



Rise Up for Africa!

Vanessa Nakate

Uganda

It was meant to be a celebration - an opportunity for young peoples' voices to be heard. World leaders, philanthropists, and celebrities at the Davos World Economic Forum were all impressed with these young climate activists' bravery, as well as their bold statements.

They'd been planning for months. Over twenty had worked hard to develop a statement, challenging their leaders to take specific actions. Some of them traveled to Davos from all over the world. They spoke on panels, attended VIP events and invited to prestigious photo ops with Prince Charles and other dignitaries. They were prominently featured by the media. And on the final day, #FridaysforFuture held a press conference to repeat their demands for concrete actions from the world community.

An Associated Press photographer captured the moment, showing climate activists Greta Thunberg, Luisa Neubauer, Isabelle Axelsson and Loukina Tille standing next to one another, looking very serious. But, for whatever reason, the photo cropped out the only young *black* woman: Vanessa Nakate, #FridaysforFutureUganda's champion. In response, Vanessa posted a powerful message on Twitter: "*You didn't just erase a photo. You erased a continent. But I am stronger than ever.*"

Many times in her young life as an activist Vanessa has experienced Africans being left out of the picture — both literally and figuratively. "At some point it feels like the world just doesn't care," she says. "But Africans have been fighting for climate action for many years now."

The one photo lit up a firestorm. Vanessa received messages from people all over the world voicing their outrage. African activists reached out to her, sharing how they had experienced discrimination, and even overt racism. Their complaints became a global refrain. Eventually the AP took down the cropped photo and released a new one. In that one, Vanessa stands in the middle of her fellow activists — front and center.

It was a small victory, but it provided a broader metaphor for the climate movement. Vanessa quickly seized the moment and leveraged the attention to get the media to focus on the profound role of Africans in the fight against climate change.

To Vanessa, fighting for the climate *must* include Africans — who are contributing the fewest greenhouse gas emissions and yet paying the highest price for climate change. In Uganda, in Madrid for the COP25 climate conference, at Davos, and indeed, around the world, she has made it her mission to make sure African voices are being heard in the global movement. "I personally want to amplify the voices of other climate activists in Africa, because we've always been underrepresented in climate change conversations," she says. And she adds, "I really want to change that."

For Vanessa, finding her own voice as an activist didn't happen overnight, however. Growing up, she tended to keep to herself. As a shy person, she didn't like to be the center of attention. "I really don't open up to people very easily, so it was quite hard for me to walk through the streets and strike for the climate," she says.

Complicating things was the fact that in Uganda, Vanessa didn't have much access to a climate change education. While her teachers would mention climate change as a theoretical problem, the reality of it never really hit home until she was older.

But what she didn't get from her school, she got from her father. As a member of the Kampala Rotary Club, he often went on tree-planting missions to communities across Uganda. This inspired Vanessa as she grew older and became more independent. Curious to learn more, she started watching the news and doing her own research. She was shocked to see the devastation that climate change had already wrought on Uganda and neighboring countries like the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

In the Congolese rainforests, near where Vanessa grew up, trees were already losing their ability to capture carbon because of higher temperatures and long-term drought. In the next 15 years, according to scientists, the trees will be unable to capture any CO₂, which could irreversibly impact biodiversity, and the environment generally. Then in 2019, when the Congo basin – the second largest rainforest in the world, after the Amazon – caught fire, Vanessa saw just how dangerous climate change could be: not just for African countries, but for the entire world.

Vanessa soon began to understand how climate change was affecting her on a personal level. In her own country, which is still largely agricultural, she learned about how droughts have already affected farmers, and how that in turn has impacted her own family's consumption habits. With higher temperatures, farmers can't produce as much grain and other staple foods; what they do produce, they are forced to sell at higher prices to make up for the loss.

"I may not be affected directly, because my parents are the ones who buy the food at home, but there are nearby communities where the less privileged don't even have the ability to get food or access to clean water when these disasters strike," she says.

Vanessa decided that despite her natural shyness, she just had to take a stand. So, in January 2019, after seeing the brave activism of Swedish student Greta Thunberg, she stood outside, in front of the Ugandan parliament building to call for more climate action.

It wasn't until she stepped out of her house that she realized just how easy it was to make a difference. "The moment you step out, I don't even know where the fear goes, but it actually goes away," she says. "The only way to overcome your fears is to confront them."

For months, Vanessa's protest was a solitary one. She carried a simple sign with four lines printed on it:

*"Green love, green peace."
"Beat Plastic, Polythene, Pollution."
"Thanks for the global warming."
"Climate Strike Now."*

At first, she dealt with a lot of hostility. People would yell things at her from their cars, saying that she was wasting her time. After a while, however, others began to join her cause. In Uganda, activists joined her climate protests in front of the parliament building. And other climate activists from around the world invited her to join them in their protests and mobilizations. In all, Vanessa has now participated in more than 60 Fridays for Future marches in Africa countries, and across Europe.

She also joined with other activists to form a movement called Youth for Future Africa. As the group grew, and activists and concerned citizens of all ages and nationalities got involved, they changed their name to the Rise Up Africa Movement. Vanessa hopes that through their activism, people will not just take action for the environment, but they will begin to see other African issues as an equally important part of the puzzle.

For Earth Day's 50th Anniversary in 2020, Rise Up Africa participated in the digital strike for the climate. They filled their Twitter feed with videos of young Africans speaking out about the importance of protecting the environment. And they launched a podcast called "Why Climate Activism," where the hosts speak with climate activists around the world and share tips about how to get involved.

*At first, I thought I was fighting to save a tree.
Then I thought I was fighting to save a rainforest.
Now I realize I am fighting for HUMANITY*
#Earthdaywerise #Riseupmovement #EarthDay2020

Vanessa has increasingly become one of the most well-known African youth climate activists. She's now an official influencer with 207,000 Twitter followers. She was honored to be the first to be featured on the new TV series, *People of the Planet*. Jane Fonda featured her on Fire Drill Fridays.

Now, despite not being allowed to gather in large groups due to the coronavirus pandemic, Vanessa has continued her activism. In fact, the pandemic has shown her even more clearly the importance of people not waiting to step up, step out, and make a difference. "Everything about climate change greatly affects our lives," she says. "It's a matter of life and death. When people say we have 10 years to save the planet, I say no: we have *no* time!"

Sometimes, it falls upon a generation to be great.

Nelson Mandela

Call to Action: Join Vanessa and other youth climate activists around the world in fighting for climate action *now*. Follow the Rise Up Africa Movement on Twitter and listen to the "Why Climate Activism?" podcast to learn what you can do to get involved. https://twitter.com/vanessa_vash • <https://twitter.com/TheRiseUpMovem1?s=20>

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