

## In Conversation: Shuaib Lwasa

This is a written transcription of Seth Schindlers discussion with Shuaib Lwasa.

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**Intro** [00:00:00] Welcome to the Global Development Institute podcast based at the University of Manchester, where Europe's largest research and teaching institutes addressing poverty and inequality. Each episode will bring you the latest thinking insights and debates in development studies.

**Seth Schindler** [00:00:26] Thank you very much for joining us today. My name is Seth Schindler. I'm a senior lecturer at the Global Development Institute. And it's really my honour and a pleasure to be here with Professor Shuaib Lwasa from Makerere University in Uganda. He's also a coordinating lead author from the of the IPCC, and I think he's founder of Urban Action Lab, which he will tell us about. And so, first of all, thank you very much, Professor. Lots of four for joining us today.

**Shuaib Lwasa** [00:00:58] Thank you to on. Great meeting you Seth. Thank you.

**Seth Schindler** [00:01:01] Thank you. Thank you so much. I think first, we want to just start with the question that everyone is asking what happened at COP? The last meeting just happened recently. Some people said it was terrible. Other people said it was a small step forward. What's your assessment overall?

**Shuaib Lwasa** [00:01:20] I think my personal assessment is that the last COP was disappointing despite the few small steps that have been taken. But we've seen that in several other previous COPs where small steps have been taken. And I think the pace at which these small steps are being achieved is much slower than the pace at which we should be taking action on climate change. I missed a lot of things in there, especially in the plenaries and the other high-level meetings, but a lot of stuff was also being illustrated and demonstrated in the blue zone, for example, in the Resilience Hub, where a lot of new, much more informative and demonstrative examples of what is being done that needs to be scaled up by the decisions of the high level. So I missed, for example, loss and damage discussion at high level. I missed adaptation being on the forefront now that we the most recent extreme events happening almost every on the planet, that should actually be a wake up call for adaptation to be stepped up across the globe. And I also was one to do to be surprised with the new kind of targets or commitments to cut methane. And yet we know that is a little bit of challenges in terms of estimating within much more challenging than carbon. So thus, that's why I feel that it was not really great right now. Right.

**Seth Schindler** [00:02:53] You've been working for over 20 years on some of these issues in African cities and in a range of cities across Africa. And so I wonder if we were to come up with the COP for Africa. What would it look like in terms of ways that would address some of these issues surrounding adaptation, loss and damage and ensure a bright future for African cities? Or perhaps we could think of it if the citizens of African cities were to come up with a document, what would be in it, do you think?

**Shuaib Lwasa** [00:03:30] I think that the Africa COP should be largely an adaptation, although not entirely. I think that Africa still has potential and promises of leading also in mitigation that combining mitigation and adaptation makes a lot more sense, especially with the dragging on the discussions about loss and damage and, you know, the climate action, funding streams and architecture. And I think in that document, Africa should emphasise the adaptation on one hand and adaptation and mitigation to optimise the co-benefits of synergies between the two. Because I think some of these solutions are already happening in Africa. We saw that in the COP in Morocco and the United Nations there on mitigation. How can Africa become or position itself as a leader in some of these technological innovations that transitioning to green economies and green technology that would also enhance with co-benefits and synergies adaptation?

**Seth Schindler** [00:04:34] Excellent. Thank you. I mean, I guess, as you pointed out, some of these innovations are already in have. Well, people are already doing them, and in some cases they perhaps have been doing them for quite some time, but they might not be scaled up. So I want to come back to, you know, how we might do that, how we might envision realising, I like that, an African COP, right? How we could envision realising some of those objectives. But I'd also like to ask you about your personal journey. So from my understanding, you were educated in, is it correct? Urban studies and planning, broadly speaking? And you know, as we all know, urban studies, it's kind of a general term, but essentially it's a very Euro-American discipline. The kind of general knowledge is still formulated typically around, you know, knowledge from a small number of cities London, New York, Berlin, etc. So at some point you must have unlearned that and then relearned the theory that you're talking about. Now the the points you made yesterday in your talk about kind of new locales for generating knowledge from from new places. So I guess I'd just like to ask you to reflect a bit on your personal journey, how you how you unlearned mainstream urban studies. Were there key moments, key points, things that you witnessed? Yeah.

**Shuaib Lwasa** [00:05:59] I mean, great question. My learning journey has been quite interesting, and I find it interesting after reflecting on it most recently because a lot that has happened to unlearn the Eurocentrism, which is still part of me in many ways have are informed by my lived experiences. Boy, I was born where I grew up, where I studied and where I've spent most of, all, my time on that is the city of Kampala, at the Makerere University and living in an upper-income household family. But within a slum and under the age of the investor, quite an interesting kind of starting position there to do to have access to the university and see what academics are thirty years ago. And then at the same time, also they lived experience in a slum environment is something that has been for long informing the process of learning and unlearning, and that Eurocentrism, I think, has also been very good, I should say, because perhaps if I had not gotten this kind of training and was interested in governance, planning and urban studies, I would perhaps not been able to reflect on my own lived experience. And that could have both in some way boxed me in the position of thinking that all this is this is really what we were built for. This is doomed and unless somebody walks on it, we are most likely going to live like this. But I think having that lived experience has enabled me to unlearn and realise that we need to think about a lot of stuff in urban studies, a urban development differently, including the way we plan our cities and the fact that many of these cities where I grew up are most likely not going to be deconstructed. How would you turn that ship around? How do you unlearn the mainstream planning of problem, you know, analysis objective setting in the alternative plan formulation and discussion with policymakers, decide on one plan and then implement which never gets implemented in the case of Kampala 1939 Plan, 1972 plan, 1994 plan. I've been studying these extensively and deeply. None of those was except in 1926 and 1939 plans. The others subsequent ones perhaps only implemented up to less than five per cent, especially. So then the reality is that

there are a lot of things that have emerged. The failure of the public policy system under planning has enabled the emergence of very micro-level innovations for which we keep a blind spot on them because we are using, you know, Eurocentric frameworks and that has not enabled many people to realise what we understand about the potential, the working's the limitations of the alternatives. And that is my academic journey.

**Seth Schindler** [00:08:49] Wonderful. I mean, this point of these successive plans and a failing, I'm sure that planners the the authors of those plans. Well, I imagine they will say that the problem is not the plan. The problem is the implementation. And I think probably another a counterargument would be like, well, the plan wasn't fit for purpose, right? The plan was being applied in places where you had alternative systems that were already functioning or, you know, the plan should was was what was the the wrong starting point? So I wonder, you know, you mentioned that you you already have plenty of things in place in terms of different types of infrastructural configurations and different social relations. Could you talk a little bit about how might those be scaled up and should they be institutionalised? And maybe this is a little bit of kind of what you're doing with Urban Action Lab, and you could also tell us a bit about it.

**Shuaib Lwasa** [00:09:48] Yeah, yeah. I'm an interesting comment earlier before the question, I think I'd go for the second lines won't fit for purpose, and that is what the unlearning on my part has actually enabled me to visualise. And to some extent, also live. And and therefore, if we're going to see a scaling up of these micro-level innovations, I think this has to be a change and transformation in the way cities are managed and planning then becomes a small part of the city management and city management that I'm talking about and thinking about goes beyond the city authority's utility companies and infrastructure companies that are usually the vehicle through which other infrastructure development is done. City management also goes beyond that to include local economic development opportunities, which is one of the problem of the plan. If we could go back to your earlier, you know, comment that the plan is not the problem, the problem, the plans have been partly the problem because the assumption is that when you have a specially organised area or city in terms of land use and separation and transportation linkages that seamlessly the demography and the population will fit in seamlessly, the urban labour market will work itself out because then industries will establish and then people will get jobs and then housing developments and housing markets will evolve and evolve and grow and expand. The plan is the problem. Yeah. So how do we then look back and say, what about these emerging innovations, how would you scale that you need a different view of managing cities to bring actors into the mainstream, especially with established cities, new cities, you can still configure them in the contemporary way. But existing cities, you need to bring the developers. The real developers of the cities is not municipalities, because in the case of Africa, it is the individuals, the family, the families, the companies, the small microbusinesses. They are the ones that are actually inch by inch transforming the landscape in the cities and adding small pieces of certain types of infrastructure with alternative technologies, which we need to think about. How to scale it up, where there is decency and potential and feasibility to provide the much needed services to the dwellers and therefore working with many stakeholders is important, but it's also a challenge

**Seth Schindler** [00:12:37] I can imagine. And I mean, can you give our listeners an example of of a success of a successful example where one of these initiatives has been scaled up to some extent, right? Maybe not globally, but somewhere where you've brought you've seen this happen, where the stakeholders have come together in some sort of coalition to successfully kind of seize on an initiative and scale.

**Shuaib Lwasa** [00:13:04] In the Urban Action Lab we've focussed a lot of resources and energies on utilities like waste management and collection, as well as sanitation services, and we've piloted on the work ing's of some of these micro-level technologies, and we've assessed the different alternatives like, you know, turning organic waste into energy briquettes, which has been around for so many us. I knew about that over 30 years ago because my mom did it in the neighbourhood as a way of saving on charcoal because it was becoming expensive because of the rebel activities. The load of trucks could not go through the rebel zones to bring the charcoal to the city. But what we have seen is that by empowering more women-led groups, youth-led groups and all the kind of groups led by man into in communities and allowing them in the free space sort of to interact, share knowledge and experiences, work through product development, business plan, development, marketing of their product, branding of the product as part of it and identifying the Low-Hanging fruit. So if so, you should say. Marketing points for their products, because we know that if you change any product in the course of energy from charcoal or wood to energy briquettes is going to always be a question of uptake. But by identifying institutions and kiosks and markets as the initial marketing, you know, tools or points, we have seen some success in business is growing around energy briquettes in the urban chamber and we are still supporting with knowledge and walking with them. These different groups to amplify their skills and to bring new skills and study the market more and ensure that there is sustainable production because people will get disappointed if they start using briquettes and they get used to it. And then several weeks down the road, there's no supply. So to bring that into the whole product development and rollout, we still continuing support and that is something which is slowly scaling up. And apart from Kampala, I know that in the case of Nairobi, it is grown to a level where medium level type of companies have picked it up.

**Seth Schindler** [00:16:02] So I studied quite a bit of, you know, the large scale infrastructure projects which are back now, you know, for years, I think throughout this the the high point of neoliberalism infrastructure was neglected simply because states were disempowered and many private investors from the OECD did not invest in infrastructure, large scale infrastructure in sub-Saharan Africa. So now when you read the policy documents, the argument is that this is enduring growth and all we have to do is invest in infrastructure. And then these people you're talking about can bring their products to market. But it sounds to me like you're saying that's not the main barrier for these people to scale up their activities. They can do it without without the infrastructure. There are other challenges like you mentioned, kind of bringing people together, institutionalising some of these processes. Am I right? I mean, is there a role for infrastructure to play in these processes or is that a kind of red herring? And the real way to scale up some of these initiatives,

**Shuaib Lwasa** [00:17:13] perhaps to be much more to be a pessimist? The red herring is you could there's not a better description of large scale infrastructure than the red herring. And that's because I'm a pessimist of the infrastructure led development. Having a couple of one and a half years ago been part of a huge research project on city infrastructure for development in eastern Africa. And same thing that has been pursued for years. Infrastructure, road construction, enabling people to bring products to the market. How much are they producing and how much is used for home consumption and how much of that produce can get into the market? And what are the costs of transporting the market? And what are the, what are the dividends that come out of that kind of trade? I don't see that happening. So. This is perhaps an indication that there is need to rethink infrastructure led development in cities, but also nationally and look at the different levers for enabling different producers to step up their production, and it's not just about stepping up production, it is rethinking product development. So the whole value chain button is much not

global value chain, but scaled down value chain. What product for whom the formerly targeting how we're going to produce are going to sustain? What is the market condition like those questions? And besides neoliberalism also did something else about the agriculture sector. It wasn't only just in infrastructure. There's been a gradual but systematic phasing out of the traditional extension farmer extension system. Which was very useful so many years ago, and now it no longer exists because of structural adjustment programmes and other kind of initiatives, donor initiatives. And the farmers are struggling when the farmers struggle. Then there's no value chain development and value addition down the road where you would expect that happening in cities if there is no real value addition, there no less opportunities in. If there are less opportunities, it is rendering the labour force in urban areas unemployed or underemployed, and that can breed a lot of challenges.

**Seth Schindler** [00:20:04] Great, I mean, yeah, that's that's fascinating, I see. We could we could take our discussion into a rural area as well because it's it's quite interesting to me. A lot of the infrastructure initiatives are designed. I mean, that's their stated purpose to kind of unlock this entrepreneurialism energy of farmers in rural areas. And yet I'm quite sceptical and the documents that I read, it seems to me that the plans are really for territory and the people are more or less absent. They're expected to simply respond to the opportunities that a new road affords. Well, does it really afford so many opportunities? I mean, I think your answer is very clear. So I would like to ask you about the Urban Action Lab. You said, you know, you mentioned bringing people together, it's challenging. Of course, every situation is different. But could you talk a little bit about this idea of co-production, how you actually bring people together to co-produce some of these plans?

**Shuaib Lwasa** [00:21:08] Yeah, a little bit of history before I go into the question is we had a lot of international students and research collaborators coming for short periods of time to understand the workings in Kampala and in a lot of ideas came up, one of which was we thought knowledge is important. Knowledge is important to inform the most small steps of transformation at a local level. And we thought of a knowledge of an arena, local knowledge urban arena where we would work with communities, so to say like the best of our knowledge creation tradition in documentary such world or to call research site. We don't own the quality research site, the intubation centres, and that base would be occupied by southern actors, community members, households, small businesses, enterprises, companies and then the policy site; ministries municipality and then the academy; the academics and researchers, students, and then that would bring all these different categories of actors in the urban space in this urban knowledge arena, and that's how we came up with the urban action lab and we started off in a very transparent manner with a series of kick workshops and meetings, informal and formal to say that, look, this is not another project. It is not another programme. It is simply a platform and an actor in this platform in the urban action lab can bring up an issue. Our role as academics in the Urban Action Lab will be amongst the several. Then we can go formulate questions, co-design questions and then generate knowledge, analyse it together, generate it together and then for initial R&D activities, co-implement them together to learn further. And then we start learning more more on how to scale up. So the co-production is quite different from participation. And as we know, participation in research and development can be thought of along a gradation right from being passive to being empowered. And there are several steps in between, but being empowered gives a little bit of ownership of the way knowledge is utilised, but it may not necessarily mean that you are deeply involved in the design of the questions, you are deeply involved in the generation of the knowledge and you are involved in the implementation. Co-production goes beyond empowerment. It is not just knowledge we have co-generated, we have tested it out together,

complimented and now you can look out for other opportunities and make bridges were necessary. So that's the other role that the Urban Action lab has played. We have bridged different actors, communities that need a little bit of support in terms of optimisation of micro and small businesses. And then there is the Swedish embassy that has a grant programme. Can you link with it? And we step out of the municipality or Minister of Lands and Housing and Urban Development that is interested in reviewing its urban policy, bringing those issues for formulating the questions, generating information or synthesizing what we already have taking it to them and say in a discussion, this Urban Action Lab platform, this is what the reality is, what you are pursuing with this policy. A good number of it are very good and several of them are really good. Some of them actually are counterproductive to the reality. Then the minister takes that and changes, but we know that routes is very, very, very time consuming. It takes a long time for policy. So we invest more in spaces where action can be realised in relatively short time, and then the successes are picked up very easily by the policy actor.

**Seth Schindler** [00:25:34] That's fascinating, I mean, I can't help but think back to our first question, we talked about planning. There's a book about the history of development during the Cold War by Sara Lorenzini, and she talks about how the mid-20th century you could almost rewriting history of development is almost like writing a history of planning. There was no difference, right? And and in in that sense, you get, you know, you get a project and then you try and get people to participate with you. And what you're talking about has nothing to do with planning because it might take any number of directions, right? I mean, you just don't get it at that at a certain stage, as you said, you step back and it's not even your your initiative. And and so that might explain why co-production is not embraced by planners, right? I mean, it's antithetical to mine perhaps. So that's a great answer. We kind of closed the circle. I'm tempted to leave the the podcast there, but I have one more question. And that's because next week, you probably know there's a meeting in Dakar with the Chinese government, along with many of its African partners. And we haven't spoken about China yet, and I think, you know, we almost have to start by speaking about the Washington consensus. It's essentially fragmented, even in 2006. Dani Rodrik talked about how he had an article entitled Something Like Goodbye Washington Consensus. Hello, Washington Confusion. So even at that time, there were, you know, there was a recognition that the model wasn't working and that was in 2006 and then you had the financial crisis. And so, you know, the Keynesians are back. The state is back. And now China has emerged since the crisis has gone out and is doing Belt and Road Initiative, but all sorts of other initiatives. And and it's it's of course, there's a long history of China in Africa, but I think we would agree that it's scaled that up in the last decade. And so I don't see a single hegemonic knowledge and instead I see a multiplicity of knowledges. And I wonder if you could talk about the implications of that for co-production and the Urban Action Lab. Are there opportunities there because you have all these different knowledge is or is it quite perilous and you have to be careful or.

**Shuaib Lwasa** [00:27:58] I mean, this a very good question, thanks Seth, and it is it reminds me of the Non-Aligned Movement versus the aligned involvement in the geopolitics so many years ago, where you would have to, you know, either lean on one side or the other. In this contemporary world, with the Welcome Washington, Washington Confusion, it seems as though it is much more strategic not to align with any side, but rather be strategic and upfront, transparent about what they co- benefits are the benefits for all parties. And in bringing it down to a little bit to the knowledge spaces for the Urban Action Lab, and the kind of work we do. I think the difference between China's hegemonic approach to development with global north largely and not on the US is something that is worth exploring a little bit more and working with in conjunction with the global north led kind of knowledge spaces because knowledge is knowledge. And what what we're

seeing is the geopolitics is some kind of bringing some kind of ideologies behind those spaces that kind of distinguishes, which is why I mentioned also Iran, because Iran has strongly developed its publication house with several Iranian best journals in their own language, so language is also very important. And of course, China is pushing back a lot of English language publication system and publishing a lot in China. And where they think there is a competitive edge, they allow that to be translated in English, which is the dominating language in this global north, you know, knowledge. So for us, there are opportunities on all sides. And if we detect opportunities and we can negotiate, it's also negotiation in some way, then we can walk together and agree on mutual benefits. The basis would be mutual benefits. So of course, the power is disproportional between us and these different hegemonic knowledge spaces. But that is a challenge to navigate.

**Seth Schindler** [00:30:21] Yeah, great. It is indeed a challenge. And everyone at the urban action that I'm sure you're up for it, you've had made so many contributions so far. We look forward to hearing more about the urban action and in your activities with them and the IPCC in the future. And I hope that you'll join us again at some point in the future. But now I just like to say thank you for today. It was a pleasure speaking with your

**Shuaib Lwasa** [00:30:45] pleasure as well, and thank you for having me. Looking forward to be back here.

**Seth Schindler** [00:30:49] Thank you. Thank you.