

The AgVocate Podcast
The Path to Empowerment - Risper Wanja Njagi & Jesus Madrazo
S01E05 Transcript

{The AgVocate theme starts}

Voice Over - Welcome to The AgVocate. The podcast that advocates for agriculture. I'm your host Simon Pampena.

With this series of podcasts we'll be telling stories from the people of this ever-growing community, be it industry leaders or those just starting out, because each and every one of them shares a passion for Ag and are doing their part in feeding a hungry planet.

{The AgVocate theme ends}

Voice Over - Risper Wanja Njagi is a young African leading a new generation of AgVocates in the country that she loves.

Risper - I'm from central Kenya and I am a farm girl - you can say that. Literally everyone [from] where I come from in central Kenya is a farmer.

Voice Over - Risper was one of 100 delegates from across the world that attended Bayer's Youth Ag Summit in Brussels 2017. While her success delighted friends and family, her parents had some reservations.

Risper - When I told my parents that I'm going for an agricultural summit they were excited because you know you're travelling outside the country - that's a source of pride because their girl is going to be a role model in the village because she travels... you know that's the way it is... but they're like Risper you know farming can't exactly earn you are living - just go, enjoy the summit, take pictures but when you come back you need to finish law school and get a job as a lawyer because that's the only way you can earn a living.

Voice Over - The concerns of Risper's parents reflected the attitude of Kenyan society at large. Namely, that a career in agriculture is considered undesirable, to say the least.

Risper - Agriculture, number one, is not celebrated, at least that is not how I grew up knowing agriculture to be. So, when I was doing my primary school, the guys who would fail in exams or the noisemakers in class, the punishment that would be given is to go to the coffee farms or to the corn fields to dig out all the weeds and carry some farm produce. So agriculture has never been an exciting thing. We always knew [that] the people that do agriculture are the ones who do not understand things in class, the ones who make noise, the ones who do not have perspectives of doing well in their lives. And you may be surprised to find that when we were in school they would tell us 'you know, you guys don't want to be like your parents you see your parent is a farmer - your mother is a farmer, your father is a farmer, your great-grandmother is a farmer, your grandfather was a farmer and you guys want to still follow through the same thing. If you do not work hard you're going to end up being like them.' So, you only do farming if every other thing has gone wrong in your life.

Voice Over - But for Risper, social conscience made her think differently about agriculture. Applying to the Youth Ag Summit was part something bigger she saw for herself.

The AgVocate Podcast
The Path to Empowerment - Risper Wanja Njagi & Jesus Madrazo
S01E05 Transcript

Risper - Like, I wasn't even stressed that I wasn't going to get picked for the Summit because it's like, you know, I'm getting prepared because Africa needs me and exposure is one of the best ways to grow.

Voice Over - Risper hopes to see change come from within. International help is important but she knows lasting change needs to be driven by those who have the most to gain: the people who live there.

Risper - My greatest belief is that there is a mindset within Kenya, within Africa, that we need to do away with. One of those attitudes that we need to get rid of is that we can't do stuff on our own unless it's a person from maybe Europe or the Americas or Australia that are coming to help us. It always annoys me like, literally, I have these conversations with my classmates every single day. My vision for Africa is to like, bring up a generation of, of Africans who think differently about development, Africans who think differently about who they are, people who believe more in themselves, in their ability, in their talents, in their capability to bring to fruition what they've always wanted. If you think we can plan our cities, well then go ahead and do it. My greatest dream for myself is that I'll be the person that brings change in the way Africans look at themselves.

Voice Over - And what's exciting is that industry leaders understand the power of people like Risper and what they're trying to do. I spoke to Jesus Madrazo, Head of Agricultural Affairs and Sustainability at Bayer Crop Science and got his thoughts about Risper and other young change-makers.

Jesus - Young generations like Risper are wired in a different way. They see the opportunity, they, they don't see the same limitations that in my generation we used to see, and they are not only far more open-minded and far more creative... they are decisively engaged. They have an incredible sense of responsibility, they're thinking about sustainability, they're thinking about doing things the right way, they're thinking about a more inclusive world [and] coupled with the evolution of technology and innovation I think creates a new paradigm - a very positive paradigm - for developing countries like Kenya.

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Voice Over - Kenya is a young nation. Half of its citizens are under 20 years of age with almost one quarter between 20 and 30 years of age. In Kenya there is a disconnect between the aspirations of all these young people and the opportunities available to them. Reports have shown that a majority of young Kenyans have high hopes and ambitions. However, poor macroeconomic performance, a lack of labor market opportunities, and an education system that suffers from problems of access, quality, and relevance mean that many young people are unable to translate their aspirations into a productive and fulfilling future.

But there is hope...

According to a 2017 report by Tufts University's Fletcher School of Business, Kenya is the fourth fastest growing digital economy in the world and the fastest in Africa. With the report noting that the country's digital economy is still in its infancy there is still plenty of room to

The AgVocate Podcast
The Path to Empowerment - Risper Wanja Njagi & Jesus Madrazo
S01E05 Transcript

grow. New opportunities could revolutionise the Kenyan economy creating a generation of entrepreneurs across multiple sectors. Given that the average age of Kenyan farmers is currently 60 years old, farming itself is ripe for digital disruption.

And this is what young Kenyans like Risper recognise. That their country needs people with the initiative to create their own opportunities. People who are not going to wait to be given a job, but instead go out and find what jobs need to be done.

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Risper hopes this entrepreneurial spirit extends beyond just digital technologies.

Risper - Kenya needs people with basic skills - not even the super qualified professionals - but we need people who can answer you know, problems, who can provide solutions to problems that the population is facing.

Voice Over - Part of the skill shortage has come from a narrow understanding of which careers lead to success.

Risper - Engineering or medicine or lawyering [laughs to herself] as I am in right now, those were the careers of the elite families after colonisation so like, I think what we need is decolonisation of the mind - that is my thinking.

Voice Over - And Risper hopes that her exposure to new ideas can bring about a change of mindset in Kenya.

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Her first trip to Belgium was one such example.

Risper - I went to Brussels for instance and then I find that in the airport they have a recycling incinerator or... okay, that big - there's like a big thing for recycling - and like 'how do you even have this?' we need this for our city alone not even in the airport. Now, like every time I see things in Nairobi, waste is highly mismanaged, I'm like, I wish someone would just come and start their own recycling company here you know, because like I see opportunities and almost everything due to exposure.

{airport ambience ends}

Voice Over - Risper and her team at the Youth Ag Summit were tasked with creating an innovative way to *empower* young people in developing countries - *young women* in particular.

Risper - Having come from an emerging economy myself - Kenya - and Ricci from my team was also from, he's from Tanzania and we had Apoorva from India, we had like very great perspectives on the problems that we can say women go through in agriculture and just basically young people.

The AgVocate Podcast
The Path to Empowerment - Risper Wanja Njagi & Jesus Madrazo
S01E05 Transcript

Voice Over - And they called their project AGRIKUA

Risper - AGRI is for agriculture and KUA is a Kiswahili word that means 'grow'. KUA is like 'develop', KUA means like 'moving forward' - it's basically like, you keep improving yourself - that is what KUA means in Kiswahili.

Voice Over - And it's not just Risper's team that understands the potential of empowering women in agriculture - industry sees it as well.

Jesus - As I travel the world I've seen this time and time again in smallholder farming communities. When you see a woman in charge of the farming operation, what, what you see is a small-scale entrepreneur that is thinking about a business and when they make decisions on how to invest in that business, they're not only thinking about themselves, they're thinking about their family, their communities. So we have many proof points that you know, women are far better at doing this than men. They're far more thoughtful, they are better [at] planning, they think about the long term, they're thinking about their kids, they're thinking then about their community, they're thinking much more holistically about sharing and in engaging and including others so they are far better at socialising the work, in sharing the benefits of that work, and so they are much better business people.

Voice Over - The problem is how to connect young women with these opportunities. And that's where Rispa and her team were able to fill in the missing pieces. Starting with a general job description.

Risper - When we looked at young women in agriculture and speaking from my perspective in Kenya, look at this as you are a problem solver. How many number of Kenyans go hungry every single day because either they can't afford food or they live in places where food doesn't grow and the roads are bad so we can't get food there in time. So when, when we appeal to come to agriculture we appeal to them in all areas of agriculture not just farming itself. If you want to get food to the market you are more involved in how infrastructure effects food security in the country.

Voice Over - And so AGRIKUA took shape as a tool to make change happen - a website that provides open access to educational material, courses, and opportunities for young women across the world.

Risper - So AGRIKUA's main goal is to provide knowledge that can empower people to become solution providers for themselves and for the people surrounding them. So what we did is we figured if we do a digital platform that is providing knowledge on best practices, how to improve the way you look at things, seeing opportunities, grants that are available for young women, funding opportunities for young women either [those] who want to go to school like scholarships or those who want to start businesses but do not exactly know where to get the finances to start up - we figured if we provided such a solution we are one step closer to achieving food security as well as an improved life for every young woman that gets involved in it.

Voice Over - Digital technologies have changed people's lives all over the world.

The AgVocate Podcast
The Path to Empowerment - Risper Wanja Njagi & Jesus Madrazo
S01E05 Transcript

In emerging economies, internet-enabled devices can connect people to information faster than ever before. This is the power of AGRIKUA.

Jesus - Hundreds of thousands [of] small holder farmers that are so fragmented and distributed in so many places and technology is solving a lot of those challenges. Today, most of those small holders, you know, have at least a phone with access to data - whether it's a smartphone or not - they have access to data... and by having access to data they can be rich and they can get information and knowledge to be able to be applied in your agricultural practices: when to commercialise the crop, what type of agronomic practices to put in place in their own field because they're getting real-time data on how the weather interacts in their unique space, and whether they're going to have, for example an agronomic challenge ahead of time and they can do something about it with the insights that have been provided [to] them. So that was unthinkable just a few years ago and young generations are looking through the lens of - you know - what's possible based on this incredible technology enablement.

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Voice Over - And out of all the fantastic projects that were developed at the Youth Ag Summit in Brussels, only one could take out the top prize. A grant of 10,000 euros and ongoing mentorship. That project was developed by a team of like-minded change-makers who thought locally but wanted to act globally - that project was AGRIKUA.

Risper - Wow, that was like one of my highest moments ever... [takes big breath] it was me, it was my team, it was my mentor... when AGRIKUA was announced as the best team and the best idea and we got the funding, I can't tell you how excited we were! I think literally everyone in our team cried - every one of us. That was a moment that no one can take away from us but above all that was like, the extreme mark of how just believing in an idea and giving it a try - let's see what happens - and I think up to date I've taken so many risks since the Youth Ag Summit because I was like, I mean, if we got that in the Youth Ag Summit and all we did was sit down, think, and give it a try, then... I don't think there's anything else that can possibly go wrong by me trying out new things.

Jesus - Young, creative, energetic people like Risper that can proactively engage with a tremendous level of passion, creativity, ingenuity, bringing new ideas in a very inclusive and collaborative ways - that's how you have a multiplicative effect to be able to address something as complex as food security. Our job in leadership in companies like Bayer is to clear the way for them to really make an impact.

{music ends}

Voice Over - AGRIKUA is now live. Visit the website agrikua.wordpress.com and follow them on FaceBook and Twitter.

{The AgVocate theme starts}

Voice Over - Thanks for listening to The AgVocate. This podcast is brought to you by the team behind Bayer's Youth Ag Summit. Follow us on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram.

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S01E05 Transcript

Google 'Youth Ag Summit' and visit the website. Subscribe to our newsletter and be part of the AgVocate community.

Special thanks to Risper and Jesus for making time in their very busy schedules to talk to us.

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