harsh decision. I made the decision to go back to the farm, I was still going back and forth to the city. I wasn't actually living in the village 100%. When I went back to the farm, I started eating my own food that I was growing. I gained back my health.

Before that, I learned a very hard lesson. No hospital could ever treat me. Because I went to all the hospitals, I was sick, but they could only say that the machines are not seeing what I'm suffering from. So my psychology and everything failed. So the only consolation was to go to the forest. So there I had my healing and I'm fine today. I was unable to actually drink a bottle of water then, but today I drink water very well, I eat very well. And I think I can say I feel younger than my age.

I've learned a lot from being with nature and eating the food that I plant myself. It's a wonderful experience to be in nature because there is an inner transformation that I don't think one can explain to another person in many words and then the person understands except that you experience it because life is experience.

Ashley Hopkinson: What does it take to convince people of the value of this approach?

Mafah Cornelius Kuta: To me, it's a matter of like-minded people. Because this movement is going on. People know, people are aware, but they are pulled on the other side by the powers that be. Just imagine that people, poor parents on the farms and then a Parliamentarian comes and says, "I'm offering fertilizers for this season." Who will not be happy?

So the issue is like-minded people, conscious governments, conscious organizations, coming together to say, let's make it this way. This is how human beings function. The human being, when he sees light from a life and they know that this life is exemplary, they follow. Like today in Cameroon, we have Samuel Eto'o for football. Whatever he says here, they believe because the world highlighted him in the Champions League. In any other field, apart from football now in Cameroon, who knows Wandusoa? Only those who are already there in the limelight who understand that this is a good thing, can highlight it.

We do our best to communicate our vision, to communicate our mission and to do our work so that one day we can be identified like today. It's a grace for us that somebody is listening to our story because this story was unheard. Like when I was invited by Legrand of the United Nations

Development Programme to join the Conscious Food Systems Alliance. I like the movement. I like to read a lot and see what others are doing and share ideas of viable solutions that don't exploit our planet but really work to be contributors to this living planet.

Ashley Hopkinson: What are some of the indicators that you use to define progress? What helps you to know you're moving forward in the vision for Wandusoa?

Mafah Cornelius Kuta: We have these indicators. We are happy that we're making progress when we see the number of young people who are trained in our regenerative agriculture school and they successfully graduate as regenerative farmers, start their own regenerative farms and are actually making money for themselves while protecting the soil because of what they've learned from Wandusoa. That is first.

Second, the number of smallholder farmers who transition to regenerative farmers and their livelihood and income have increased as such because of producing healthy food, and they're selling this healthy food that is certified. And that they sell with premium prices because it's certified.

Another parameter or indicator of success for us is when we actually see that this dead topsoil that we're working on that has been destroyed by plantation agriculture is now that the land that has become fertile again. This is when we see the earthworms that we used to see when we were children coming out from that ground.

That's when we even see mushrooms that we used to see pushed out from the ground when we were children. But today, because they are using fungicides, there are no mushrooms again. When we start seeing these things, we know that these are the indicators that our work is progressing. In the end, we are the winner and the environment is the winner.

Ashley Hopkinson: What is your vision and your hope for the future? If you have the right support and resources in place, what would you like to see grow and expand as a part of the work that you're already doing?

Mafah Cornelius Kuta: Very beautiful question. I appreciate that question. In the next 10 years, we actually wish to train 10,000 young people to become regenerative farmers with our model. We are collaborating with Agape Food Limited in Uganda. With Agape Food Limited Uganda, we are +1 Awardee for Global Food Security that is offered by the Roddenberry Foundation. We have a collaborative grant program that we've already submitted an application for and are waiting for the outcome of this application (to create) a cross-country collaboration, to help young people to become regenerative farmers in the future. This will hasten our target to train 10,000 regenerative farmers and

support 25,000 small-scale farmers and 100 farmers' cooperative to transition to regenerative agriculture. Our vision is to foster a shift in mindset for a new generation in farming, instilling pride, connection, and awareness of agriculture.

Ashley Hopkinson: That's wonderful Mafah. It's been great speaking with you.

Mafah Cornelius Kuta: Ashley, on behalf of the staff and participants of Wandusoa Organic Cameroon, I wish to express my sincere gratitude for granting us this interview.

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.*