

### **1. Tell me a little about yourself.**

My mum gave me my name for a reason she had never foreseen. I always joke about my name, which just sounds like “eating.” Not only do I enjoy eating, the “healthy-for-you-and-healthy-for-the-planet” type of real food, I also love cooking. I have studied, interned, and lived in the U.S., India, Denmark and now Kenya. The diversity and richness of the world’s social and natural landscapes keep me continuously exploring, mingling, and re-creating. Embracing an open identity has allowed me to appreciate different perspectives, values, and meanings.

### **2. What is your background and current field of study? What made you decide that you wanted to enter in the field of climate change and energy?**

I majored in environmental studies, focusing on the relationship between environment and development, and between environment and energy. I also have a minor in international relations.

The first campus-wide summer reading drew me into the interdisciplinary approach of the environmental studies program at my college in general. I signed myself onto campus environmental activism clubs when I entered college. I met some young Chinese climate activists during the PowerShift 2009 conference in the U.S. and have since volunteered at China Youth Climate Action Network.

My interests in energy originated from a class I took that “peered into the future” and explored several forms of renewable energies in both commercial use and development stage. From then on I have devoted much of my energy studying the technologies as well as the multi-faceted challenges in implementation. Most currently, I have been doing research on improved cook stove dissemination using carbon finance in rural Kenya. I examine the emergence of carbon finance on improved cook stove projects against the background of decades of governments and development agencies’ efforts to promote them throughout the developing and rural world. Using a political ecology framework, I seek to understand how carbon finance enables the involvement of local youth organizations in the highly politicized issues of stove dissemination. The project offers valuable opportunities for social and economic empowerment for local communities, especially for women and it also provides employment for young people. But the local host organization also faces challenges in fulfilling the carbon registration steps, ensuring the adoption of new cook stove, and equity of benefits distribution.

### **3. What influenced or motivated you to work in Africa? Can you tell me some of your experiences working in Africa?**

The beginning of my affairs with Africa was a rather coincidental one. Interested in both environment and international relations, I landed an internship last year with the United Nations Environmental Program, which happens to be headquartered in Nairobi, Kenya. I stayed there for the summer and fall of 2010, taking a semester off school wholeheartedly. The other half of the story started when I did a study abroad semester in Denmark before the summer in Kenya, after attending the UN climate conference in

Copenhagen as part of a Chinese youth delegation. In Denmark, I worked with Energy Crossroads' local chapter and learned about its collaboration with several youth organizations in Africa and Southeast Asia to promote energy-efficient cook stoves. I became friends with members from the African Youth Initiative on Climate Change (AYICC Kenya). They introduced me to a slew of youth-led community-based organizations across Kenya that are engaged with improving cook-stove dissemination. I was thoroughly impressed and inspired by the work some of the local youth groups do, notably the Tembea Youth Center for Sustainable Development in western Kenya and Ruiru Youth Center for Empowerment Program. The former has been laboriously fulfilling steps to register their cook-stove project with Gold Standard for voluntary carbon credits. The latter, with its enterprising young director, takes a different approach and restlessly builds green houses and now energy briquettes, in addition to cook stoves on a social business model.

Out of these field visits and interactions with my fellow AYICCs, together around eight of us started the Rural Energy Enterprises Network, or REEN. It was born out of the need to base AYICC's advocacy work off Africa's local realities, especially concerning youth and climate change. It works to bring together innovative ideas and best practices demonstrated at the local grassroots and pollinate flowers at other suitable places. It aims to facilitate local groups to translate ideas into activities by pooling together both technical and financial resources. We have a committed and diverse core team, comprising young professionals and university students specializing in environmental law, financial management, strategic planning, and environmental education. I am proud to work with my resourceful fellow young Kenyans. I have always felt at home working with my colleagues, staying in local families for my research and walking on the busy streets of Nairobi.

When I went back to school from the Cancun climate conference, I couldn't wait to start a new semester to learn everything I could about Africa. Your love grows with your knowledge about it, says Da Vinci. This year I returned to Kenya and conducted research on the benefits and shortcomings of carbon financed cook-stove project. I wanted to rekindle the inspirations and enthusiasm that I had from my equally energetic and resourceful young Kenyan friends and build the knowledge foundation upon which REEN delivers its vision.

#### **4. What is your understanding of Climate Justice for Africans?**

It is a troubled one. The carbon financed cook stove project goes a long way to demonstrate the dilemma. The energy efficient cook stove Tembea promotes was based off GIZ and Practical Actions' decade-long research, and ideally is 50% more efficient in firewood use than the traditional open fire three stone stove.

Often the images of poor Africans destroying their forests for daily livelihoods are stuck in our mind, therefore money from carbon credits intends to subsidize efficient cook stoves to help mitigate climate change and adapt by reducing pressure from firewood

consumption. Let's not rush to conclude who is really to blame for Africa's destroyed forest and degraded land. The fact is intriguing that a flexible mechanism under Kyoto Protocol allows big polluters to pay for the more vulnerable victims of climate changes to use a more efficient cook stove. Although no doubt everyone should do his or her part, the weight of the responsibility is blurred on which side most of it should lay on. It is not only highly complex and exclusive to eventually receive carbon revenues, but the whole mechanism also removes the attention away from implementing more direct climate funding and hard laws. Overall African, especially its rural communities, still lack sufficient knowledge of climate change and its global connection, carbon market, and access to the credits. In so doing, they will not be able to exert a more active role in participating in climate change mitigation and adaptation activities and still end up being climate victims without even knowing why.

When I asked a young technician employed by Tembea to construct stoves his understanding of carbon offset, he said all he knew that Africans were given money to reduce the smoke but then the developed countries could emit more: "I am not sure how this is really supposed to help but at least we now have some money."

The knowledge gap African communities have from the causes and global implications of climate change, to the policies, funds and markets of climate solutions matters not only in a social justice matter, but also prevents them from effectively participating in activities that mitigate and help themselves adapt to climate change. The young educated and experienced African students and practitioners are what I think are key gatekeepers in bridging this gap -- connecting their local communities with national and global movement and politics.

##### **5. What does it feel like to be an Asian working on African issues?**

This is an interesting question. I don't think it is news to see Asians working in Africa or on African issues. I experienced a big presence of Japanese development workers and scholars in African issues, for example. Nowadays Chinese interests, private or public, flourish at every corner of African soil. But I do see a lack of scholarly engagement in Africa from the Chinese society in general to help the Chinese businesses make informed, socially and environmentally sensitive planning and investment. African and Asia have historically had frequent contacts. There was a long history of China-Africa diplomatic relationships. On many levels, however, the two need to learn more about each other. Ironically, my sense is that Africans probably are more eager to learn about China than vice versa. China has walked a long way and made notable development progress, and Africans are very interested in learning.

I am doing my best to learn about Africa out of human curiosity and appreciation of all human culture. The African hospitality and the strong emphasis on family and social networks often reminds me of the Chinese equivalent -- something that many western societies have lost.

## **6. What do you think the conditions in Africa will be like in 10 years?**

I think Africa faces a very precarious situation and it is hard to predict anything in full confidence. On the one hand, while quite a number of sub-Saharan African countries are exhibiting encouraging development paces including Kenya, many more are also in the hot water of political turmoil, socio-economic and environmental crisis. Increasingly pressure from climate change on Africa's capability to feed its rapidly growing population takes tolls on its promising prosperity and stability - inequity and inequality across the populations. Unless African and global leaders and the civil society address these big threats, no matter how prosperous the growth figures might suggest, the society will still be at peril.

## **7. What are some suggestions you would like to make to African political leaders or other global leaders concerning climate change?**

As I have mentioned the knowledge gap of climate change between the grassroots community and African elites, between African in general and global elites. The stakeholders at every level need to take actions towards climate compatible development. Decision-makers should balance funding towards addressing climate change between adaptation and mitigation.

Mass education is key. And our local, national and global educators should not easily assume that the peasant communities would not be able to understand climate science anyhow. The most vulnerable populations need to be economically and politically empowered to effectively fight against climate change on their own turns for their future generations. This empowerment will only come from education and socio-economic and political capacity building.

## **8. If you had one message that you could spread around the world, what would it be?**

All human beings possess infinite potential of communicate with one another across geographic and cultural spaces. Listen, share and create.