



MOHAMED OKASH: TACKLING CLIMATE CHANGE IN SOMALIA

Among the many challenges that Somalia is grappling with on its path to peace and stability is climate change.

Climate shocks have greatly impacted Somalia as it deals with other challenges on the security and humanitarian fronts. They often add another layer of complication to already-difficult issues.

However, there is growing recognition among Somalis that they themselves need to do more and soon.

One of those Somalis is Mohamed Okash.

The Mogadishu native is an educator, researcher and innovator. He is also the founding director of the Institute of Climate and Environment (ICE) – a think tank at SIMAD University set up to tackle climate, environment and development challenges in Somalia.

"I firmly believe that sustainable development is not just a lofty goal but a necessity for our survival," he says. "Through collaborative efforts and innovative solutions, we can ensure that no one is left behind in Somalia's journey towards a sustainable future."

In some ways, Mr. Okash's path to ICE comes as no surprise, and is a testament to his drive and the power of education to change lives and communities.

Beginnings

Mr. Okash was born in Mogadishu in 1992 and completed his primary and secondary schooling there, amidst the civil war. From a young age, he was aware that education was an avenue to a better future and he threw himself into his studies.

He went on to study at Mogadishu University, from where he received a Diploma in Education in 2012, and he embarked on a teaching career at local high schools.

"I started teaching at schools out of passion, as I used to teach my siblings at home. Being the eldest of seven siblings, assuming early leadership responsibility within the family, teaching them how to write, read, and think critically brought me joy and imbued meaning into investing in human capital cultivation and development," Mr. Okash says. "This led me to pursue a Diploma in Education, specializing in teaching."

From there, he went on to undertake a bachelor's degree in public administration at SIMAD University in 2015.

He took his education, and that of his fellow students, seriously. In addition to his studies, he also became a student leader,

advocating for changes to improve the learning experience for his fellow students.

"Throughout my undergraduate studies at SIMAD University, I frequently served as a class coordinator and on the inaugural faculty election board, which introduced the university's first student election and student government bodies aimed at representing and serving students," Mr. Okash says.

"I did this because I believe in empowering fellow students, ensuring that their voices are heard, and their needs are met," he adds. "And it helped me develop my leadership skills!"

He followed this with a master's in development studies from Kampala International University in 2018.

Looking back, the 30-year-old says there was always a unifying thread to his educational goals: "All my qualifications and educational pursuits were and are aimed at understanding public affairs to enhance the quality of life for communities."

Social enterprise

Mr. Okash's leadership endeavours did not remain in the classroom.

In September 2018, he co-founded a community-based, youth-led non-governmental organization called SDGs252 – later rebranded as Rays Initiative – which aims to empower Somali communities on sustainable development through

capacity development, policy advocacy, and development monitoring.

"Rays Initiative is now a member of the United Nations Sustainable Development Solutions Network and implements developmental programmes, including the localization of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Somali into the Somali language, and the Rays Leadership Programme, which is a career and leadership fellowship for teenagers and youngsters to navigate career paths while in tertiary education," he says.

The SDGs are a universal call to action to end poverty, protect the planet and improve the lives and prospects of everyone everywhere. They were adopted by all UN Member States in 2015 as part of the 2030 Agenda, which sets out a 15-year plan to achieve the SDGs.

International representation

The young activist's path started to take on an international hue, with his potential and efforts being recognized abroad.

In 2019, he was selected to take part in the Léo Africa Institute's Young and Emerging Leaders Project (YELP).

According to its website, the Uganda-based institution seeks to empower "young and emerging leaders in Africa to success, live high-impact and fulfilled lives," and the YELP project "picks individuals who are clearly on the path to success and empowers them with knowledge and skills to navigate through the pitfalls of success and dangers of leading change."

In 2020, after a highly-competitive application process, he was selected as a participant in the Generation Change Fellows Program (GCFP), established by the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) and the University of Southern California's Center for Religion and Civic Culture.

The GCFP focuses on young leaders from conflict-affected and fragile countries and aims to foster collaboration, build resilience and strengthen capacity as they transform local communities.

"Even the most dedicated young leaders face challenges and burnout as they work to create change. They often work in isolation, or lack the knowledge, skills, and resources to maximize their efforts and increase their personal resilience," USIP notes on its website.

"USIP developed the Generation Change Fellows Program," it continues, "to counter this isolation through a family-like community of practice, to augment the existing knowledge and skills of participants through mentorship and training, and to partner with them in community-led peacebuilding initiatives."

"Being chosen for the Fellows Programme meant a lot to me – it has opened doors to incredible opportunities, networks and leadership development," says Mr. Okash.

As could be expected given his drive and trajectory, Mr. Okash – at a young age – has become something of an old hand at representing his country in international fora, and especially its youth.

He is very aware of the responsibility he bears in this respect.

"Somali youth, the primary stakeholders in the nation, are facing escalating threats to their current and future prospects due to climate change, endangering all facets of their lives," he says. "It is imperative to empower them, facilitating their participation in co-creating their future by utilising their creativity, innovation, energy, and aspirations for a sustainable Somalia and beyond."

According to the World Population Prospects, produced by the UN Department



of Economic and Social Affairs, Somalia's current population is close to 18 million, with some 70 per cent being of them under the age of 30.

Mr. Okash's representational duties saw him attend the World Economic Forum's Annual Meeting in Davos in 2022 and, in 2023, the UN Conference of Least Developed Countries in Doha and the climate summit known as the Conference of the Parties (COP) to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), which took place in Dubai and was known as COP28.

"At these global gatherings, I have witnessed firsthand the power of collaboration and the urgent need for collective action – Somalia may face unique challenges, but our aspirations for a better future are universal," Mr. Okash says.

Teaching

In 2020, Mr. Okash joined SIMAD University, where he served as a senior lecturer and as Head of Innovation at its innovation project, known as SIMAD iLab.

"Part of my role included disrupting and designing social innovation programmes to innovate solutions among emerging social entrepreneurs that align with the Global Goals, mentoring and coaching micro-, small- and medium-sized enterprises and startups, and building an ecosystem that challenges traditional job creation by fostering an entrepreneurial, design, and tech community that innovates for SDGs and Somalia's National Development Plan," he says.

"To boil this down to its essence, in the Somalia context, this was about promoting lasting development by empowering local communities and encouraging innovation and collaboration," he adds.

In his role lecturing at SIMAD University's Faculties of Social Sciences and Management Sciences, he taught classes, supervised students' research and



mentored them as they pursued their professional careers.

While he was content with his work, he started to become aware of the looming and ever-growing threat posed to Somalia by climate change.

Somalia is the most climate-vulnerable nation and the least prepared to tackle climate shocks. Over the years, the country had problems of severe droughts, famine and floodings.

According to a Climate Risk Profile by the consultancy Weathering Risk, temperatures in Somalia will rise between 1.4 – 1.9 °C by 2030 compared to pre-industrial levels. The annual number of very hot days – with daily maximum temperature above 35 °C – is also set to increase, with central Somalia being the worst affected. Added to this, overall water availability per capita could halve by 2080, underlining the acute need for long-term climate and conflict mitigation strategies.

On ICE

After careful consideration and much consultation, Mr. Okash decided to put a long-gestating plan into place in January 2023: the creation of ICE, which has quickly established itself as a leading environmental think-tank focused on tackling the climate crisis in Somalia.

“We need to rethink how we farm, transport, build infrastructure and manage our resources, as well as reorient the mindset of people towards the environment – we advocate for informed and evidence-based policy making through research to design bottom-up policies and programmes that build resilience and improve climate adaptation in Somalia,” he says.

ICE currently has four full-time staff members, two interns, two advisory board members, and five research fellows, in addition to a group of student volunteers known as GreenChampions.

Central to its mission is the exchange of ideas and knowledge through stakeholder engagement with academics, policymakers, and practitioners. These interactions aim to inform policy processes and inspire innovative solutions tailored to Somalia's unique context.

“We offer capacity development for communities, we disseminate knowledge to raise people's awareness of these issues as well inform policy-making processes to build climate resilience, reduce vulnerability and enhance the adaptive capacity of

Somalia so that it's a place where people prosper, and our planet is protected,” Mr. Okash says.

Over the past 18 months of its existence, ICE has worked with various partners, including governments, the private sector, communities, civil societies and the United Nations.

In 2023, ICE signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Federal Ministry of Climate Change and Environment to partner on research, capacity-building and raising awareness on climate and environmental issues. Last year, it collaborated with the United Nations Assistance Mission in Somalia (UNSOM) to form a so-called ‘climate change cluster,’ a platform to bring all the stakeholders that have shared interests in climate and environmental issues.

“We believe in the power of knowledge and collaboration to drive meaningful change,” Mr. Okash says. “Through our partnerships with governments, the private sector, communities, and civil society, we work to build local capacities and foster resilience in the face of environmental challenges.”

UN and environment

On the issue of climate change, the United Nations in Somalia has been actively working with the Federal Government of Somalia to advocate for increases in funding for climate adaptation for communities affected by climate shocks.

“We are doing this through policy, technical advice and project and program support to both Federal and Member states. Together we are delivering large programs such as the ‘Jowhar Off Stream Development Programme’ to help drive climate security through water, food and human security and through working with communities

to support adaptation to the changing world,” says the UN Climate Security and Environmental Advisor to Somalia, Christophe Hodder.

UNSOM is one of the world body's few special political missions to incorporate climate-related language into its mandate and has been leading the way since 2020, when it became the first mission to deploy an environmental and climate adviser – Mr. Hodder – dedicated to working on the impact of climate change on the country's security.

The UN Mission also provided the training for the Institute's ‘GreenChampions’ on the nexus between climate change and human rights. It aimed to deepen their understanding of the impact of climate risks on fundamental human rights and principles.

“It's young Somalis like Mr. Okash who have inspired the United Nations in Somalia to better incorporate climate action and youth perspectives into its programming and advocacy, and also strengthen engagement with academic institutions such as SIMAD, a key way to reach youth but also future policy-makers,” says the Chief of UNSOM's Human Rights and Protection Group, Kirsten Young.

Ultimately, the responsibility for the response to climate change in Somalia will fall on Somalis, and Mr. Okash is fully prepared and committed.

“As the founding director of the Institute of Climate and Environment, I have chosen to dedicate my life to pioneering initiatives that bridge the gap between climate change, sustainable development, and social innovation in Somalia,” he says. “In the journey towards sustainability, every step forward matters, and together, we can pave the way for a brighter, greener future for future generations.”

