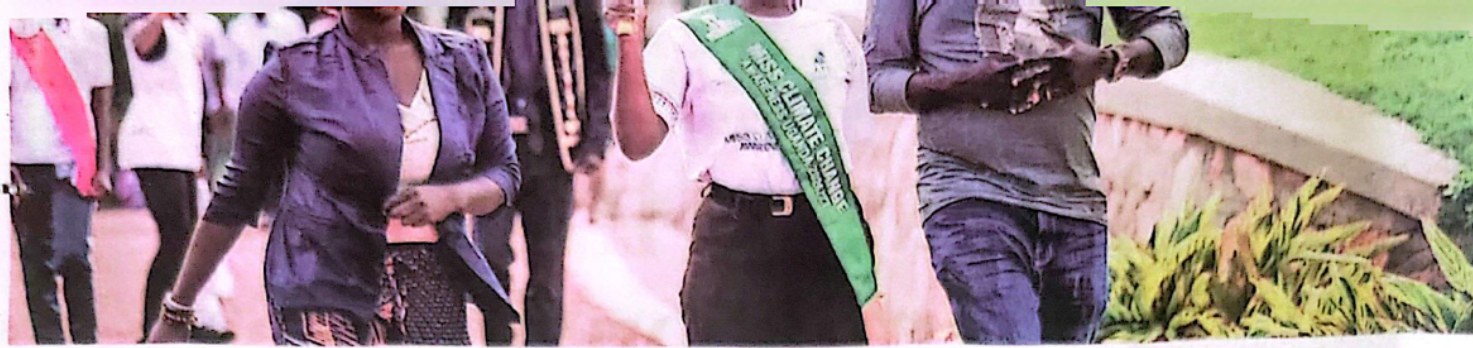




How Uganda's young climate queens are turning lived experience into advocacy

Miss Climate Change Awareness Uganda highlights the growing role of youth-led initiatives in promoting environmental sustainability in the country.

BY PROMISE TWINAMUKYE

The rain does not ask for permission to fall. And it brings along all the effects when it is especially heavy.

Be it in Butalejja, Mbale, Buhweju, Kasese, and Kigezi among other regions. Kabale, in this case is known for steep, terraced, and interlocking hills, deep valleys.

Deep valleys... that is where the now Queen, Patience Kirabo lived.

In the hilly terrain of Kabale District, where slopes define both beauty and burden, her family's home sits in a low-lying area, an unfortunate geography in a changing climate.

What begins as rain in someone else's compound often ends as floodwater in hers.

"Whenever it rained, the water would come into our home. Every wet season, we lived in those conditions. Some people would direct the water away from their homes, and it would come to us," Qn Kirabo recalls.

When climate change became personal

Hundreds of kilometres away from conference halls and climate summits, another young woman who would later wear the Miss Climate-Green Innovation crown, Bridget Kyarikunda, was also experiencing the climate crisis firsthand. Back in 2017, her community endured a prolonged dry spell that devastated crops and livelihoods.

"In our community, most people depend on subsistence farming. People grow food mainly for home consumption and sell only the surplus," she says.

But that year, the rains were delayed for unusually long periods. Crops dried up in the gardens. Planting seasons became unpredictable. Families struggled to find enough food to eat.

"It created a lot of famine. That experience stayed with me," she says.

For her, climate change was never just theory. It was hunger, uncertainty, and watching communities slowly realise that the seasons they

once relied on were no longer predictable. The experience pushed her toward environmental studies and eventually climate activism.

"I felt like I needed to understand what was happening. And more importantly, help people understand it too," she says.

She later pursued a Bachelor's degree in Environmental Science, Technology and Management, hoping knowledge would help her make sense of what her community was experiencing.

Instead, the more she learned, the more urgent the problem became.

A generation growing up in crisis Uganda contributes very little to global carbon emissions, yet it remains among the countries most vulnerable to climate change. Across different regions, young people are witnessing the effects unfold in real time.

In Karamoja, prolonged droughts continue to threaten livelihoods. In eastern Uganda, floods and landslides regularly displace families. In central Uganda, wetlands are disap-

pearing under the pressure of urbanisation and agriculture.

For many young climate advocates, activism does not begin in classrooms or online spaces. It begins at home, with failed harvests, walking longer distances for water, watching parents struggle through seasons that no longer make sense, and increasingly, it begins with frustration.

"One thing people misunderstand about climate change is that they think it is foreign. Yet it is already affecting us here in Uganda," Kirabo says.

In some communities, delayed rains are still explained through superstition.

"People spiritualise climate change. If rains delay, they think someone in the community is holding the rain," Kyarikunda says.

But behind the myths are human actions; deforestation, wetland degradation, poor waste management, and unsustainable land use. In many rural communities, trees continue to disappear to create more farming land.

"People cut down trees for matooke growing because they are looking for quick money. But they forget those same trees help reg-

ulate the environment," she explains.

Discovering advocacy through pageantry

Neither woman initially imagined herself in pageantry. For Kirabo, the journey began almost accidentally during a climate change awareness marathon at Makerere University.

There, among runners and environmental activists, she noticed young women wearing crowns.

Climate queens.

"I had never heard about them before. So I went and asked them, 'How did you get here?' she says.

One of the queens told her she was studying international business. That surprised Kirabo.

"If she could do it from a business background, then maybe I could too," she remembers thinking.

What attracted her was not necessarily the glamour. It was the platform. A way to speak, to educate and be heard. When applications for Miss Climate Change Awareness Uganda opened, she applied.

Regional auditions tested contestants on environmental knowl-



The reality

The most challenging part is that many people are not interested in climate discussions. They see it as boring,

- Bridget Kyarikunda, Miss Climate Change Awareness Uganda

Climate Action

edge, confidence and communication skills. At one audition in Mbarara, Kirabo arrived before even the judges.

"We were about 25 girls competing for only three spots," she recalls.

The judges wanted more than beautiful speeches.

"They would ask, 'What have you actually done in the climate space?'" she says.

Contestants needed projects, ideas, and real community engagement. Kirabo focused on wetland restoration while others worked on waste management and sustainable agriculture.

The pageant, it turned out, was less about beauty and more about visibility.

"It simplifies difficult climate conversations. Through fashion, modelling and talent, you capture people's attention and then educate them," says Kyarikunda.

Beyond the crown

Winning the title changed everything. "My life became more public and more purpose-driven," Kirabo says.

Suddenly, people expected leadership. As Miss Climate Change Awareness Uganda, her days became filled with awareness campaigns, school outreach, mentorship programmes and community engagements.

She participated in Uganda Water and Environment Week, where discussions focused on Uganda Vision 2040 and sustainable development goals. But much of her work still happens far from conference rooms.

In communities, schools, and in conversations with women and youth. One of the initiatives she is most proud of focuses on climate-smart agriculture for women and girls.

"I train communities on practices like urban farming and agroforestry," Kirabo says.

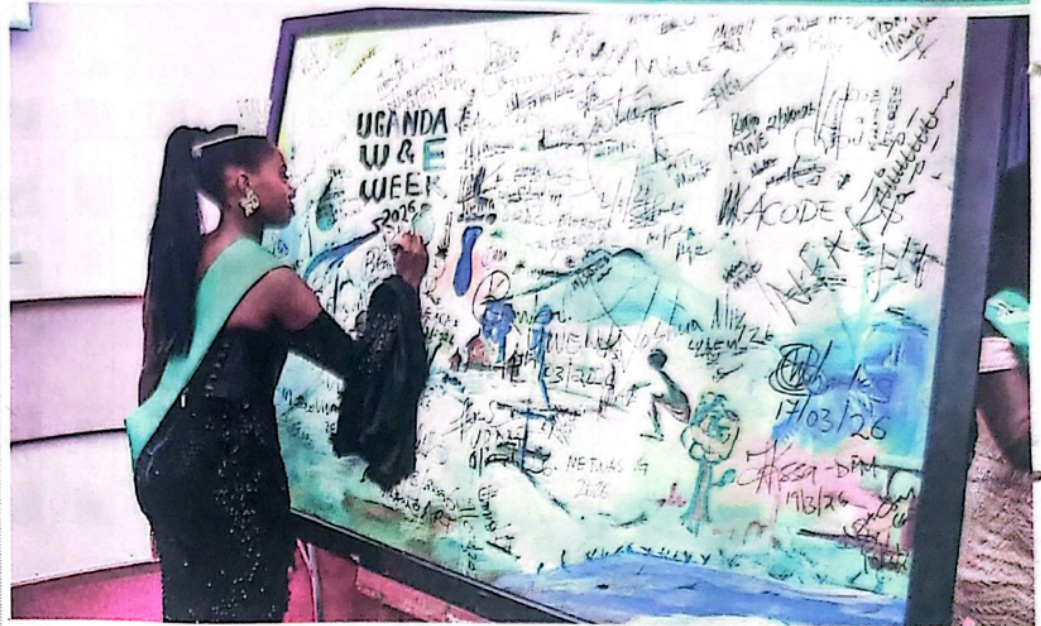
In some projects, women reuse discarded plastic materials to grow crops. In others, like Kyarikunda's, communities are encouraged to embrace clean cooking methods like briquettes instead of relying heavily on charcoal and firewood. Beyond environmental protection, she also emphasises economic survival.

"People need to see that climate-smart practices can also generate income," she says.

That balance between survival and sustainability remains one of the most difficult conversations in Uganda's climate space. Communities struggling financially often prioritise immediate needs over long-term environmental protection.

ABOUT MISS CLIMATE CHANGE AWARENESS UGANDA

It is a purpose-driven environmental advocacy pageant and a concept initiative of Africa Tourism and Environment Initiatives (ATEI) in partnership with the Ministry of Water and Environment. This year's edition was held during Uganda Water and Environment Week (UWEW), and it empowers young women from Uganda's grassroots regions; Albertine, Central, South-Western, Northern, and Eastern, to champion water and environmental conservation, promote climate action, and inspire sustainable practices in their communities.



How do you tell a family not to cut trees when charcoal sales are paying school fees? How do you speak about conservation to communities already struggling to survive?

For many climate advocates, those are the realities they navigate daily.

The weight young advocates carry

Behind the polished photos and crowns lies pressure.

"There is pressure to always have answers," Kirabo admits.

Balancing activism with academics has not been easy. Both climate queens are university students trying to juggle coursework, advocacy, travel and public expectations.

"There are times when activities become too many. But I work with my deputies and delegate where necessary," Kirabo says.

Still, the emotional burden remains heavy. Climate work often means confronting slow progress, public indifference and constant reminders of environmental decline.

"The most challenging part is that many people are not interested in climate discussions. They see it as boring," Kyarikunda says.

Yet climate change touches almost every aspect of life; agriculture, health, education, energy and livelihoods.

"There is awareness. But not always

urgency," Kirabo says.

That disconnect worries them. "If people do not do something, then we are going to face even worse effects," she says.

Youth taking up space

Despite the challenges, both women believe young people are becoming more engaged in climate action.

"When I started advocating in 2019, we were very few. Now the numbers are growing," Kyarikunda says.

Across Uganda, more youth-led environmental initiatives are emerging. Young people are organising clean-up campaigns, tree planting drives, recycling projects and climate education programmes.

But many still lack funding and technical support.

"Youth have ideas. But they need support to implement them," Kirabo says.

She believes climate advocacy can no longer be left to older generations alone.

"We are no longer leaders of tomorrow. We are leaders now," she says.

It is a statement that feels especially powerful coming from young women whose activism was born not from privilege, but from witnessing climate hardship firsthand.

Reimagining climate conversations

For the environmental scientist, Miss Climate - Green Innovation 2025, one of the biggest goals moving forward is changing how climate conversations happen.

Too often, she says, discussions remain technical and inaccessible. That is why she wants to use social media more intentionally.

"Most people are on social media. So if we use it well, we can reach many more people," Kyarikunda says.

She also hopes to see climate discussions become more visible in mainstream media, television and newspapers.

Because ultimately, climate change is not just an environmental issue. It is a human story, a story about food, water, health, migration, and survival. And increasingly, it is also a story about young people refusing to stay silent.

More than a crown

When asked what happens after the title ends, neither woman speaks about moving on. Instead, they speak about continuing. "Climate action is not a one-day thing," she says.

The crown may eventually pass to someone else, but the work remains. And perhaps that is what makes this generation of climate queens different. Their advocacy is not built on abstract ideals but on reality.

Kirabo signs the Water Week Board. Climate Change Awareness Queen says Climate action is not a one-day thing. PHOTO/CO COURTESY