

YOUTH LEADERSHIP IN SUSTAINABILITY



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ABOUT VOICES OF SUSTAINABILITY

Voices of Sustainability is a thought leadership platform launched by the Zayed Sustainability Prize to explore the challenges and opportunities of the global transition to an inclusive and

prosperous future. Each month, the series hosts the world's thought leaders to discuss the latest trends and themes in the sustainability agenda.



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INTRODUCTION

On 29 August 2025, the Zayed Sustainability Prize aired the 51st episode of its virtual fireside chat series Voices of Sustainability. This episode, titled “Youth Leadership in Sustainability,” explored the transformative power of youth-led action in driving sustainable solutions.

The conversation featured Kehkashan Basu, Founder-President of Green Hope Foundation,

and Mukudzeiishe Madzivire, Student at Columbia University. Jackline Wambua, Stanford University Research Fellow, moderated the discussion.

The speakers shared personal journeys as changemakers, the barriers and opportunities they encountered, and the values that sustain their leadership in the sustainability space.



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SUMMARY

To mark International Youth Day, the 51st episode of Voices of Sustainability, titled “Youth Leadership in Sustainability,” featured two inspiring young changemakers to explore how youth are driving practical, inclusive solutions to global challenges.

Moderated by Zayed Sustainability Prize Youth Ambassador Jacqueline Wambua, the episode opened with a powerful reflection from Kehkashan Basu, who shared her early motivations for starting the Green Hope Foundation at age 12. Drawing on her work across 28 countries, she emphasised the importance of empathy-based education, peer-led initiatives and creating safe, sustainable infrastructure tailored to local communities, from solar powered academies in Bangladesh to organic farms in Canada.

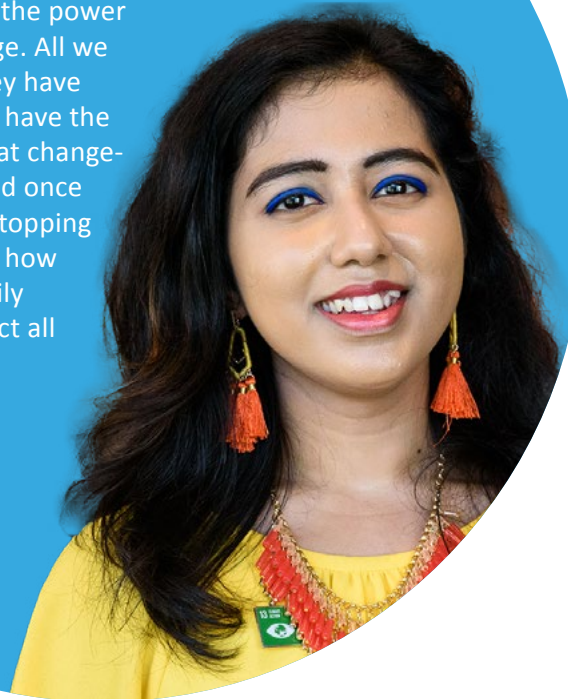
Basu highlighted that engaging youth meaningfully requires recognising their diverse lived experiences and providing education that fosters both sustainability knowledge and character development. Her approach centres on grassroots, community-led action driven by young people themselves. She stressed that youth leadership must be inclusive, amplifying a spectrum of voices and ensuring that marginalised communities are represented in shaping solutions.



“Young people have the power to bring about change. All we do is ensure that they have that education, they have the power to harness that change-making potential, and once they do, there’s no stopping them. And so, this is how we slowly and steadily create positive impact all around the world.”

Kehkashan Basu

Founder-President
Green Hope Foundation



Mukudzeiishe Madzivire, a student at Columbia University and alumnus of the African Leadership Academy (ALA), a 2019 winner of the Zayed Sustainability Prize in the Global High Schools category, shared how ALA’s culture of innovation shaped his understanding of youth leadership. Although not part of the Prize-winning team, he spoke to the lasting influence of their project, the “Living Machine,” and how it exemplified the role youth can play in redefining development.

SUMMARY

Madzivire also emphasised that progress in developing countries will only be possible when centred on environmental protection, a principle he linked to the role of youth in redefining development priorities. Young leaders, he argued, are uniquely positioned to embed sustainability at the heart of progress, challenging approaches that overlook environmental limits. He went on to outline three critical tools that empower young people: passion, voice, and community. He urged youth to act boldly in the face of limited access to resources, calling for a shift in mindset from

waiting for external change to becoming the catalyst for it. True leadership, he noted, is consultative and grounded in listening, humility, and sustained engagement with local knowledge.

The discussion reinforced that youth leadership is not confined to grassroots projects, but extends to influencing policy, shaping innovation, and mobilising global networks for change. Both the speakers agreed that sustainable change is slow but essential, and that young people have both the responsibility and the capacity to shape a more just and liveable future. They urged today's youth to anchor their leadership in progress, rather than perfection.

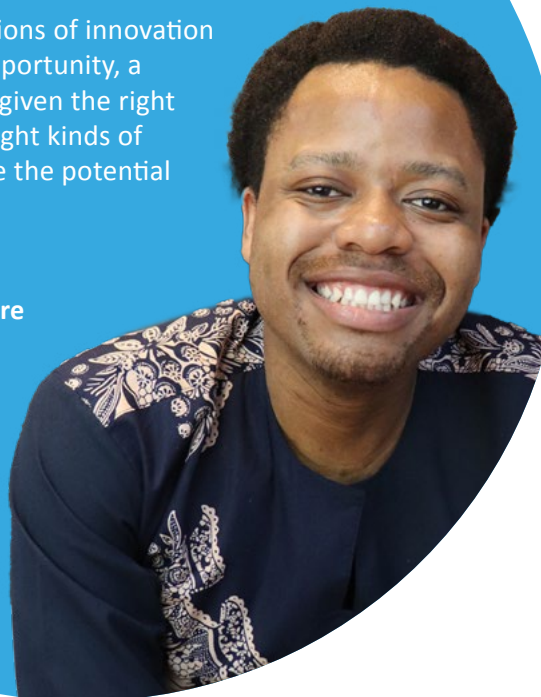
The discussion also highlighted the realities of sustaining leadership in the face of setbacks, showing that resilience and persistence are as vital as innovation for long-term impact. Their insights affirmed that youth are not only the future of sustainability; they are its most urgent force in the present.



“Students are, as bastions of innovation and as fountains of opportunity, a group of people who, given the right resources, given the right kinds of opportunities, do have the potential to change the world.”

Mukudzeiishe Madzivire

Columbia University
Class of 2027



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BIOGRAPHIES



Kehkashan Basu

Founder-President
Green Hope Foundation

Kehkashan Basu is a Canadian environmentalist and Founder-President of Green Hope Foundation, working with over 500,000 people in 28 countries. She is a recipient of Canada's Meritorious Service Medal and has been recognised as a UN Human Rights Champion, UNCCD Land Hero, National Geographic Explorer, and in Forbes 30 Under 30.



Mukudzeiishe Madzivire

Columbia University
Class of 2027

Mukudzeiishe "Muku" Madzivire is a student and researcher at Columbia University and managing editor for its Student Journal for the Study of Human Rights. He is a Youth Ambassador for the Zayed Sustainability Prize and former President of the Zimbabwe Junior Parliament.

The conversation was moderated by:



Jackline Wambua

Research Fellow
Stanford University

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OUTCOMES



Youth inclusion is critical in sustainability decision-making.



Education empowers action by fostering empathy and encouraging peer-to-peer learning that inspires long-term change.



Passion, voice, and networks empower youth to overcome barriers and mobilise communities



Patience and persistence are essential to avoid burnout and sustain progress in slow-moving systems.



Youth-led innovation demonstrates that practical, community-driven solutions can shape a more sustainable and equitable world.

Watch the full episode on the Zayed Sustainability Prize's YouTube channel

Follow our social media accounts for updates about upcoming episodes



[zayedsustainabilityprize](https://www.youtube.com/zayedsustainabilityprize)



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