



Marginalized Communities Want Their Say but Will Global Powers Listen?

By Carla S. Handley



For the first two weeks in November, world leaders and diplomats gathered in Glasgow, Scotland, for The COP26 Climate Summit. Superpowers like the United States, Russia, China, and Brazil discussed reaching net-zero carbon emissions, curtailing deforestation, and successfully adapting to new energy sources away from coal production.

Recognizing that climate change will bring about catastrophic effects if we do not act globally, the COP26 goals are undoubtedly long overdue.

Addressing climate change requires significant commitments from powerful governments - the most egregious polluters. Once leaders have made their pledges and leave the implementation to their diplomatic teams, it will follow classic top-down models of imposing the majority's will without adequate input from those local communities which may be most affected by the proposed interventions.

While indigenous members worldwide went to COP26 to denounce the ravages of climate change on their traditional ways of life, they also reminded policy architects that implementation without acknowledging local peoples' rights to self-determination over their land and resources is violence perpetrated by global powers.

Though small strides have been made in countries like [Australia](#) and [Canada](#), which have legislated for increased indigenous empowerment, a vast gulf still excludes local communities from decision-making that affects their landscapes, natural resources, culture, and livelihoods.

Over the last five years in Kenya, we have witnessed local communities displaced and disenfranchised through hydroelectric production at the [Gibe Dam project](#), clean energy production at the [Turkana Wind Power Project](#), and [community conservation](#). This has led to anxieties about [what is to come with the 30 by 30 Plan](#) (i.e., 30 percent global land and sea conservation by 2030).

And yet, we know that empowering local communities as the rightful and autonomous land stewards has massive environmental benefits worldwide, as seen in places like the [United States](#), the [Amazon](#), and [Kenya](#). So why does this power gap exist, and what steps must international institutions take to bridge the power divide that leaves local communities out of the decision-making process?

As a white, British-born anthropologist working within the pastoral populations of northern Kenya for more than 15 years, my relationship with these communities has continued to evolve and deepen over time. Before embarking on almost two years of doctoral fieldwork studying resource conflict and cooperation among three pastoral ethnic groups, one of my supervisors advised me to “be friends with everyone but have alliances with no one.”

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At the time, his wisdom served me well as I found my footing navigating contested landscapes, managing local distrust, and maintaining my researcher’s “objectivity” in faithfully recording these pastoral groups’ daily lives and activities. My mission at the time was to witness, record, understand and explain.

Since then, I have transitioned from doctoral student to postdoctoral researcher, independent researcher, and consultant researcher working with multiple universities and INGOs.

As I have become intimately involved with so many friends and families in northern Kenya, my supervisor’s words echo in my ears, and I wonder if they still have meaning for me and what I represent to these communities. The reality of the situation is that I will always be white. I will always be from a colonial power. I will likely be comparatively wealthy and educated. And, for the foreseeable future, I will have more significant opportunities and larger platforms from which to potentially effect change – even in communities that are not my own. It shames me to acknowledge this, and it should shame any majority group working on global issues at the community level.

There are well-documented criticisms regarding the neo-extractive and colonial nature of international development, scientific research, biodiversity conservation, and humanitarian aid within Kenya, particularly at the local community level. Again, one of the fundamental reasons why the power gulf exists is that the system is designed to function precisely in this manner.

The seats of financial power like those at USAID, World Wildlife Fund, or the World Food Programme, reside in the Global North, administrated regionally by white faces and, on the ground, relying on expatriate staff and specialists with the support of a handful of local people to carry out projects on the ground. Given this imbalance in structure, can we really expect anything to change?

And yet, change must come.

Globally, calls for change are reaching a fever pitch among minority groups demanding that the majority recognize gender inequalities, LGBTQ+ protections, social, racial, and environmental injustices, and formalize indigenous rights to self-governance and self-actualization over their lands, livelihoods, and natural resources.

International institutions are feeling pressure to raise critical questions about how they operate in local communities and the impact of their work on these populations. While this realization is an important first step in decolonizing and de-centring the role of top-down institutions, I ask: Are these same institutions prepared to listen?

Listening is a simple act, yet it requires critical self-reflection. Listening requires a compassionate mind-set to understand people where they are. Listening also presupposes that the listener considers the potential for a systemic overhaul of institutional structures that have historically maintained the status quo.

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Global institutions are just starting to ask these questions. Unfortunately, they may not yet be prepared to listen to the responses as they challenge an entrenched system and an intransigent worldview. Listening confronts our concepts of self, acknowledging our relation to others and the potential hierarchies we have ascribed to our value systems. Listening can also shine a light on our failures, missteps, and ignorance that can be painful to acknowledge and may cause frustrations if we cannot see a future where we can fix them.

The terminology used to describe northern Kenya's local conservation and development projects is starting to change, with "community-led" initiatives and "participatory" methods being emphasized. However, these programmes must be examined critically to ensure that community engagement is not mere tokenism, but instead that the centres of power reside with communities writ large to design initiatives, carry out programmes, and wholly benefit from outcomes as they themselves see fit.

This transformation will be a long and arduous process, and often, global funders do not operate on sympatric timescales, while metrics of success can differ between communities and funders. Systemic change will require that funders first listen rather than dictate, support rather than demand.

At the heart of a listening first approach is the humility to know that we, the global majority, cannot understand the complexity of local issues. As outsiders, we do not possess the silver bullet of progress. Simply driving through northern Kenya and passing a series of abandoned electricity poles, broken water tanks, and unstaffed medical clinics bearing the faded names of international funding bodies speaks to this point. Within these local landscapes, precarity exists and interacts at every level, making it impossible to understand outside of the lived experience.

I have been fortunate to form a deep, lifelong friendship with a Borana family in northern Kenya with whom I live when I am in their village, who offer their exceptional research skills, who teach me the value of their rich culture, who named me in their local custom, and most important to me, who share their stories that make us laugh and trust me to share those that also make us cry.

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I am forever grateful for their friendship. In the last 18 months, one tragedy after the next has befallen this family: inadequate medical attention leading to the death of a new-born, the amputation of a young mother's leg due to an untreated infection, the family compound burning down from open-flame cooking, the sudden death of a brother who shouldered much of the family's financial responsibilities from a manageable condition, livestock death brought on by a locust infestation, and an unsupported mental health disorder compounding economic and personal insecurity, made worse by an irregular pharmaceutical supply chain. Indeed, most families in northern Kenya can likely speak of similar tragedies.

These are the lived realities, unseen, unrealized, and unfelt by decision-makers in Nairobi, London, and New York who will decree what is best for these communities' lands, resources, and families in the coming months and years.

Yes, we must indeed all band together to tackle global-scale issues like COVID-19 and climate change. However, implementation at the local level must start with global powers devoting resources towards truly listening to local communities, recognizing the diversity of their needs and concerns, and pledging to upend traditional power dynamics by de-centring their agendas. Local peoples understand their precarity, as their cultural institutions and customs have been forged to adapt appropriately and to meet challenges as they are faced.

International entities often undermine these institutions by privileging their values and superimposing their systems on the local context. It is time for these seats of power to start listening. For the rest of us, I feel it is time to put alliance neutrality aside - for as allies, we may begin to amplify the voices and concerns of indigenous peoples to be heard around the world.

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