

Looking back, moving into the future - a conversation with Nigerian environmentalist Nnimmo Bassey

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Our first podcast episode, which coincidentally is a year ender conversation, was with the respected Nigerian environmentalist, activist and poet, Nnimmo Bassey. This conversation speaks to the harsh realities of the year and carefully excavates the structural issues at play in the multiple and intersecting crisis we are facing presently, from the environment, to the global pandemic, the economy and democracy. This conversation does not stop there as Nnimmo continues to remind us that in the midst of the crisis, resistance continues to be very much alive and fertile and we must centre the radical work of grassroots movements across the world in the coming years if we are to fundamentally change the world.

Full transcript:

Ruth Nyambura:

Hello, my name is Ruth Nyambura. I am a Kenyan ecofeminist based in Nairobi and I am the coordinator of the HOME Campaign. The HOME Campaign brings together over 200 organizations across the world that rejects geoengineering and other false solutions to the climate crisis. Welcome to a very nice final year conversation with someone I really respect and I know many of you know who he is. His name is Nnimmo Bassey. I don't know how to describe him because there are too many things to describe. Today, I am only going to describe Nnimmo Bassey the poet. I'll let him introduce himself with the other things. But today, I am having a conversation with Nnimmo Bassey the poet, the person, the activist, who continues to give us a lot of hope in our resistance and hope to dream of a better world. Nnimmo, welcome.

Nnimmo Bassey:

Thank you so much Ruth and thank you for the introduction. I think I am very happy with that introduction. I don't need to elaborate on that, only to mention in Health of Mother Earth Foundation (HOMEF), which I direct, we spend time looking at the root causes of the market environmentalist behaviour, a behaviour we are seeing not just in Nigeria but across Africa and in the world at large.

Ruth:

Thank you so much Nnimmo. I'm just going to start by asking you how has this year been? It's a year that has been dystopian in many many respects. We started off the year hearing about a virus that was so far away and became so close to us. It's fundamentally change how we think about the world, how we are in the world. But it's also a virus that surfaced already existing inequalities - inequalities that you as an activist but also movements across the world have been exposing for years saying that this is a fundamentally unequal world. Economic system fundamentally works for those who are wealthy, for the one per cent and it doesn't work for all of us. So this virus, in many ways, in as much as it has shifted how we look at the world, but it does expose many of what activists like you have been saying for the last many many decades. So how has it been for you this year?

Nnimmo:

It's been a very dramatic year but we've learned never to be taken by surprise by things happening around us. A lot of this happening in the world are contrived by humans - human activities, by systems that humans have built, by corporations who have life when it is pleasantly convenient and not when it means taking responsibility for actions.

On the whole, and as you've earlier mentioned, it's been a very surreal year. And right now, through the covid-19 pandemic and the dramatic responses by governments, it feels like a script, like a fictional script being run by the invisible hands around the world, quite invisible anyway. My conclusion in the early days of the pandemic was that nothing was going to change except we take action to make that change happen. The virus itself provides background for mobilization but it's not going to change by itself.

We've seen people adjusting, people suffering. The system has punished the poor. The system has, deepened inequality as you said, people who don't have space to lay their heads down to sleep are asked to observe physical distancing which is almost impossible. And the social distancing is an insult, really, because it is very colonial. You're asked to keep away or look away from your master, from people, because of social differences. I'm happy that many people prefer to speak about physical distancing when that is possible.

On the whole, I've seen that this year has really exposed the underbelly of capitalism because I see a lot of speculation. The covid-19 pandemic has been a canvas for speculators to really rip off the world. In other ways, we compare - people use the military to lock down people. In Nigeria, in the first few weeks of the lock down, more people would die from security confrontations that from the covid-19 itself. That was very revealing. And then we saw right from before the pandemic came that there were speculators even in the area of the vaccines, that if this happens, we're going to have to invest in development of the antidotes. And as we've seen, if we go into vaccinating the entire population around the world, that is big business. That is really big business. Now, without having to question the vaccine itself, it's good to see that business aspect that we saw international financial institutions quickly shuffling around and telling African countries, global south countries, that, look, we could delay your repayment of the debt. They're not cancelling the debt. We can delay, reschedule your debt and the allow you to use that gap as a help to fight the pandemic. So the pandemic has really really given impact to the oppressors and the exploiters to deepen their grip on the system and to further impoverish and inconvenience a lot of people

around the world. No wonder there's also a lot of suspicions going on.

I think one of the things we have to do this year really, one of the things we've been trying to do this year which we have to do going forward is to critically re-examine the stories that we tell. Review the narratives and point in the direction of the imaginaries. Otherwise, this year is ending in a way that still remains challenging and unclear. But as you said, we have to keep hope alive and that hope must not be something just to make us feel good. It's got to be hope in mobilization, hope in the struggle, and hope through organizing.

Ruth:

Thank you so much, Nnimmo. One of the things, as you said, that was very surprising to see... Of course, there's a very big global movement to cancel debts, especially debts from the global south and it's very interesting to see how the IMF and the World Bank, as you said, they're not cancelling the debts, but saying we can rethink the repayment methods. But at the same time, not just thinking of the repayment methods, we do know that very many countries have borrowed more money in this particular period because of the crisis. But what is interesting is we see that because of the debt issue, across the continent of Africa and across countries in the global south is that the restructuring from the 1970s and the 80s made sure that the public health sector, for example, has collapsed. So you're having a pandemic in countries whose public health sectors literally have collapsed structurally. People like to call it corruption from particular governments but it's larger than that. It's a systemic and structural collapse based on the economic policies or the financial policies that have been pushed across the global south in the last thirty, forty years.

I also want to go back to something that you said in terms of one thing about this year and the continued repression. I know that you've also done a lot of work around handling the bills that are being pushed in terms of GMOs, for example in Nigeria. But we are seeing that even within the crisis that we find ourselves in, market-oriented environmental "so-called" solutions are still being actively pushed which is very interesting to see. You think that in the midst of a pandemic that we'd have less of, sort of like this journey to a death mill that we've always found ourselves in. But there are more and more policies around technofixes, around market schemes that are being pushed around the environmental policies and to solve the ecological crisis that we find ourselves in. What is your response to that, in the sense that we still find ourselves marching towards almost a certain death?

Nnimmo:

It's really very, in a sense, surprising that the system is so resilient in terms of keeping in the wrong track. Over the years, people have come to believe that technology can fix any kind of problem, that whatever is broken can be fixed and whatever needs to be broken must be broken. Nowadays, we've seen that the basic underlying push is for control. It's about the power, about who sets the pace and who benefits from what is going on. So it's not very surprising that those speculators who are developing and selling these technologies, these technofixes, are also investing a lot in having foot soldiers in our nations who promote these false solutions.

Nigeria is a very bad example for Africans, I must say, in terms of modern agriculture, about technology. In 2016 when the first permits were given, they were for genetically modified cotton - cotton that is modified to act as pesticide, BT cotton. It was the same variety that has just failed and was abandoned in Burkina Faso that was being approved across the board in Nigeria. It's quite interesting. It shows how impervious to reality and to the needs of poor farmers who were caught in the trap of cultivating that cotton variety that ended up impoverishing them in Burkina Faso, just across the Nigerian border. It was really dramatic that that happened. Of course we opposed the application, sent objections, but the management agency just ignored everything, ignored the

opposition and approved those varieties.

In 2019, when we thought that we had it bad enough, the agency went to the national assembly in Nigeria and got the law that set up the agency - the Nigerian National Biosafety Management Agency Act 2015 - got it reviewed to now include a page that defines gene drives, synthetic biology and all the extreme techniques that have come into the system. So normally, when we see a law of that nature, we're told that it's meant to protect us but we know that the law is actually to allow permitting, to allow the permission or the permitting of these extreme technologies into the system. That goes beyond just exposing our ecological system to danger, it also exposes everyone to very challenging biosecurity concentrations because we have a situation where, like the genetically engineered mosquitos that were considerations permitted on in Burkina Faso, again, preparing to introduce gene drive mosquitos that would exterminate, hopefully, they think might exterminate the anopheles mosquito and thereby wipe out malaria. "Wipe out malaria" sounds good. Nobody wants malaria. Right now, we have a lot of people dying from malaria than from covid-19 in Africa. But there are sensible, safe ways of tackling malaria which is not being looked into but rather look into technofixes that would open, it's like putting a foot or a shoulder in the door. Once you say this is okay, we can go that way then the flood gate will open and Africa becomes a big field for experimentation of risky technologies, not just in terms of biotechnology but maybe also geoengineering leading to more around us.

Ruth:

You know, one of the things that emerge when I listen to you is that, apart from how countries or continents are being turned into open fields of experimentation, we also see the fact that this is literally, it's going to benefit particular companies, right? It still, things that are considered solutions but is really something that very particular transnational corporations are going to benefit from. And that's one of the things that we keep saying in the HOME Campaign when we work against geoengineering. We keep saying that you have to also look at the financial and economic underpinnings and ideologies that are guiding these so called solutions. Because solutions that actually work to fight against the climate crisis, solutions that make sense in terms of the public health sector, for example. As you said, there are very meaningful ways of dealing with malaria. One thing, for example, would be that you have destroyed the public health system but also the ecology itself has been destroyed, right? So going back, zooming into that aspect of the fact that the same companies that bring us the crises, the multiple and intersecting crises that we find ourselves in are still the companies that are benefiting from the solutions that are being pushed, while the space for civil society and organizations is growing smaller and smaller and smaller. And every single year, we see the fact that environmental rights defenders are getting murdered in such high numbers and it's become a very risky thing to be engaged in - the fights for rights, the fight for justice.

Nnimmo:

Absolutely. We're seeing a situation where, as you rightly said or as we implied, capital has become the god of this world and anything on the altar of capital is permissible by the high priest who are the transnational corporations and the politicians who are performing the roles of the warrant chiefs of the colonial days, as well as slave drivers. This is most unfortunate but is something that we have to keep on, that's why I mentioned in the beginning that our story telling must really continually unveil the roots of these challenges because people are benefitting from misery. They are trading on our blood and sweat. This so called solutions in almost every dimension is just meant to intensify exploitation. As you said, the health systems have been deliberately sabotaged through structural adjustment programs of the IMF and the World Bank over the past decades. And then we are told that something like covid-19 happens due to underlying causes. I did say underlying health causes but it is more than that. It's also the underlying economic factors, underlying political factors, underlying social factors - this is what the virus latches on. The virus, not just the invisible thing but also the politician, it's also the transnational corporations that are the ones who are propagating the many challenges that we have in the world today.

And you know, again, going back to extreme geoengineering, when you look at climate change negotiations, and I think the Madrid conference of 2019, it was very clear that the hands of the polluting industry was very very alive in the drawing up of the playbook of the Paris Agreement, of the implementation processes because they very craftily introduced, and politicians keep announcing this, that technology is a critical part of the solution. And they won't say what technology they're talking about, as if technology, they keep repeating this so that it gets into the brains of everyone, even the unsuspecting campaigners. They say, "look, you cannot overlook this but let's put it on the table." What is this? It's the same way that market environmentalism was introduced to climate negotiations starting from maybe before Kyoto in 1997 or thereabout. We had cases where people say you cannot, nobody could do climate action except if they see national implications or benefits of their actions. Nobody is going to protect nature except nature has a price. They said you can put monetary value on nature and people just say "yes, it's true! We cannot. How do you expect me to protect nature, how do you expect me to take action, to preserve my environment if I cannot see how much that translates to in my bank account?" It just shows the madness, the fact that we've lost our minds, we've lost our sense, we've lost our sense of humanity. We also say that we are part of nature and we're thinking that we are masters of everything around us.

I believe this is what, the kind of thing that we need to really challenge very deeply - that how could somebody say we're going to capture carbon from the atmosphere, and we're not talking about the release of carbon from where nature has kept the carbon. For example, why should keeping fossils in the ground be a cardinal climate action when we know that it's extracting these fossils for the burn in them that is driving the crisis that we're seeing in terms of climate change? You know, everybody goes "well, you got the carbon we have to burn it. There's a lot of money attached to it. Africans, African governments, the politicians, declare that if anybody tells Africa not to extract crude oil and burn it, such people can be said to be unpatriotic and talking nonsense, "so we have to burn it. We have a right to development, we have a right to progress." But we have to define what is development, we have to define what is progress. If progress means alienation from nature, I think that doesn't make sense. We find engineers saying, "well you know we can take carbon out of the atmosphere using more trees." Of course we want more trees, I love trees, we all love trees. We like to sit on the greenery, we like fresh air. But this idea is not just about trees. It's about genetically engineered trees to have enhanced capacity for photosynthesis. It's like saying nature is inefficient. When someone says that nature is inefficient, my first reaction is that that person's brain is inefficient because if you brain is disconnected from nature, you actually need to see a doctor. And the best doctor may be a native doctor, as we call them the sangomas, who would have to get you back into shape.

Ruth:

I like that. Yeah, I like the idea that you're visiting a sangoma. So, Nnimmo, just in conclusion, what is your vision, what is your message for hope as we, this year is almost over, this long train we've been in is almost at the train station. You know, what is your vision? What is your vision for next year? How should we mobilize? What kinds of things should we look forward to? How can we grow our power?

Nnimmo:

Ruth, you ask the most difficult questions. This is what everybody wants to avoid at this time. We go blindfolded into the new year then we remove the blindfold and say wow, this is 2021! But really, one thing I've learned through this crisis in 2020 is the fact that we really, activists need to propagate means of campaigning without being visible. We are grassroots activists. Grassroots have to take the lead. We have to really work to make the grassroots lead, then we'll follow at the middle or at the rear. It became clear to me when we couldn't go to communities for meetings because of the lockdown. That we couldn't just say, okay, communities, you fend for yourselves. We have to stay far away but we have to find a way to communicate, find a way to share ideas. I really see things happening. I saw a lot of changes, I saw more groups, communities coming together, really really pushing their positions for their demands for change. And I think this is something we have to take going forward into next year - the invisibilization of activism, of activists! Not activism. Because we've been too much in the

front, we have to become more invisible and really get things going.

The other thing I believe we have to do, which I think the HOME Campaign is doing very well, is to pick-up these complex issues and break them down into simple language. When those who are the exploiters speak about the changes and the action that should take place, they make it sound so esoteric, so high-level that these are things that you can only do when you wear gloves and wear white gowns and when you're in the laboratory. These are very sensible things that we need to know and take action. And so we need to break these stories down. We have to tell these stories in our own languages. We have to bring back the moonlight tale, so to speak, and sit down in circles and share our experiences, share our doings, recover our memory. I've been thinking about it. We need to recover our memory after we've lost our minds. We need to recover our minds. Go back, look at the concept that really builds communities In Africa, in the global south, in the global north. In every region of the world, we have authentic systems that actually build harmonious solidarity, everywhere in the world. So we need to bring these trends together and begin a new, a system, not really new, of recovering or discovering where the rain started beating us. That's what Chinua Achebesaid in one of his books, where the rain started beating us, we need to ask ... where did this happen? When did we take the turn in the wrong route? And of course understanding the fact that no matter how far you've gone on the wrong route, you're not gonna get to the right destination. This should really help us to re-trace our steps. I think this is what we have to do next year - pick everything, and yes, in going forward, every single thing that we've been told is the way to go. Let's question them. Let's look at the alternatives. And of course we should not be browbeaten when we say there is no alternative. There are many alternatives. Saying no is an alternative in itself, to quote Comandante Marcos of the zapatistas. So if I am able to say no to a thing, I should be confident to keep saying no because that is a real alternative to the nonsense that people are saying yes to.

Ruth:

Thank you so much, Nnimmo. You know, I'm not even going to say any more. I'm just going to pick out from what you said from the zapatistas. One their most famous quotes is that we make the road by walking. That's the only way we do it. So I will take what you said and, you know, coming into the new year is that we only make this radical new possibilities and walls when we do the praxis is ultimately the most important thing. That's how you figure out what your freedom, dreams and ideas are.

Thank you so much, Nnimmo. It's very interesting how the names of the two organizations are, Hands Off Mother Earth and Health of Mother Earth Foundation, and I love that. I love how these two HOME, and home is a beautiful place when you think about the idea of home. It is the foundation, it is the grounding, it is where we become selves and people. So thank you so much, Nnimmo, for not just this conversation but for the radical work that you are doing together with so many activists on the continent of Africa and we hope that everyone who is going to watch this or listen to this is going to be filled not just with dread because the purpose is not to fill people with dread. But the purpose is to radically think about how we can transform the world because nobody can transform the world for us. We transform the world for ourselves. Thank you so much, Nnimmo and take care of yourself.

Nnimmo:

Thank you, Ruth. It's so good to know that HOME is also in your hands, as one of the hands who are holding HOME. So keep on working and best regards for the new year.