

Championing a Livable Future

TARIQ AL OLAIMY: If you turn on the TV, check Twitter, or follow the news in any other way, you'll see that climate change is happening all around the world. Whether it's wildfires. Hurricanes. Floods. And other natural disasters, it's clear that there is no more time to waste in the fight against climate change.

Nisreen ElSaim has made it her life's mission to combat climate change. But she has managed to blend two worlds: that of youth-led grassroots movements. *And* policy level change. All while sitting at the same table as heads-of-state from all over the world. She is now the chair of the UN Secretary General's Youth Advisory Group on Climate Change - and has been turning heads with her powerful speeches.

During Climate and Biodiversity Week at Expo 2020 Dubai, Nisreen discussed the importance of having youth lead policy change in the fight against climate change.

I'm Tariq Al Olaimy, and this is "People and Planet."

A podcast from Expo 2020 Dubai's Programme for People and Planet, where changemakers from all over the world breakdown what it will take to create a sustainable future for our planet.

[INTRO STING]

TARIQ AL-OLAIMY: So Nisreen, you are an advocate for the transformative power of young people. You are a champion of a livable future. Your work is driven by a deep, moral obligation towards people and the planet. Your climate action is grounded in the principle of equity and you're someone who's deeply attuned to

the state of the earth every single day, and what it will take to chart a path towards a climate safe future for all generations. And you're someone who I have had the pleasure of meeting a number of times on your comment advocacy journey. I've been inspired every single time.

Welcome Nisreen, it's an honor to have you here with us today.

NISREEN EISAIM: Thank you very much, Tariq. The honor is mine and I'm equally happy to be here with you today.

TARIQ AL-OLAIMY: Thank you. And I'd love to start from the beginning. If you could tell me a little bit about your upbringing and how the environment around you inspired you to take this path in life, both as a child and a young teen going up in Khartoum, Sudan.

NISREEN EISAIM: Actually, Sudan is one of the countries that have a lot of problems and a lot of challenges, let me say, from different perspectives. One of them is, of course, environmental and climate change, as it's one of the very vulnerable countries to climate change.

But, my start in climate action was a bit different. It was more of a technical start than a local position or the local engagement in the community. I started university as a freshman, ten years ago. As I was saying to some people, it's my tenth anniversary in climate action and environmental work. And I was a freshman at university and the University of Khartoum had many problems - mostly political. So we used to close a lot. And in one of the closures, I was thinking of how to actually link physics - which was the thing I was doing at that time - with political

science, because most of the problems we were facing at that time, especially as students, were political problems.

And the first time when the university closed, I used Google a lot and I discovered something called “science diplomacy,” which is using science in diplomatic discussions. And the two biggest topics in science diplomacy was actually water because people, countries, share water normally. The Nile Basin’s eleven countries, for example. And if we counted how many countries there are in the Mediterranean. And so there’s a lot of shared responsibilities, but also shared interest in water in different countries. So there’s a lot of science included in that topic, but also a lot of diplomacy and a lot of political discussion.

And the second topic was of course climate change. And at that time, I could relate more to climate change of the reality around me than the water. So I actually moved into that sector, but it was mainly trying to find a way of linking two passions together, which is natural science and human science.

TARIQ AL-OLAIMY: Thank you. And was there also a sense of your upbringing with your family, that they also had an interest in environmental issues. Or were you the first person in your family to take interest in this area?

NISREEN EISAIM: No, actually I wasn't the first person. And it happened very strangely, I think, in the second year of my volunteerism with the Sudanese Environment Conservation Society. I had my membership card with me. So my grandma asked me “what is this?”

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NISREEN EISAIM: So I decided to explain about the environment and the organization and the work we do and stuff. So she said: "Okay, okay, nice to hear that." And then she went to her room and I was hearing her looking into something like *sh-sh-sh-sh*, and then she went out holding something.

I think she got it from a bag or something. And she showed it to me and it was her membership in the same organization in the eighties. I was like: "*whaat?*" And then she told me that my mother was also a volunteer in the late nineties, early twenties. So I was the third generation female to actually be an environmental activist and luckily in the same organization also. And it was amazing because then I realized that maybe it wasn't a coincidence to have this environmental awareness inside of me and that maybe I was raised like this. So yeah, sometimes it's your destiny that takes you to places, but also sometimes how you raise the kids to grow up takes them to the same destiny without them knowing, or you even knowing it.

TARIQ AL-OLAIMY: Beautiful. And you've walked and followed in the footsteps of your ancestors indeed, as you said, embarking on a journey of climate action from 2012 - exactly 10 years ago. Your destiny has brought you to an experience that has spanned working at the grassroots level all the way to the policy level. Was there a moment in your climate activism journey where you decided to enter into the political space of climate negotiations?

NISREEN EISAIM: I noticed that very little change happens when only the people on the ground change stuff where the government is not changing the policies or the legislation. And especially with climate change, because we are talking about global emissions.

So I said, okay, then this is a bigger problem, and even if we continued working only in our communities, it will not be solved and we will be damaged anyway. We still suffer from floods, we still suffer from burning summers. We will also be suffering from less rain or more rain. So I was thinking about how to make an influence on the bigger level. And of course multilateralism and climate change negotiations was the door to actually do that.

TARIQ AL-OLAIMY: And what is it that you learned from being in the spaces that are behind closed doors, that the media can't see? What have you learned about being in those kinds of rooms with your fellow delegates?

NISREEN EISAIM: So unfortunately there is a triangle. I call it the triangle of conspiracy. [laughs] And I mean that there are three things that actually control and are holding us back from making progress.

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NISREEN EISAIM: Number one: oil and gas corporations and companies and the private sector. Number two: interest. Number three: money. And unfortunately the oil and gas sector corporations, companies and private sector have a lot of influence and a lot of money and a lot of power in many places in many sectors. So political will alone, unfortunately, without a plan B to actually support the economy. Political will, will not be enough. People must be aware that if we all want to shift to zero emissions, then there's a lot of luxuries that we are having right now that we should let go of. And I'm not talking about basic life. I'm talking about extra things that we don't, we don't need.

We don't have to have twelve pairs of shoes. We don't have to have twelve pairs of jeans. We don't have to have a dozen suits. So when we have the political will, when we have a supportive private sector and when we have an aware community that is ready to actually let go of the luxuries that we don't need, this is the only moment where all of the negotiations will actually reach a place.

But now, if the people are ready to let go, political will is not there. If people are ready to give and political will is there, the economical support and private sector is not there. If the private sector agrees, the politicians will back up. So there's always something missing. And unfortunately with that, having all of these things together, at some point in some place, it would be very hard to make a mega change in mega steps instead of the very small and little, and very slow progress that we're making right now.

TARIQ AL-OLAIMY: Thank you, that's a very powerful framing. And at COP 26, the UN Climate Change Summit, which took place in Glasgow last November, you also fiercely made yourself heard in a room of mostly older male heads-of-state.

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NISREEN EISAIM: Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen with all titles respected and reserved. My Name is Nisreen Elsaim, I'm from Sudan. But today - and to make it easier for Mr. Prime Minister of Italy - my name is 47 percent of the world population. So anytime you meet me, don't say Nisreen. Just say 47 percent and I'll understand. This 47 percent is only for the people who aged between 15 and 29. We are not yet talking about the people aged 30 to 35, we are also not talking about children, which is by far more than this number.

Back to the interview with Nisreen Eisaim:

TARIQ AL-OLAIMY: And you held up a sign with 47% written on it in bold letters. And you asked those leaders to call you 47%. Can you explain to our listeners what you meant with this and what was the message you're trying to send?

NISREEN EISAIM: The basic idea was that I didn't want them to talk to me as Nisreen because I'm a single person. I can go outside and die at any moment. I can maybe leave the sphere and do something else in my life or anything can happen. I wanted to look - I wanted them to look at me as the youth representative. To understand how much population of the world I'm representing at that moment.

And everything I was saying wasn't coming from me as an individual. It was coming from the young people that actually were demonstrating outside or joining the negotiation room in different capacities other than like either civil society or with their country delegation. And I was also representing, moreover, the young people in their villages, in their neighborhoods who are suffering everyday from the climate change or will suffer one day from climate change.

And most of the leaders who I had in the room were leaders who came through democratic processes. And these democratic processes say that I elect X to actually do what is in my benefit. And if the benefit of more than 60 percent of the planet's population is actually stopping climate change and stopping emissions. And they are all going against the will of this majority population, then they have to understand they are not democratic anymore.

TARIQ AL-OLAIMY: Expo 2020 has made sustainability, climate and biodiversity a core component to its priorities. And I want to roll back to your Expo 2020 talk last October where you mentioned your disappointment with the 2015 Paris Agreement on Climate Change, after realizing it was just a quote “ink on paper.”

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NISREEN EISAIM: We just discovered that it doesn't matter how many accords or many agreements we have. If we do not really start actions and start implementations, all of these agreements will just stay on paper. And at the end of the day, it won't even be worth the ink that it was written with. As a young person who doesn't feel young anymore, we are very much obliged and burdened by thinking of the future, by thinking of the environment, and by the thinking of the planet. I really think that it's really high time, for all of us, not only to consider young people as experts, but also to really stop being kids in thoughts and being adults in actions.

Back to the interview with Nisreen Eisaim:

TARIQ AL-OLAIMY: I wonder what key takeaways from that message do you hope that both young and elder audiences took from it?

NISREEN EISAIM: Well, I think one of the biggest winnings that we are having and we are witnessing every day is: more and more people are joining the fight against climate change. More and more people are starting to actually get aware of what's happening around them. And not only that, but actually taking actions to stop that.

Also more and more young people, specifically, are pushing - not only demonstrating outside - but also in a very smart and pragmatic way and putting their needs and their priorities to their representatives in the parliament, for example. To the ministers of youth, and ministers of education, and the ministers of environment of their countries. But also sometimes head-of-states.

It's actually the human capital that are joining this movement against climate change - it's one of the biggest winnings. I remember in 2012, barely three or four people around me in Sudan, young people that were aware of the problem and talking about it. And then two years later, we became ten, two years later, we became twenty. I mean, this increase, this continuous increase in number of people who are joining means that very soon, the whole planet will be - again its a few number of people. And I don't think that these few number of people will last in front of the whole population. I hope we reach that point soon enough because unfortunately we are also in a race against time.

TARIQ AL-OLAIMY: And Nisreen, as you think about the future of the fight to overt the climate emergency, a lot of work in the political space is about balancing action with compromise and diplomacy.

And I wonder with such a gravity of consequences, not just in the future, but in the current, the present. How do you manage to stay both true to your mission whilst also finding common ground with politicians and negotiators of all backgrounds and coming from all countries?

NISREEN EISAIM: There are always red lines that we cannot cross.

And of course compromising means delaying and using technicalities that will allow us to find other spaces maybe next year, maybe next conference and stuff like this, but it doesn't mean that we lie to ourselves and we lie to our partners in discussions and say "wow, this is well done" and clap for them and then just pretend that everything is good. No, no, no. Compromising means that we don't get everything today. But we get some today and some tomorrow, because as you mentioned, some countries don't have the privilege of compromising. Some countries are losing now. Actually some countries lost long ago. And some countries, some contexts, some communities don't even have some things to compromise with. They already lost everything or are on the way to losing everything.

So there's a very fine line between lying to yourself and being happy with whatever you get. And by being strategically technical and maybe delaying some of the winnings for tomorrow. Because as I mentioned, we are not doing this for our individual interests. I'm doing this for the countries that are actually almost disappearing.

TARIQ AL-OLAIMY: And this year, the UN climate change summit COP 27 will take place in Egypt where young people make up the majority of the population, followed by COP 28, which will take place in the UAE.

I wonder, where do you see hope and optimism towards real, tangible progress moving forward in the next year and also in the years to come?

NISREEN EISAIM: I think losing hope is a privilege that we don't have. I always tell young people when I feel that they're down a little bit, I say, okay, let's lose hope.

And let's all go to The Bahamas and stay on the beach until we all burn out. And then they start laughing. I mean, they say: "Nisreen, of course, we can't do this, we can't just sit and chill and wait for the world to burn out." Then I said: "okay, then why feeling down?" I mean, we know that our fight is not easy. We are fighting not only hundreds of thousands of corporations in the oil industry. We are not fighting lifestyles of 7 billion people on this planet. We are not only fighting against 196 or 197 world leaders. We are not only fighting nature, or what we did to nature. We are fighting years of misuse of natural resources. We are fighting something that is not very much easy to actually undo.

So losing hope is not really something we can think about. It's not something we can do at any point. It's not even something we can talk about between ourselves because we have a bigger case and we all know what we are going through. But there is always a difference between losing hope and being critical, then criticizing what's happening and seeing how much we achieved is always welcomed. If a country decided to cut 10 percent of their emissions by 2030, then we can simply say, this is not enough, 10 percent of your emissions will not make any difference. So don't give us small peanuts and ask us to be happy about it, because this is not our target. We know our target and we know why we want this target.

So there is a difference between climate anxiety and between climate reality. We have to keep the climate reality otherwise we will just be telling ourselves lies and false hope. I mean, hope doesn't come with empty promises, or promises that are less than needed. Hope should always come with actions and come with commitment, that we will actually reach the target by the year that we set, because otherwise we will be in an irreversible situation.

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TARIQ AL-OLAIMY: Absolutely. And maybe a final note. Nisreen, you are of course, the chair of the UN Secretary General's Youth Advisory Group on Climate Change. And you work day to day with young people. What is the message you'd give to young people actually in the Middle East and North Africa, where the focus will largely be on those communities in a few years as COP comes to the region?

NISREEN EISAIM: My suggestion or advice will be: get involved. Getting involved doesn't mean you have to fly for COP or attend international meetings or something like this. No. Getting involved can be simply do a small presentation to your school mate, if you're in school. It can be a very nice talk to the neighborhood in one of the days. It can be a discussion with your football team. It can be planting trees campaign in your neighborhood. It can be anything. It doesn't matter really how small you think it is, but start and get involved and things will get bigger and bigger. It's simply the snowball effect. It starts small, but then it grows, it grows, it grows, as more people are joining, and more initiatives are being created. Things start small and then they get bigger. So don't be afraid. Don't waste time. Just get involved in anything around you and the impact will double itself.

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TARIQ AL-OLAIMY: Amazing. And we honor the generations of environmentalists and climate activists that you come from. And we also honor all the sparks and the work that you're doing on the screen to really nurture the next generation of climate activists and environmentalists. And we are there with you in that race against time, running with you. And we look forward to following your journey in the coming years.

People and Planet
Episode 07: Championing a Livable
Future



Thank you so much for speaking with us today and for your presence.

NISREEN EISAIM: Thank you, Tariq. Pleasure's all mine. And I'm equally happy to be here with you today.

TARIQ AL OLAIMY: People and Planet is an official podcast of Expo 2020 Dubai. Creating a sustainable future for our planet, together.

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