



## DEMOCRATIC USE AND PROTECTION OF NATURAL RESOURCES

### INTERVIEW WITH JOSEPH KENSON SAKALA

### YOUTH FOR ENVIRONMENT AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT, MALAWI

Video on YouTube: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=VZwT3-ZPsn0&t=1s](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VZwT3-ZPsn0&t=1s)

#### Transcript English

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My name is Joseph Kenson Sakala and I am working with *Youth for Environment and Sustainable Development*, which is an environmental and youth-based organization. I come from the northern part of Malawi. I was born in Mzimba, in a city called Mzuzu. This is where I was raised, growing up as a young person, until the end of my primary school. That's when I moved from the north and came to the central part of the country in Malawi. That's where I still live until now. I've done my studies here in Lilongwe, I studied environmental sciences and also, I am working right here in Lilongwe. So, in general, I am an environmental and also a climate activist, this is how I identify myself.

*Okay, in the following we would like to talk with you about the protection and the use of natural resources and how this process can be shaped democratically. So, first of all which importance do you see in this topic of democracy and natural resource use?*

The democratic processes to me, I find them to be very vital and also very essential for the protection and the management of natural resources. For instance, we need to coexist with nature, and for that to be achieved we need to embrace the interests and the feelings of different spectrums within the society. Not only to be guided by the few most powerful people because simply they have strong financial standing, but rather it is very, very important that we are moved together and that we protect together in a democratic way, in a process that is enabling, in a process that is engaging, but also in a process that is very open for anyone to be part and parcel of that process. So, I find this to be very important, but also I find it to be a very good way to achieve sustainability, because when we make decisions in a democratic way, most definitely we embrace the different aspects that entail sustainability of natural resources management, so in short, you cannot distinguish sustainability of natural resources from democratic processes. These are quite closely linked.

*Okay, what is your experience, how do the use of natural resources is different within democratic and non-democratic countries?*

It is very different, because, for example, I like speaking using examples. So like, for example in a scenario where, I remember sometime back, we were working in the country with regard to the pollution of plastics. You know there is a lot of pollution that is happening from human activities infringing on natural resources, and, you know, this is a decision that the government permitted those countries, I mean those companies, to be producing the thin

plastic bags. And these have a very bad impact on the environment. And using the democratic process, the committees were mobilized and we were able to hear those constraints. Like, to challenge the production of these thin plastic bags. And we managed to reverse the decision that was already made at the governmental level, you see? Even the members of the parliament approved of it, but because of the strong democratic foundation, right at the communities, we were able to say: "No, this does not represent our interest, this does not represent the sustainability of natural resources, and this does not even embrace the principles of natural resources conservation". So, as such, the community, the people, were able to challenge such kind of an initiative and that initiative was stopped by the courts. So, this is like one scenario where, in a democratic disposition, it's like one a way process: So like one decision, one way, one power. But like in a democratic system, the management of natural resources is a shared power source, it's like a platform where both the people on the grassroots, they still have a say. And even the development that come, people have a say, in a democratic disposition and in a way where the natural resources management, they are managed under the auspices of democratic processes. But in a different setup, where these democratic processes does not apply, what it means is that, once the decisions are made, once those projects are executed, there is nothing that the communities can do, a part of embracing the impacts and the costs of such projects. Whereas in a democratic setup, people are able to express their feelings and also they are able to express their opinions, not only the expression, but for even to take further steps that would lead into some actionable, actions that can lead to stopping the harm on natural resources, but also on the environmental in general.

*Okay. You were already talking about some environmental problems. Can you give one or two specific examples of overexploitation of natural resources and explain briefly what the problem is?*

So, you see, overexploitation of natural resources, in this context we are looking at nature as a living system. It is not a dead system. So, nature as a living system, it means each and every activity that is happening on nature, it has to provide room, a breathing space, a breathing room for nature. In another way, there is this way which we call regeneration. So, you need to enable nature to be able to regenerate in its own self. So, when we talk about overexploitation, it means that human activity, we are mainly focusing on human activity here, because I think it is being the center of focus when it comes to natural exploitation. So, when the human activities have exceeded the level at which nature can regenerate itself, then there we have reached the point of overexploitation of natural resources. Just an example in point that I would like to share with you, right here in Malawi, we have a river that has been heavily polluted by the industrial waste. This river has been heavily polluted by the chemicals, the pollutants from the industries. And because of that pollution, the aquatic ecosystems in those water bodies have been heavily depleted. They used to be fish for example, we used to have different aquatic life, but there is no longer life there! Like, there is not even enough oxygen to support life. So, when we talk about overexploitation in this context, it means it has reached a level where nature itself, the natural resources, cannot regenerate naturally. And in another context, we are looking at exploitation that does not have conservation measures. So people that are just looking at the economic benefit that they gain from for example cutting down trees for different functions like timber. You talk of fire wood, you know, people use it for different ways, construction, and sometimes even there is lot of infrastructure projects that are still creates on those natural spaces. So if we

are only looking at getting our means without looking at the restoration, the conservation aspects, in that way it means that we are compromising the integrity of nature, but also at the same time we are exploiting nature, in a no-return scenario, or in a no-return manner, where nature cannot return or cannot regain its strength.

*So, you've been an activist for many years now, and you have participated in bottom-up movements as well, like you were talking about that you are engaging into the protection of natural resources from a local level. Can you tell us a bit about how your path to the point where you are now have been so far?*

As a student who is just passionate about what is happening around, our surrounding, and also the communities where we come from, so, we've been observing the different natural resources that have been, for example trees that used to be there, like the natural forest that we used to have. And then growing up seeing those natural resources declining over time, and even declining at a higher speed that they used in the past. So, with such kind of observations and, you know, constraints, you try to share your impressions with different people, especially the people in authorities and also the whole generation. And then you don't really get what you want to see. So, everything looks like it's okay, everyone looks like business as usual, everyone looks like it's still taking their time. But like you still feel the urge to do something, like agency, and like you know, when I was in secondary school my voice was in so many ways challenged here in Malawi, because then I was perceived as someone who cannot make a well informed decision, and also cannot influence a public opinion. And I resulted to study environmental sciences at the University of Malawi, which was not even easy, because we don't here normally get the chance to go to university, as spaces are just so limited here in Malawi, and you have to work really hard to even get the chance. So when I finally got it I started a student movement at the university, so it was an environmental movement, specifically we were targeting at empowering the schools because wanting to empower the future generation to think in a different way that the current, but also we did a lot of planting trees. So that's how we started, and then when we started doing these things I realized the problem was much more bigger than even what I thought at first. So like the moment I get on the ground I realize there are many loopholes, that there are many problems than even what I thought before. So I realized we have problems with our policies, we have problems even with the governmental system to really get things done on the ground, we have the problem with different sectors, even the companies, including those companies that come here in the name of helping us. But in the end they also capitalize and take advantage of the resources and exploiting some resources. So, you know, that then brings us to say okay: "I think we have a huge task ahead of us" and in that context, I realized that just a student movement, just university setup, which maybe might weaken after we graduate, would not be enough to confront these challenges. So now we had to move into a national movement, so that we can embrace not only those people who have been in college, but also those people who have never been to school but who are interested to do something about nature, interested to do something about the environment. So that's how we started this organization called *Youth for Environment and Sustainable Development*. So, we are demanding that we are here for the environment but also for sustainable development. So, we are not against development, we are not against economic development, but this development should be done in a sustainable way. And that's what inspired us. But of course, it hasn't been easy, it's been a very tough road, we face a lot of hurdles, and sometimes threats, and at some point, even risking being arrested. But, yeah,

we had the vision to see change of business and also a change of the thinking narrative, but also to get different people active, to get people to do something, to act. In short, that is what I can say.

*So, throughout your time working for the NGO, can you tell us about some positive change that you might have evoked during your time there, can you tell us about some positive examples through which you see some hope?*

Yeah, exactly. Actually, the reason why we are still active is because even out of those pressures we still get inspired by looking at some of the results that we get along the way. So for example, let me share the example, that we manage to protect the aquatic life but also land pollution as a result of these thin plastic bags, and we've also managed to restore some forest that were at the verge of completely being depleted. These are some of the indigenous forests, so when you talk about indigenous forests, it is not just a forest, but it carries the identity of the place, the identity of people. And we managed to protect some of these indigenous forests and we are glad today that people they can still identify themselves with such resources out of that effort, but of course it is not like a one man show, but rather we work together. So, we don't go to the community to suggest for them what is best for them, but rather we work together, so that's the, like it's a people power movement, so, it is a movement that is inspired by the people for the people. So, we put the communities at the center of everything that is happening and that's what has inspired our work and also has inspired our movement. And also, we've managed to gain some victories in terms of empowering people to promote indigenous ways of farming, in agricultural sector, by improving them. Then we are also incorporating practices of protecting nature and natural resources, practices of embracing them. So, we've also challenged some fossil fuel activities like resistant campaigns against the extraction of fossil fuels here in Malawi, but also participated even across the border, like in Zimbabwe.

*You are implementing through your organization democratic processes of civil engagement that the people that are living there are participating in the use of natural resources. Is that something that is seen commonly in Malawi, or is there a trend that you could say that there is being implemented more and more democracy within the use of resources or is it a special case?*

We're coming from more or less the same background from where our ancestors and also our great grand grannies they had this custodian system of managing resources. So under the alignment, what it entails is that the community is the custodian of those natural resources. So, according to that context of the customary, grant system, so throughout our forefathers and those old generations, they have grown up in that system where they had a sense of responsibility not only, not to deplete it, but also to protect it. So, they coexisted with nature and they lived in harmony with nature and they derived a lot of benefits from the natural resources. For example like for those who were in the farming, so it means they could get fodder from the natural resources, they could also get manure from the wildlife animals, but also of course you look at issues to do with like construction, where they get some construction materials from those natural resources. But at the same time, they were also very cautious about the rate at which they utilize those natural resources, to avoid depleting them, to avoid reaching that scenario where you deplete beyond the restoration capacity. So that's the background. And over time, government took the custodian of those

natural resources under the parks and reserves and those protected land and these took away the sense of responsibility from the citizens living there, from the communities. And people regarded these natural resources as a government property and in the first years of course maybe it had advantages, but over time what we've experienced is the continuous and even increasing depletion and destruction of these natural resources because now people they no longer have that sense of responsibility. So, they say: "Okay, this belongs to the government, I don't care." Okay, so like they can deplete the natural resources. For them, they don't really see the direct connection between them and the natural resources. So this is why this kind of approach is perceived, coming back to equation, I am just trying to give you the background, the way of co-managing it, and to democratically managing the natural resources, is not that very common, but it's unique in its own way, because now we are in a disposition where these natural resources, some of them, there are on public land, and some of them are still on customer land. But what now people have lost is the sense of responsibility, the sense of ownership. So now people are looking at natural resources as a resource, but not as their identity, as part of their identity. So, what we are doing is through these democratically and participatory process, is to re-ignite that sense of identity that we are identified by the natural resources that have surrounded us. We identify by those precious resources. As such we need to preserve them, we need to protect them. So, I would say the co-management comes in because we want to instill that sense of responsibility. Because only when you feel responsible, you feel ownership, that's when you can take full control but also you can take good measures to protect that resource, which a few, you are part and parcel, you are responsible.

*Related to this, what is your vision for a sustainable future in your country?*

That's a nice but also a difficult question. My ambition and my desire are to see my country, Malawi, being able to fully operate on a zero-carbon economy, because all these issues that we are talking about, they are arising from the economic aspect of development. So, by attending a zero-carbon economy, that would entail divesting from the fossil fuel investment and to renewable energy. So, I would love to see that day when we totally shut down those fossil fuel investment and we promote the investments in renewable energy. I would love to see that future where people they have the green jobs, green entrepreneurship, you know, we should tap into that potential, we should tap into those opportunities. Even being able to have local industries under those renewable energy and without really emitting carbon dioxide. So that is the kind of future that I would love to see, but also more important, a future when people that have the environmental consciousness. You know we have lost the environmental consciousness. We have lost our consciousness towards nature. And this is what we need to regain. And that is exactly why we need to engage the people. We don't need do impose but rather we need to engage them. They have to be part and parcel of the process, they have to understand the process, they have to own it. And by owning it, we should not only include an informal, scientific approach, but also integrate the indigenous knowledge, the indigenous tools. And then fuse that together. Wow, that looks like a very beautiful future for me.

*Is there something you would like to tell anybody who is listening to this interview?*

Exactly. I would like to say that we need to realize and recognize that nature is valuable, it's valuable. And it is insane that for so long people have perceived the harm of nature as

valueless. But it carries great value, and each and every activity that hampers on the natural resources, that activity has to be taken to account. It has to be taken to account. The same as those activities that hamper on the economic processes of the country. That's one thing. And the second thing: We should realize that the only true way to attain sustainability is by incorporating the democratic processes into natural resources' management. It has worked here in Malawi, it has worked at a small scale, and we believe it can also work at a large scale.

*I would ask you to finish a sentence. The first one is:  
My wish for a democratic and sustainable world is...*

My wish for a democratic and sustainable world is that people put aside their personal interest and they put nature at the center of the interest. Because only then we can attain true economic, social and environmental development.

*And the next one:  
Become active for sustainability and democracy yourself, because...*

So, become active for democracy and sustainability yourself, because that's the only opportunity we have to safeguard the natural resources and to end the dramatic climate change, that has really affected life across the world and different things. So, the time to act is now, and we must do it right now.