



S5E12: Transcript Food, Agriculture & Human Flourishing with Agnes Kalibata

Tavia Gilbert: Welcome to Stories of Impact. I'm writer/producer Tavia Gilbert, and every first and third Tuesday, journalist Richard Sergay and I bring you conversations about the art and science of human flourishing.

This week we hear from Dr. Agnes Kalibata, a Rwandan agricultural scientist and policymaker. Dr. Kalibata draws on her personal history growing up in a refugee camp to shape her work as both UN Secretary-General's Special Envoy focusing on international food systems and the president of the Alliance for a Green Revolution. This leader uniquely offers her deep personal understanding of how communities and individuals can flourish when two of their essential needs — nourishing food and quality education — are met.

We'll begin where we so often do, with our guest's personal definition of human flourishing. Here's Dr. Kalibata:

Agnes Kalibata: Human flourishing refers to the ability of human beings as people to thrive, the ability to express the goodness of human beings, the ability to express the growth that human beings experience. But also the ability to be resilient and flourish even under difficult circumstances. So for me, human flourishing encompasses being able to fulfill our purpose here on Earth and being able to thrive while doing that.

Tavia Gilbert: Dr. Kalibata's childhood was shaped by political and social upheaval in Rwanda that caused her smallholder farmer parents to be displaced to Uganda. In the refugee camp, getting enough nutrition was a challenge.

Getting to school was a challenge. Day to day life was never easy, and yet, she points to the family gift of education that allowed her, even in the most difficult of circumstances, to flourish.

Agnes Kalibata: I started out reading in refugee camp at a very early stage, because I was born there and grew up there, in very difficult circumstances, no schools. I was born in a refugee camp, I grew up in a refugee camp, I was educated in the refugee camp. I got out when I was 35 years old, when I had the job and refugee camps were closed because my community was able to go back to Rwanda. But how did I flourish?

I was lucky that my parents, my dad had been a teacher. So he taught me how to read and write using his own means, you know, he improvised. I was lucky that I was able to get an education. So I want to underscore that not every kid had a parent that had been a teacher that could improvise and be able to teach them at that very early age. Not every parent had the opportunity to be able to struggle and be able to send their kids to school the way mine did. While every parent wants their kids to flourish, there are very few in that type of environment that were empowered to do so. And it killed that something in them.

So for me, being able to grow out of that environment, being able to go to school eventually and being able to have the opportunity to be part of where the world is at today, has been a journey that you might then refer to as flourishing. But the most important part for me is the fact that it helps me understand the environment around me and the needs, challenges, but also the opportunities of the people around me and how we can work to enhance their livelihoods. It's been a journey that, for me, it's more an educational journey that has defined what I do today.

Tavia Gilbert: Dr. Kalibata has respect for the resilience, creativity, and persistence of African people – a grit that she thinks others far too often fail to recognize.

Agnes Kalibata: You know, when people say that Africa is not flourishing, I just say they don't understand the continent. They don't see what I see, and I tell you what I see. I grew up in a rural setting in Africa. When I was growing up, the nearest access to my village in terms of transport was probably 20 kilometers away. So to be able to go to a secondary school, I had to walk

20 kilometers, to be able to get to a train that would be on the rail for three nights before I get to Kampala, which was only something like, what, 300 to 400 kilometers away? So taking me four nights to get to that place after walking 20 kilometers.

Today, there's hardly any environment in many of these countries where you find that type of burden on a kid trying to get school, to the schools that are in nearly every village, secondary schools, which is what I was trying to get to, is nearly in every 20 kilometers itself. So education has come so close to people, services are coming close to people. Our cities are moving out of central cities to, to decentralized cities.

Africa has decentralized its services, and many countries are now working through decentralized systems because they see the opportunity to take services to communities. And Internet, if you might say, and telephone penetration is probably one of the highest now in the world. I mean, Africa is connected in ways I didn't know when I was growing up. Growing up, I didn't even know there was a TV out there!

Tavia Gilbert: The values that she celebrates in her fellow Africans – embracing technology, being willing to work hard to get an education, courage, and self-determination, and most of all, a sense of community – can offer others valuable perspective, says Dr. Kalibata.

Agnes Kalibata: There are many lessons that Africa kind of teaches the rest of the world. I guess one of the things that stands out for me, because maybe that's one of the things I lived, is the sense of community. The sense of community is extremely important for us. And you see that around indigenous communities as well. So that sense of community is something that I appreciate a lot, it's the glue that binds us. And I think it's important for mankind and flourishing mankind and appreciating the things that we all care about together.

There's a huge appreciation in the African culture of the environment they live with, and the landscapes and the planet. I think people underestimate how much stewardship smallholder farmers, indigenous communities, provide to the environment they live with. They provide some of the best stewardship that I've seen in the world, and we need to take advantage of that.

- Tavia Gilbert:** Dr. Kalibata is herself determined to give back to Africa, to apply her knowledge and skills to address systemic problems that keep today's children and families from thriving. Since 2014, she's served as the president of the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA), which "seeks to transform African agriculture from a subsistence model to strong businesses that improve the livelihoods of the continent's farming households."
- Agnes Kalibata:** AGRA works to improve the varieties of local varieties of farmers that they are producing to ensure that they have better yields. First of all, it's, do we have the necessary technologies for where these farmers live. Do we have the right seeds that address the needs of these farmers? Now, the next bit is access. How do you ensure that year after year, season after season, they have access to those technologies? And that is also being figured out, whether it is through the mom and pop shops that we call AGRA dealers, that have been created in every village to reduce the distance for the farmer. Or whether it is the scientists that are working to continuously improve those, these are being figured out.
- Tavia Gilbert:** By focusing on agriculture, Dr. Kalibata's work impacts the majority of African people.
- Agnes Kalibata:** Two thirds of Africans live in the agriculture sector. It has the ability to give them a decent livelihood. It has the ability to give them food security for their children, has the ability to provide the nourishing that we are looking for when it comes to nutrition, and ensuring that they thrive.
- For me, success is when a smallholder farmer that works in agriculture sector feels like I have a business and that business is called my farm. This is how it gives meaning to my life. So for me, success is about two things, ensuring that that ecosystem around the farmer is working, and ensuring that the farmer has what he needs because the ecosystem is working and the farmer actually can talk about his farm as his business. And I could see that, it's something you can see on people's faces, just like the smiles of a flourishing farmer today, when our work is successful, it's something you don't forget. That is success.

Tavia Gilbert: By supporting sustainable, healthy, thriving farming practices, Dr. Kalibata can help her fellow Africans thrive.

Agens Kalibata: The connection between food, agriculture, and flourishing is huge. Here in Africa, especially, two thirds of nearly every country lives in agriculture. Food is everything. It is their source of nourishment. It's their source of income. It's the source of food security for their children. It's their hopes. It's their culture, too: Food is everything to the communities that live in the kind of settings and work in smallholder agriculture. They've built a whole culture around it as well.

So for these people or for the people that work in the agricultural system, for them, it's also how they get through this poverty. For them, it's also how they get to send their children to school. For them, it's also how they get to pay for health insurance. For them, it's also how they empower themselves. For them, it's also about fulfilling that human spirit of feeling that you are everything, that you have control over your life. It's their world.

Tavia Gilbert: Dr. Kalibata is called to be of service not only to individuals, families, and communities, but to the planet itself.

Agens Kalibata: Being human, right, we are made of food, and we want to make sure that we are made of the right food. That's why it's not just ending hunger, it's also about the nutritional health and how that nutrition gives our capability as human beings and allows us to flourish.

But let's also think about our planet. We've done so well in flourishing from not just a food perspective, not just the nutrition perspective, but also from a prosperity perspective. Our economies are flourishing, and they all started with food and addressing that basic human need, in many cases. A significant part of global economies are flourishing because the food sector has flourished. We are producing over 300 times more food than produced a while ago, you know, when we figured out how to increase yields.

But let's understand that this is happening against a planet that can only take so much from us. So if we want our planet to flourish, we need to ask ourselves whether what we are doing is also right for the planet. Part

of our flourishing food system is about how much we waste. Wasting is not flourishing, wasting is destroying the planet. Part of how we produce food, how we go about using the resources we have is endangering biodiversity. Eighty percent loss of biodiversity is associated with how we produce food. This is not flourishing for our planet. This is endangering our planet.

These resources, whether it's plants, whether it's animals, these genetic resources are so critical to the survival of our planet and us as human beings. So the flourishing of the planet will have to be about putting it back and growing it. Our planet needs us to grow it, to reconstitute it, but also to grow it. We can't just be extractive. So part of what we are doing in the food system is really helping people understand that we cannot work with a failing planet. We were given a good, functional planet, we need to ensure that it flourishes. We need to grow it. We need to nurture it.

Tavia Gilbert: Dr. Kalibata wants her life's work to make good on a promise made long ago — one that has yet to be fully realized.

Agens Kalibata: I feel that my responsibility is to keep reminding us that we actually did commit to ending hunger, to giving humankind, that, that right and dignity, number one. Number two, nutrition and ensuring nutrition is extremely important. We know that inability to access the right form of nutrition reduces human capability, reduces our ability to perform. We don't want to live in a world where part of the population we are living with is already left behind by the fact that they eat poor.

How can we flourish when half the population we are living with, or a certain percent of the population we are living with, is actually incapacitated from the very beginning? We must ensure inclusivity in nutrition, because that's how we ensure that mankind is equal. Otherwise, we are living with people whose ability to be equal has been interfered with from a very early stage.

I look at ending hunger as a basic human right, so we can't talk about flourishing of mankind when there's a basic need, the need that makes you feel less than human, that is not being addressed. So ending hunger

is about coming through on expectations of humanity. It's about mankind coming through for mankind.

Tavia Gilbert: If and when hunger is eliminated as a problem for all people on our planet, Dr. Kalibata says, it will, in fact, be because of the efforts and progress of womankind.

Agnes Kalibata: Women are a huge part of the agriculture sector, women spend 16 hours, especially in rural settings, spend 16 hours a day working in the agriculture sector to make it productive for their families and their communities. Women also expect the agriculture sector to be useful for them, to generate results with regards to incomes for the household as well.

But it is clear that definitely they make much less than their male counterparts, and part of that is just the inequities that exist in the system, the ability to access land, the ability to access funding, the ability to access markets. So all these things make it very difficult for them to have an equitable role in the participation of the sector. Yet, like everybody else, they need the sector to be productive for them. They also spend so much more time getting so many things done around the sector, that makes it difficult for them to use their time efficiently.

So designing programs that address the structural challenges in access is extremely important. But also we need to think through how women businesses thrive, especially in rural settings, in agricultural settings. So we have built a program called Value4Her, which looks at how women SMEs thrive or survive in an environment where there are all those challenges, but also in an environment where capacity and investing in capacity remains one of the biggest challenges of coming through on businesses in the agriculture sector. So we are trying to find them and using them as agents of changing the environment in which women are working.

Tavia Gilbert: As ever, in order for all people to flourish and prosper, serious challenges lie ahead — and it may be the greatest challenge the planet has ever faced.

Agnes Kalibata: Today, the biggest challenge is climate change. It's climate change, and then how farmers stay on top in terms of what they were getting used to as improved seeds, improved varieties, that work in these landscapes, how they stay on top of that. These seeds are not necessarily adapted to the changing climate. So being able to give them means to cope with the failing climate in terms of these better yielding varieties, in terms of how to manage water better, in terms of how to understand climates, have the right level of information around what has changed in the environment and how they are supposed to cope with that.

These are the challenges of today, ensuring that the knowledge that we had built over time, that is being eroded, can be replaced, ensuring that the little capital base that they had built over time, that's been eroded, can be replaced, ensuring that the varieties that we are working for them, over time, that can no longer perform, can be replaced at the rate at which climate change is happening. So for me, the biggest challenge of farmers today that live in agriculture systems that are rain-fed, but even if they were not rain-fed, is definitely climate change.

Tavia Gilbert: But despite the complexity and gravity of climate change, Dr. Kalibata points to a valuable global resource that will help us rise to the challenge – the young global citizens who will be tasked with finding ways to thrive, even in the face of a climate crisis.

Agnes Kalibata: I think the opportunity that the youth movements have is that ability need to understand the place and role of technologies better. They have the ability to use that technology to harness our environment better, and I'm already beginning to see where they are taking up these opportunities.

Youth understand the need for profitable businesses. They wouldn't be in the sector just because it's what they grew up knowing, just because it's what they find themselves in. They want to be in it because it is profitable. And I think that type of approach and attitude would help the productivity of the sector and would grow the productivity of the sector much faster.

In major parts of the world, a significant proportion of people that occupy our world are young. They need to be equipped to appreciate their place in the world, to appreciate the relationship between taking

and giving on our planet. So in fact, when you look at how we design the food system today, it's about helping people understand that you and I, individually — and it's even more so for youth — you and I individually impact our planet by taking and giving.

So we need to balance those choices and make sure that flourishing is about that. So helping young people understand from a very early age that this is not about extraction of what we need, this is about balancing the needs of ourselves with the needs of our planet is extremely important.

Tavia Gilbert: Young global citizens give Dr. Kalibata hope for the future, and for the potential that her efforts will be carried on by young Africans who help their fellow countrymen help each other:

Agnes Kalibata: As the leaders of tomorrow, they can't do what we've been doing. They have to ensure that their children and the children of their children will have a better future and a good future based on how they manage the planet. Youth have already started putting programs together, and some of what they're doing is just being able to put their voice forward, because it's a very strong voice. And the strength of that voice in the whole conversation around a better planet, I think is very important.

Tavia Gilbert: In two weeks, we'll be back with a conversation with Stephen Croft, Bishop of Oxford, who shares his thoughts about meaning, purpose, grace, and faith.

Stephen Croft: I think, for me, Grace is a really important part of human flourishing. Because to flourish really well as a human being, I need to know and have a relationship with my creator. And that relationship is fundamentally a relationship with grace. So that the attitude in which I live best is an attitude of thankfulness and appreciation for the good gifts in life and being content. And it's that gift of contentment, founded on grace, which makes a difference between never being content, no matter how much you have, in terms of material wealth, and satisfaction.

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