
Lessons in Sustainable Change Management: #deCOALonize Kenya



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The campaign to prevent the construction of a coal power plant on an idyllic island in the Indian Ocean.

At the 2021 UN Climate Change Conference (COP26), Kenya’s President Uhuru Kenyatta showcased his country’s progress on climate action with global leaders, in particular committing to a **32 percent** reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by 2030. Kenya is blessed with abundant renewable energy resources and is Africa’s leading producer of **geothermal energy**. It is surprising, then, that the government had previously planned to establish East and Central Africa’s first **coal-fired power plant** in Lamu, a tranquil island off the northeast coast of Kenya.

Lamu Island

Conde Nast described the island as a “unique blend of African, Far Eastern and Arab architecture”; Lamu Old Town has **UNESCO** World Heritage status

as one of the world's best preserved Swahili settlements. The island has a vibrant local fishing community and is home to a thriving marine ecosystem that includes ancient mangroves.

One could not pick a less likely location for a coal power plant. What led Kenya to pursue this strategy despite its apparent wealth in renewable resources? The short answer is infrastructure development. To fuel its ambitions of growth, Kenya faced the dilemma of choosing between short-term exploitation of fossil fuels and the more sustainable approach of long-term investment in renewable energy.

Further compounding the question is the China debt issue. In a review of Kenya's debt profile, the University of Nairobi attributes a steep increase in public debt to infrastructure spending. And after the World Bank, China is Kenya's biggest foreign creditor, accounting for a third of Kenya's 2021-22 external debt service costs. This debt stems from financing contracts that support Chinese companies creating infrastructure, as well as operationalising and managing revenue collection.

Cheap energy from coal would mean faster project completion, lower operating costs, higher profit margins and faster loan repayment for Kenya. Coal powered both the Industrial Revolution and China's recent quest for rapid modernisation and global trade dominance.

The government's push for coal is contrasted with Save Lamu, a community organisation which spearheaded a successful national campaign dubbed #Decoalonize Kenya. The legal battle resulted in a landmark judicial victory for Save Lamu in 2019, when the Environmental Tribunal of Kenya upheld a ruling revoking Amu Power Company's licence to construct the coal plant. This remarkable story contains important lessons in how to lead and manage sustainable change, and overcoming strong exploitative forces. It's a journey of the unconscious, working with partners, engaging strategically and managing resistance by cultivating an emotional connection.

Working with the unconscious

The Unconscious – emotions and thoughts outside of awareness – exerts a powerful influence on decision making. Arguably, underlying Kenya's 2030 ambition is a colonial assumption about development in the form of exploitation and industrialisation. In fact, Save Lamu clarified this unconscious influence, transforming it into an equally powerful symbol of

opposition with the hashtag [#deCOALonize](#). This association with colonialism generated strong public support for the anti-coal campaign. The hashtag was coined in a bid to expand the anti-coal campaign beyond Lamu and capture the hearts and minds of the wider Kenyan population. It proved crucial to the campaign's national and international success.

For a deeper understanding of the campaign, we spoke to [Omar Elmawi](#), outgoing coordinator of Save Lamu, and founder of the deCOALonize movement. Originally from Lamu and lawyer by profession, he gave his views how the movement can teach sustainable change management.

The power of partnership

When the coal plant was first proposed, the campaign team's knowledge about the impact and benefits of coal was limited. Thus, the first step was to convene experts who clarified the objectives of the campaign to prevent coal mining in Lamu. In partnership with like-minded institutions including Natural Justice and The East African Institute for Constitutional Reform, Save Lamu team members gained expertise that enabled the documentation of key gaps in the environmental impact assessment.

In Omar's view, significant community engagement made this approach sustainable. Like many indigenous populations across the world, Lamu's community has been historically economically marginalised. Due to indigenous communities' proximity to natural resources, the exploitation of natural resources benefits the national economy and other interests' short term while destroying these communities.

As highlighted at COP26, indigenous communities and their ways of life are [sacrificed](#) when climate change action is postponed. Omar described how the team embraced all those who supported the campaign to join and contribute in any way they chose, including the Beach Management Unit and fisherfolk who were key pillars of the campaign.

The importance of strategic engagement

From the outset, the team was clear that "this is a campaign and not an organisation". Accordingly, they prioritised: ensuring that they had a strategy, that it was relevant and that it determined their actions. They regularly revisited and revised the campaign strategy, involving the community in identifying priorities. Thus, their strategy directly reflected the

needs and concerns of the community, who were effectively the campaign's customers and shareholders.

This is in stark contrast with the state agencies and AMU Power's approach of implementing development on behalf of the community without assessing the community's views. In fact, this lack of consultation became the lynchpin of the court case against the coal plant, as public participation in national development projects is enshrined in Kenya's constitution.

An emotional connection

Resistance to change is inevitable. What makes the difference for sustainable change is engagement with the resistance. The government sought to terminate or even deny resistance, engaging only with individuals and organisations supporting the coal plant and ignoring critics. AMU Power argued that the Save Lamu campaign should not be recognised as legitimate.

The Save Lamu team faced the daunting task of persuading local landowners not to sell their land to the coal consortium. The team understood that ignoring or striving to quiet the voice of resistance does not dispel it but can in fact make it louder. Instead, they sought to directly engage with the coal plant supporters. They leveraged their network of partners to send the community leaders to India and South Africa to see the effects of so-called clean coal plants there.

These field trips meaningfully shifted the views of local leadership and businesses. The social media campaign also leveraged video and testimonial evidence from the trips.

Insights from Save Lamu for Leading Sustainable Change

- 1.** Reflect on the unconscious emotions and assumptions driving your change programme. If they are colonial in nature – short-term, exploitative and focused on the needs of one faction – this is not sustainable change. Eventually it will falter or fail.
- 2.** Sustainable change is inclusive, collaborative and strengthens partnerships across communities, the organisation, industries and national borders. Effective leaders engage with all stakeholders, including initial resisters. For sustainable change, more inclusion is better.
- 3.** Practitioners of sustainable change engage with resistance. Ignoring resistance costs time, money and potentially the entire project or even your career. Instead, welcome resisters by respecting and empathising with their concerns. Resisters will reciprocate, and together you will find the way forward.

Success for the community

The COP26 [coal pledge](#) highlighted the struggle world leaders face in balancing their demand for energy and climate action. The need for effective sustainable change management practices is substantial and will increase.

The story of Save Lamu and deCOALonize Kenya provides a contrast of two approaches to change. On the one hand was the government's approach, potentially with good intentions and with an eye towards Kenya's National Strategy. But its approach was single-minded and failed to engage the full

breadth of parties with a stake in Lamu's future. When encountering resistance or new information, their response was denial. By contrast, Save Lamu utilised a sustainable approach to change, with broad and inclusive engagement at the heart of its movement. The campaign continually adapted as concerns and new information emerged, positively engaging all involved, both the original supporters and opponents of the coal plant.

The Kenyan government has since launched the largest **geothermal** energy project in Africa, which will cement the country's position among the top 10 global geothermic energy producers. This may signal the start of a full-fledged renewable energy strategy for Kenya that can serve as a model for the region and the world.

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