Interview Eugene Nforngwa, COP30 — Transcript and summaries

Interview with Myrto Tripathi (EcoHumans, TerraWater) and Eugene Nforngwa, Program Director at the Africa Coalition for Sustainable Energy Access, at COP30 in Belém, November 14, 2025 (duration: 27 min 22 s)

Full Transcript

[prior question off-record] Myrto: What in your view does the COP process contribute to the definition of energy policies and the fight against climate change, and what are the main influencers of this process?

[0:08] Eugene: The space, especially the UNFCCC processes, to the principal stakeholders: states. And we've seen growing interest and participation from civil society and activists. And most of these people are those who are framing the issues, determining what options should be accepted. In fact, they are determining what energy futures are desirable without the scientific and the technical foundation. And so the role of science, even though we all claim that science should provide so, even though we all claim that science should inform the decisions, but the interpretation of the science and the translation of that science into policy options is usually not done by scientists, or most of the times it's done by people who have already certain biases,

[1:22] Myrto: So how would you say this translates in the way energy issues are being dealt with here in the government?

[1:29] Eugene: So there are two extremes to the energy debate. There is an extreme that is focused on the development imperatives of energy. And these are the people who say that all options should be on the table. These are the people who bring up the argument of a right to development and the right to use natural resources. In Africa, for example, there is a whole section of people, especially in government, who are beginning to talk about energy sovereignty, the right to be able to use all the resources that are available to meet energy needs. So that's one extreme of the spectrum. And that extreme is quite development focused. But you have an extreme that is very environmental and climate in nature and are looking at the conversation only in terms of emission metrics. They're looking at the potential contributions of energy production and use to greenhouse gas emissions. And that is the defining factor in their analysis. So therefore, [in their] understanding, any energy use that poses potential threat, whether real or emerging, to the climate system or to the environmental system, should be discouraged. And these are the people who advise the African government to abandon fossil fuels completely without any offering for alternatives in the meantime. These are the people who resist the idea of [transition] resources. For example, some have argued in Africa that gas should be allowed to help African countries establish a strong baseline in terms of economics and infrastructure, and then they can think about transitioning and phasing out fossil fuels. But there is a very strong resistance to that move. But these are also the same people who have a very negative view about nuclear energy because of the perceived environmental and safety risks and so on and so forth.

[3:52] Myrto: And you would say that the perception of nuclear and hydro is also perceived negatively by these kinds of activists is very different from, for example, their perspective on biomass and wind and solar that have that aura of natural resources. Of natural resources when they actually do have environmental and health effects. Both of them.

[4:22] Eugene: Yes, so. So it's difficult to explain how we choose which environmental footprints are acceptable and which aren't, because when it comes to nuclear, for example, we know for sure the science is clear that it's the cleanest form of energy you can have. So if the problem is safety concerns, why aren't we talking about strengthening safety safeguards? For example, why aren't we talking about improving the

technology so that it's safe enough to provide clean, affordable energy, even if the upfront costs are high? I mean, we are talking about countries, so we're talking about hundreds of years and thousands of years. We are not talking about returns in 10, 15 years. So the upfront cost debate for me isn't a debate that makes sense. Hydro [too] has been a victim of that. There's been a campaign in the past against what was referred to as big hydro, which is that the bigger the hydroelectric dam, the more environmentally unsustainable it is. But those environmental impacts of hydro can be dealt with, can be addressed. So why do we skip to a ban or an attempt to stop countries from using these resources, rather than have a middle ground that says now we understand what the risks are, what measures should we take to minimize this risk? I think that is a more sustainable and realistic approach in these issues.

[6:05] Myrto: And you were talking about earlier energy sovereignty and the right for countries to use their own natural resources and to make their own decision. And a few moments after you referred to who was advising the African government. So listening to someone like you, we wonder why you are not the one advising the African government. So how can more rationality into that advising effort can be done?

[6:35] Eugene: No, no, we actually [are] having a very frank conversation with African leaders. But also I think the biggest challenge is having this conversation with African civil society. And I think part of the reason is that to be an activist, you have to be biased, strongly biased towards something. And so it's difficult to shift minds within the activist community. But within the public sector communities, the governments and so on, they have a mission that transcends climate concerns. And therefore they are open to a conversation that offers them a broader range of options, of policy options. And so as an organization that is focused on sustainable energy, we have tried to position the idea of sustainable energy above the ideas of clean energy and the idea of dirty energy, so that it's really about what is the best mix that works for each country with very little contributions to greenhouse gas emissions. We must admit, but that is still strong enough to be able to lift communities out of poverty, strong enough to be able to industrialize, whatever that industrialization pathway is. Can we feasibly say that we can run factories and build industries in Africa with solar energy? At this point? The level of the technology doesn't allow it. The justice question is, is it fair to ask questions, to wait until the technology gets to a point where it can drive their industrialization so that they can industrialize? Or can they use what is available and industrialize to a point where they have the capacity and the resources to phase out fossil fuels if that becomes inevitable? So these are the kinds of questions that I am not sure the activist community is having a frank conversation about.

[8:47] Myrto: Part of my life is to be an activist for something that is not activist-like, which is a reasonable technical approach of things. And my experience of exchanging with decision makers as well as populations that don't have any background on energy issues is that generally when you bring the information, people have a pretty reasonable rational analysis. And what we see here is that - here in the COP today - is that most people don't have those basic facts. While they're supposed to be, contrary to the regular population, part of the few that have a deeper knowledge and understanding; reason why the rest of the population trusts them. However, when you listen to them, it seems that 1 kWh solar is exactly similar to 1 kWh coal or 1 kWh nuclear, which all three of them are radically different and provide radically different services to the grid and to the communities. So how come that basic understanding doesn't seem to be shared? And if it's not shared by this climate community, how can it be conveyed to the populations?

[10:06] Eugene: I think one of the reasons is that the climate community, especially the UNFCCC processes and perhaps all of the global initiatives to try to address the climate crisis are inherently political. They're really not technical as people might think. It's a space for interests and it's a space for advancing different agenda. And all of these issues are very political. Which means that even if the basic understanding of the science did exist, we are cherry picking which science we are using to make our arguments. But that's not all.

It's not everyone who comes to the COP that has a technical background. It's a very multidisciplinary environment. So you have people from a very legal background, you have people from anthropology, you have people from economics, you have people from, I don't know what, who are not necessarily speaking the same language, whose understanding of the issues, especially the political dimensions of the issues, are completely different. So perhaps the way you remedy that is to strip away the politics and allow the bare bones and let's see what exactly is going on. Let's go back to the days when we used to talk about global warming and discuss the science of global warming. Let's go back to the days when we used to talk about the energy sources in terms of what the potentials are, what the basic science is, what the physics behind it is, and so on and so forth. That can perhaps give us a sense of exactly which energy choices make the best sense in the current situation. But the politics, I think, has so covered up the science that it becomes very, very difficult to make sense. So now politics choices are based on who is shaping the narrative, who has the greatest amount of resources to shape this narrative, what interests are topping the agenda, rather than what exactly is needed and what exactly is required to reach where we want to get to.

[12:29] Myrto: And so how would you suggest, or do you have any idea at this stage of how we could get rid of those politics? Because the situation is getting more and more dire, the effects are getting stronger and stronger, and it seems the emotions are getting either heightened or people turn their back to it. And so the politics seems to be even more acute now than it used be to. It seems we are going in the wrong direction running.

[12:58] Eugene: I think it's going to remain political. It's going to be hard. But if the political choices have to be informed by science, at least that science should be politically neutral. The problem is that even the science is very political these days, like I said.

[13:15] Myrto: Would you be able to give an example?

[13:17] Eugene: All right, let me give you an example. Let's take a look. Something like carbon offsetting. All right, this is how carbon offsetting is positioned. Developing countries can hold back their emissions and get offsets bought from them by developed industrialized countries. What if you flipped that and said that developing countries, low level industrialized countries, should be given a window to pollute more and that is offsetted by deep emission reductions in the North? That's the same thing, but it's a very different political issue. So you need to be able to see which political lens is shaping the scientific analysis that we are having. You take, for example, all of the models, all of the models that are shaping policies are designed with metrics that are skewed towards political interests of the North. We do not know what exactly it would mean for the climate system. If Africa, for example, was allowed to use, say, a certain amount of fossil fuels for the next 100 years, we should have that information. On what basis are we asking Africa to abandon fossil fuels when we do not know exactly what contribution of the use of fossil fuels under what conditions lead to what emission scenarios and what those scenarios do to the global emission scenario? So even models are not designed in a way that answer the questions that policymakers in Africa have. So, and that is because it's political. Again, if you come from a research institution that believes that we need to abandon fossil fuels once and for all, I don't see a scenario in which you would be pursuing research that demonstrates that there's some room for emissions, say in Africa, for example, which currently contributes only 4% of greenhouse gas emissions. But you can still make a very strong argument that any amount of emissions, wherever it's coming from, is not good for the planet. But that doesn't resolve the policy questions that African leaders have. And that's quite a challenging thing.

[15:52] Myrto: And what we realize when we run our models based on [a] rational and technical aspects, is that very often the scenarios and the models that are put forward for countries to decarbonise actually assume a green field or look for an end state and very rarely go from the current state brownfield and then

analyze the industrial deployment to where we would reach a sustainable, which would include what you're describing, which is a remnant of fossil fuel use, for example, maybe if that helps the industrial deployment of the other sources of energies that will come in their own time. Because you need that relay race to take place between energies before you reach the ideal end state. And very often the models just provide you with that end state and say, oh, you know, this is where we need to go and without consideration of the road that need to be traveled to get there.

[16:59] Eugene: Yeah, so we've argued before that, and this is really good because of the scenario discussion. Let's have scenarios that tell us at what point should Africa's emissions [peak] and at what point should they start going down? Yes, right now there are a few studies that suggest, for example, that it will take at least 500 years for some African countries to exhaust their emission budgets. If we went on the premise that everyone has a budget, an allowance for emissions, but what do we do with that information? How do we translate that into pathways for energy transition?

[17:45] Myrto: So if I revert back to the physics of the grid that we were talking about earlier,

[17:49] Eugene: There is some audio, I'm hearing something from your phone.

(In the captions this exchange is split differently between the two speakers; the split above is reconstructed from context.)

[17:56] Myrto: What we are pointing at is the fact that the development of infrastructure systems industry is not doable on any kind of energy. It requires qualities inherent to an energy source to allow that development to take place.

[18:14] Eugene: What would those qualities be in your mind?

[18:16] Myrto: What kind of power, what kind of energies would Africa need to reach that level of development that it deserves?

[18:24] Eugene: Okay, let me start with saying that I think there has been some thinking that [grids] are not good for Africa. And that discussion is put forth as if the problem was with grids.

[18:43] Myrto: You mean centralized, centralized grids?

[18:46] Eugene: The centralized grids have worked elsewhere. So if centralized grids have worked elsewhere, the problem is not the infrastructure itself, perhaps it's the management of the infrastructure. So the solution is not to do away with good grids. So I still think that in Africa let's need to strengthen the grids because in any case, it makes management a lot easier because you're dealing with one entity. The risks are also high, but it's more efficient to manage. But in the meantime, what people really need is electricity access very quickly. 630 million people in Africa live in darkness. So you want to provide them with electricity very quickly. And you could do that with decentralized energy solutions based on renewables. But that cannot be the permanent solution. That is only solutions to allow people to quickly have access to electricity. Now, if you want that electricity to be productive and useful, say in driving local industries, whether it's in agriculture, in small businesses and so on and so forth, you need to find a way of building and moving from there to mini grids, for example, that perhaps are based on hydro or other sources of energy that can provide the quality and quantity of energy that is needed to drive small scale industrial activities. But now, if you want to think about the industrialization of the entire country with manufacturing, we are now talking about the need to process critical minerals on the continent. If you have to do that, you have to deploy energy at scale. Mini grids, decentralized systems aren't going to make it. You're going to need more robust systems. And I'm thinking that you need to, first of all, to be able to solve the problem, break up the energy needs of

the continent in these three categories. You have immediate household needs for lighting up this 630 million people that don't have electricity. You need to think about how then do you make these households productive, that they can go to school, they can study at night, social infrastructure can function, hospitals can function in many places. The water pumps require some kind of energy to be able to continue supplying water. Schools need, hospitals need electricity for cooling and for keeping vaccines and medications safe. These are some kind of mid range needs for energy. And beyond that you have large scale industrial needs. And for each of these categories you are going to need a different set of solutions. So mini grids or standalone solutions or decentralized system can work very well on the lower side of this problem spectrum. But on the upper side of it you're going to need more robust system which can be a network of the standalone system of the mini grids. But at the end of the day you're still dealing with very strong [grid] systems, centralized or regionalized or what, however you want to organize yourself. But you also are going, there's also going to be an impact in terms of the kinds of energy sources that you're going to be using. So as you go towards the industrialized end of the spectrum, solar and wind become less and less reliable. So you need to find a solution for that. On the lower part for quick energy access, solar and wind are going to make sense. So you can have a complete, a fair argument that we do not need to deploy fossil based energy production in these areas because the sun and the wind can do the thing. But once you get to the industrialization end, it becomes less and less difficult [sic; likely "more and more difficult"]. So the choices now begin to look at should we think about nuclear? Should we if we have to do green hydrogen, which is something a conversation that is increasing on the [continent?], under what conditions are we doing green hydrogen? How do we deal with the competition over water resources that are related to the production of green hydrogen and so on and so forth and so forth.

[23:22] Myrto: So when you say about perspectives about nuclear, for example, we can see a number of African countries trying to consider nuclear as part of their future energy mix. Yesterday only Rwanda and Senegal have signed a pledge that already 23 countries had signed [to] triple nuclear capacities. We had seen in the past Ghana, Kenya [have expressed] interest in the matter. South Africa is extending the lifetime operations of its nuclear power plants. So there is a very open and frank discussion that's taking place in Africa around nuclear energy that is not taking [place] everywhere else actually. So what would you say the perspectives of the continental nuclear are and how can we help?

[24:11] Eugene: The question is what exactly is the problem with nuclear energy? Is it a safety concern? How we manage the waste from nuclear reactors? If that is the problem now let's talk about how we solve that problem. Let's not talk about no nuclear because you're going to be left with nothing if each time you have a problem. The solution is don't touch so, and I think it's based on this that most African governments are beginning to realize that the anti nuclear narrative is not based on sufficient evidence and the argument is weak and that it's possible to have nuclear energy that is safe but that produces sufficient energy for your countries. The second thing is that the hypocrisy of the west is becoming more and more visible. So how do you justify that? Countries that use gas, nuclear energy and all sources of energy available to them and are even willing to go to war to secure these sources of energy are telling you this is not a good option for you. So African governments are seeing through that now and are beginning to think that they need to put every option on the table. If you look at the Africa common position on the energy transition, the underlying spirit, the spirit of it is that Africa needs to develop with every resource that's available to them under the context that can be defined locally or nationally. So that the energy pathway for Nigeria doesn't have to be similar to the energy pathway for, say, Cameroon. But the idea being that Cameroon should be able to sit down, ask itself what the policy challenges it's facing in terms of energy are and what's the best combination of resources, governance systems, infrastructure and technologies they can use to solve that problem. Of

course, bearing in mind the potential impact on greenhouse gases. But the idea here is that we shouldn't take any options off the table yet.

Summary

Eugene Nforngwa argues that African climate and energy policy should rest on science and on each country's real needs, rather than on the political framings that dominate international climate negotiations.

Science overshadowed by politics. In his view, decisions about which energy futures are desirable are often shaped within the UNFCCC process by actors who lack a scientific and technical foundation, and the translation of science into policy options is rarely done by scientists. COPs are "inherently political": participants pick the science that suits their arguments, and the narrative is set by whoever has the most resources.

Two extremes in the energy debate. On one side, those who stress the right to development, energy sovereignty and "all options on the table." On the other, an approach focused only on emissions metrics, which advises Africa to abandon fossil fuels without alternatives, resists gas as a transition fuel and also rejects nuclear. Myrto Tripathi adds that nuclear and hydro are viewed negatively, unlike biomass, wind and solar, which carry an aura of naturalness.

Nuclear and hydro. He says the science is clear that nuclear is the cleanest form of energy. If the concern is safety or waste, the answer is stronger safeguards and better technology, not a ban. The upfront-cost debate makes little sense when countries are planning over centuries. He sees the campaign against "big hydro" as the same reflex to ban rather than manage risks.

Dialogue and energy justice. Conversations with African leaders are frank; the harder audience is activist civil society, which by nature is biased. His organization promotes "sustainable energy" above the clean-versus-dirty split: the best mix for each country, low in emissions yet strong enough to lift communities out of poverty and industrialize. Solar cannot run factories today, so the justice question is whether Africa should wait for the technology or use what is available to industrialize and phase out fossil fuels later.

Models and scenarios. He argues that the models guiding policy use metrics skewed toward Northern political interests. Scenarios are missing on when African emissions should peak and then decline (Africa contributes about 4% of global emissions; some studies suggest at least 500 years before certain countries exhaust their emissions budgets). Myrto Tripathi observes that models often assume an ideal end state instead of starting from today's brownfield situation and the "relay race" between energy sources.

Grids and energy needs. Centralized grids have worked elsewhere, so the problem is management; they should be strengthened. With 630 million Africans lacking electricity, he distinguishes three tiers: basic access (decentralized renewables), productive and social uses (mini-grids, hydro; water pumps, schools, hospitals, vaccine cooling) and heavy industry such as processing critical minerals, which needs robust systems. The closer to industry, the less reliable solar and wind become, which brings nuclear and green hydrogen (with its water competition) into the discussion.

African perspectives. Myrto Tripathi cites the pledge signed by Rwanda and Senegal to triple nuclear capacity, interest from Ghana and Kenya, and South Africa extending its plants' lifetimes. Eugene Nforngwa says African governments increasingly see that the anti-nuclear narrative lacks evidence and that Western hypocrisy is more visible. The Africa Common Position on the energy transition, he explains, favors pathways defined locally or nationally (Nigeria's need not match Cameroon's), keeping every option on the table while weighing greenhouse gas impacts. The interview ends when he has to leave for a meeting.