

**CLAUDE**

**GRUNITZKY:**

Hello, everyone. Welcome. We're so, so delighted that you're here with us. I know that some of you are still watching the film, because it started at six, and it's exactly 90 minutes. So we put it on cue for you to jump straight from the film to the webinar. But for those who are already here, and who actually came in on time, I am truly delighted to welcome you to the launch, the official soft launch of True Africa University.

And it's my pleasure to introduce our Sustainable Development in Africa series with this wonderful panel on the film *The Great Green Wall*. So I'm going to get into *The Great Green Wall* later, because it is really our opening salvo. But I also wanted to tell you about True Africa University, which is a new higher learning community that is really dedicated to providing online courses, as well as webinars like this one, and master classes, and educational materials for Africans. And being a native son of Togo I always insist on the fact that it was created by Africans for Africans.

And so my name is Claude Grunitzky. I am an entrepreneur from Togo, a media entrepreneur, and a journalist. I'm also an executive producer on the film *The Great Green Wall*. I'm an MIT alum, and I'm really, really proud that MIT has been supporting the launch of True Africa University for more than a year now. And I particularly want to thank the teams at MIT Center for International Studies-- which is hosting this webinar, the team at MIT Africa, and the team at MIT J-WEL-- which is the World Education Lab.

So now I want to give you a bit of a primer on the actual Great Green Wall. For those who came in-- because I knew some people were coming in and were not going to have an opportunity truly to actually see the film, because they couldn't do both-- I wanted to give you a bit of a primer on this film, *The Great Green Wall*. And for those who actually saw the film before coming on, we'll give you a bit of a different perspective before we launch into the discussion.

So one of the favorite things about Zoom now is that we get to share our screen. And I will now share my screen with you. And I will present just a few images to get you thinking about why we consider the Great Green Wall to be such an important movement actually. And the thing about the Great Green Wall is, in some ways, it's

still the best kept secret. And I think that this community here that is actually participating in this webinar should be early adopters and knowing why we consider the Great Green Wall to be really significant.

And so for me the reason we wanted to launch True Africa University with a screening of *The Great Green Wall* and a discussion around the film is because essentially the whole concept was conceived by Thomas Sankara. In the beginning of the film, we show this sentence-- and it's really the leitmotif of the film-- and it's the sentence, the first sentence, "we must dare to invent the future".

And Thomas Sankara for many people like myself are from Togo, Burkina Faso, where Thomas Sankara was a leader in the 1980s until he was assassinated as the president of Burkina Faso. He was one of those freedom fighters that really led the liberation movements across Africa. And in many ways he was also a visionary. And I think that it's important that we pay tribute to him and to his spirit as we embark on this discussion around the importance of the Great Green Wall.

The project is about 18% complete now. And just to remind everyone, we are trying to work with the African Union, the World Bank, the United Nations, various countries around the world, various African communities, to really bring a wall of trees, actually, which is in a way more of a mosaic of trees that would go from Senegal all the way to Djibouti.

And as you saw in the film, there's a lot of issues related to the degraded landscapes and the desertification in the Sahel Region. And the objective is to create 10 million jobs and restore 100 million hectares of degraded land. And so this is a really important part of a strategy to absorb more than 250 million tons of carbon.

So again, 8,000 kilometers, a new world wonder. And there's about 135 million people involved in this project that we're considering a solution to a global climate emergency. Those who've been to the Sahel, they know that temperatures are rising much faster than the rest of the world. And water scarcity is fueling conflict and food insecurity. And that's leading to a major crisis of migration, a mass exodus. I'm sure you've seen images.

Those who didn't get to see the film-- I'm sure you've seen images of young African

migrants hopping on these boats trying to get to Europe, whether it's Lampedusa in Italy, whether it's in Spain. It's just a really, really sad state of affairs. And we believe that the Great Green Wall could be part of the solution once again.

And again, the initiative now that we are very much involved in is called Great Green Wall X. And it's actually more about shifting the power into the hands of actual citizens, actual Africans along the countries of the Great Green Wall, as opposed to going to this default mechanism, and default mentality, and default mindset that the United Nations and western nations and big corporations should be providing solutions for Africans. So we're really trying to find ways to get Africans along the Great Green Wall to be more involved in the movement and this massive effort.

The mission is to invent, to discover, and really identify new open source business models that can lead to superfoods, that can lead to new agricultural products coming out of it. And this can really impact the livelihoods of, as I said, more than 135 million people.

So I'm not going to go through all of this in detail, because I'm going to really let Alex Asen, one of our speakers, and Kemo Fatty talk more about this Great Green Wall X movement and what some of the models for rapid scaling are. But we really want you-- if you like the story of the Great Green Wall, if you like the potential of the Great Green Wall, if you are like us a bit on the optimistic side-- we would love for you to get involved in the movement. And we'll tell you how.

So before we jump into the discussion, which I've been waiting for, I again want to thank MIT Center for International Studies, which I'm actually a research affiliate there. And the aim is to support and promote international research and education at MIT. We produce research that creatively addresses global issues, while helping to educate the next generation of global citizens. The website is [cis.mit.edu](http://cis.mit.edu), and this webinar is also supported by the MIT-Africa Program, which is based on the MIT Center for International Studies. And the idea is to really empower MIT students and faculty to advance knowledge and solve the world's greatest challenges by connecting them to the leading researchers, companies, and other partners in African countries. So the website is [misti.mit.edu](http://misti.mit.edu).

And now I wanted you to-- just if you want to screen share, capture the screen with a Great Green Wall.com website, and also visit our TRUEAfricaUniversity.com website, which just went live yesterday. We will actually be uploading this webinar discussion on the TRUE Africa University website. And we will do so for the next 11 weeks, because we have an 11 week webinar series to really tackle a lot of the issues around sustainable development in Africa.

So with that very long intro I wanted to introduce our five panelists. I don't really want to call them just panelists, because they're really champions of the Great Green Wall in very, very, very different ways. First is Inna Modja. She is a singer and model from Mali. She is the driving protagonist behind this film, and we're going to get to talk to her as well.

Then Jared P. Scott is the director of the film, of this award-winning film I must say. We won many awards around the world, and I'm very proud to state that once again. Fernando Meirelles is one of the executive producers of the film, and I will introduce him later. But he is very well known throughout the world for creating some of the most incredible films of the last 20 years, including films such as *City of God* , *The Constant Gardener* , and the very latest one that I love so much which was called *The Two Popes* . He's currently working on another film around environmental issues.

We have Kemo Fatty, who is a new friend. He is an environmentalist, a conservationist from Gambia. And he heads an organization called Green-Up Gambia, in addition to working with Alex Asen at Civic. Alex is really the person that I know who is the most knowledgeable about the Great Green Wall. He has spent the last few years conceiving the idea of this film, bringing people together to make this film happen, and he is a very close collaborator of mine.

So with that, I'm very, very happy to tell you that I'm Claude Grunitzky, the kid from Togo who went to MIT and got the support from MIT to launch True Africa University. So now we could just jump straight into the discussion. And we'll start with Inna, because Inna, you are the star of this film. You are magnetic in this film. I really wanted to ask you-- in visiting Senegal and going back to your own country, Mali, and going to Nigeria, and going to Niger-- which has the highest fatality rate in the world, and ending up in Ethiopia-- what did you learn about yourself and about your

relationship to Africa when you embarked on this project as the lead protagonist and actress in the film, the documentary film *The Great Green Wall*?

**INNA MODJA:** Hello, everyone. Hi, Claude. Thank you so much for having me. For me going through this journey, I went thinking that I knew a lot about Africa, because I was born and raised in Mali and in Ghana. And I realized that I know nothing, because I grew up in a city in Bamako and in Accra. And the rural communities-- I thought that I knew about them, because I was traveling for a long time all over Mali-- but I realized that what they are going through and the issues that they are facing I don't know nothing about it.

I didn't know their struggles really well. I heard about them. But truly spending time with them, seeing how they became resilient, and they are fighting every day for-- they are in survival mode. And everything that I thought about-- I learned about agriculture, I learned about locally how they are putting in place systems to fight climate change. I was so impressed. And also the beautiful cultures that are very similar, but also has something really different-- I learned a lot.

**CLAUDE GRUNITZKY:** You know, there's a scene in the film that is probably my-- I love many, many scenes in the film, but the one that really had me in tears was when you were in tears, because you actually spent time with these migrants who were going through Libya with this dream to get to Europe and think that was going to be the El Dorado for them. And the poverty, and the desperation, the starvation-- how did you get to relate to those people and really understand what their struggle was, and in turn, kind of think about what we could do as Africans to stop this from being the perennial African story?

**INNA MODJA:** I think what was the most striking for me is that one of the men that I met in the desert actually grew up-- was born and grew up-- in the same area as me. We could have been neighbors. And thinking about it, and thinking that one of my brothers could have been in that situation if I wasn't born in my family, if I didn't have the chance to go to school and have an environment that protected me a little bit more and gave me also the opportunity to not be in the survival mode, and seeing them in that desert for a moment, I lost hope, seeing that they were really stuck.

One of them told me that they felt like they were in a well. And I didn't know what to

tell them. I didn't know what was the solution at that moment. When I was seeing them I couldn't picture a future for them. And that really brought me to tears. And it was so difficult to not be able to comfort them. Just knowing that they were born Africans and that was the reason why they were in this situation without any future, any hope, it just broke my heart.

And I promised myself after we left that desert that I will do my best to have young people have a dream bigger, and that our dream comes back to the continent. Because for a long time, the African dream has been outside of the continent. A lot of people-- when I went to Agadez, I met a lot of young people in a migrant camp. And having them coming from all over Africa to Agadez in Niger and try to go to Libya, a lot of them died in the desert.

And I heard their stories. I wanted them to believe in Africa, to believe that the African dream can be built in Africa. So that's the reason why for me in this film. It was so important to picture the Great Green Wall as an African dream, because it could be an ideal solution for so many people, for millions of people. And that we as African-- we start building our continent, and we start creating opportunities and jobs for our people and not have them dying in the desert, or in the sea, or we see them in Europe. Their life is so miserable. They have this idea of an El Dorado, and it's really a false idea. And for me, as an African woman from the Sahel, I will do everything until the Great Green Wall is achieved and done, to bring to them, to be part of the solution and try to have these brothers and sisters out of this terrible situation.

**CLAUDE  
GRUNITZKY:**

Thank you. And speaking of the African dream, one of the dreams of True Africa University is really to create conditions through education where Africans can control again their own destiny and really live their dreams and access the best education. So that we can transform our continent as opposed to always kind of looking for handouts and people trying to save us.

Jared, you're an American. A white American, obviously, who actually went to Africa to make this film. And what was it for you, as an experience, being an outsider coming into these very interesting environments? Whether it's around Lake Chad, or the heart of Nigeria with the Boko Haram crisis all the way to Ethiopia. What was it for you, and what did you discover about Africa and Africans in this journey making

this film?

**JARED P.  
SCOTT:**

Sure. I mean, I think it's worth noting I'm the only American on the project. I'm a white American. It was one of the first things that I-- I remember when I was-- you know this project kind of came about where Claude, you, and Fernando, and Alex, and Inna predated me. And I was able to walk into this to start working with this amazing team.

And I remember when I was engaging in that I reached out to a producer friend of mine. And I said, there's this amazing story about this Great Green Wall. There's this fascinating musician and activist, Inna Modja. It's going to be amazing. And she kind of looked at me, and she's like, are you sure you're the right person to direct this film? And of course with the excitement you don't always stop and think, well, am I. And I think-- you know I remember Inna and I met actually in Paris for a cup of coffee. And I think we talked about this. Just like, hey, should-- do you want me to be the person who helps tell this story?

And we ended up coming to the agreement of yes, because we ended up doing it. But yeah, I had to kind of figure out what's my role in this. As a director, we have our hands in every aspect of the project. And also I have these instincts where I want to be like, hey, let's do this, let's do that. But at the same time, you have to listen. And I think that listening never stops, whether it's to Inna, whether it's to everybody that we meet on the ground.

Sometimes I don't see myself as a filmmaker but as a messenger, as a conduit. And I think you're always trying to channel these stories. As Stephen King says, some of the best stories-- like he unearths them. They already exist. You just have to unearth them. I was able to kind of go there and just try to listen, to try to put all these different pieces together in a way that I felt would make sense. But again, it's an orchestra. Everyone who's on this panel now and the rest of the team, we all had a part to play in that.

But traveling to Africa, I felt like I was in good hands. We were following Inna. The idea was to experience it through her ears and her eyes, not my own. I think that was a really important thing-- as the whole filmmaking team was quite international-- that we weren't coming as outsiders, the Global North kind of infiltrating the Global

South and extracting a story, but actually immersing ourselves with Inna. And again to try to absorb, to try to listen, to try to capture the texture and the tone and the feel on the ground.

So it was really never about me. I would just treat myself kind of like an audience member. If I was in the audience, what would I want to see here, what would I need to understand. I think I was initially drawn to this though by the idea of climate injustice. I've told a lot of climate change stories. And I think initially, although this is a hopeful film about this burgeoning Great Green Wall, although this was a musical journey as well where Inna was able to express a lot of what she experienced through music, it's also a climate change cautionary tale.

And I think what really drew me in at the beginning, too, was this idea of-- I struggle with this-- this idea that those who have done the least to contribute to the problem of the global climate crisis are bearing the brunt of that crisis. This idea of climate injustice really sticks with me. And I really wanted to go to the heart of the Sahel where, as you said Claude, this is an area of the world where the temperature is rising one point five times faster than the global average. And there are consequences to the hyper-consumption of the Global North. And I wanted to be able to tell that story as well. So I was really just kind of looking to go there and try to be a sponge and soak everything up. And we ended up with the film that we did.

**CLAUDE  
GRUNITZKY:**

I remember, Jared, when we first spoke about the film-- when you first came on the project, because I was in the project I think for two years before you came on-- you kind of opened my eyes to the importance of Lake Chad and what was happening there, and why it was important for all the countries around Lake Chad. Do you mind-- if it is part of the film, but some of the participants here did not get to see the film, because they were busy as I said-- do you want to maybe explain a little bit about the crisis around the shrinking of Lake Chad and what it means for people's livelihoods and everyday ambitions?

**JARED P.  
SCOTT:**

Yeah, sure, and I'm no expert. And I have to constantly remind myself to be humble. I remember sitting down with some higher ups from the UN. And I was talking about the African dream with them, and they were all African. I was like, what am I doing, I should just be listening to you guys, but really quickly realized my mistake. And I think when it comes to Lake Chad there's far more better experts and I.

But I think we've seen the gradual shrinking of Lake Chad. And we know that climate change exacerbates these problems. So if climate change is then creating the conditions, whether it's rainfall and variability, whether it's more droughts, it's usually more water when you don't need it and less water when you do, then that creates conditions like Lake Chad where you see the shrinking. You see the loss of arable land. You see less water, more scarcity. And that can lead to issues.

There's a lot of marginalized communities along Lake Chad. This is where Boko Haram has had a stronghold. A lot of people in our story-- Inna sits down with the former Boko Haram, both abductees that were abducted. But one was a former fighter forced to fight, and one was a former bride turned suicide bomber. Absolutely devastating stories. But their stories were the same, that their families were farming families. The farming became no longer possible at some point. And then their family basically went on the move.

This is a story that we hear a lot, right. That there's resources-- those resources are degraded, denuded, or made scarce-- and then people then migrate. And oftentimes these migrations happen internally, before they happen cross-border and then cross-continent. And just seeing that Lake Chad could be such a flash point for seeing a lot of these issues come together was quite eye opening. And I think Inna's experience with those two beautiful souls who had endured so much pain and inflicted so much pain-- to see how that plays out through the lens of our human experience was quite eye opening.

**CLAUDE  
GRUNITZKY:**

Thank you. Thank you, Jared. Fernando, you're Brazilian, and you are a world famous director. And we actually met in Morocco. And you are actually the culprit, because you're the one who brought me into this project, *The Great Green Wall*. I had to admit again, as an African-- native Togolese, raised in Africa as a child-- I had never heard of this major, major project, the Great Green Wall. And I wanted to ask you, Fernando, what is it about the Great Green Wall that attracted you and that was the impetus for you to become an executive producer on this film and bring people in?

**FERNANDO  
MEIRELLES:**

In 2016, I directed the opening of the Olympics in Rio. And climate change was the main theme of the opening. And we wanted to show some solutions for the climate

change and planting trees was the one we have chosen to show in the opening. I plant trees a lot. That's my hobby, like thousands of trees every year. That's what I do.

And so we look for different plantings of trees around the world. And that's when I found the Great Green Wall. Actually, I went to the COP in Paris, the climate conference in Paris, in 2015. And I saw a little video of the Great Green Wall, and that kept in my mind. One year later, during the Olympics, I said, well, we have to include this project, this is an amazing project. So we got in touch with them and asked them for footage. And there were some images of the Great Green Wall in the opening of the Olympics.

And then some months later, after the Olympics, Alex called me and say, hey, want to make a feature on the Great Green Wall to promote the idea, to help finance it, and you want to be part of it and just join in? And, actually, my job in this film was more putting the-- I mean, I met Claude. I was traveling from Marrakesh to Paris, and I met Claude. And immediately I knew he was the right guy to join the project.

I worked more and more like a producer. I never went to Africa to shoot. But now, for the third time, I'm going to be involved in the Great Green Wall, because I'm preparing a film. I'm just waiting for the vaccine to shoot the film, which is on climate change again. And there's like five stories around the world. And one of the stories is about a girl that leaves Nigeria, because Boko Haram attacks Nigeria and they crosses Lake Chad.

And she tries to go to the [INAUDIBLE] Then she goes to Europe. And finally she comes back to Africa to follow her dream. So what we're talking about here is more or less the plot of one of my stories. Next time, I mean for this film, I'm going to [INAUDIBLE] I'm going to finally see the Great Green Wall live. [INAUDIBLE]

**CLAUDE  
GRUNITZKY:**

I want to see it, too. I know that you plant trees, Fernando. But I was just listening about four or five days ago to a really interesting interview with Bill Gates. And Bill Gates has a new book out on climate change. And it was a podcast by Kara Swisher, who has this amazing *New York Times* opinion podcast called *Sway*.

And Carol asked Bill Gates why he doesn't believe that planting trees is really a solution to basically reducing greenhouse gas emissions and really a viable long

term solution to the climate crisis. And Bill Gates said, it just takes so long, and you would have to spend so many years. And there's other solutions that are maybe more industry driven that are much more effective than even planting millions and millions of trees. So he kind of pushed back on the whole Great Green Wall dream. So do you still believe that planting trees is a big solution to some of these major climate change issues?

**FERNANDO  
MEIRELLES:**

Of course it is. Of course it is. Trees is 60% carbon. So if you bring this carbon back to the atmosphere and fix it in a tree, of course just planting trees is not a solution, like the solutions that Bill Gates is talking about are not a solution. I mean, we really need to go everywhere. We need to tackle all the options we have.

And I've been listening to some interviews that he's giving-- I mean, he's promoting his book. And I think he's missing a point. Because he never talks about consume. It's all about technology bringing carbon back. But we have to stop emissions, right. And he never mentions that. Never. I thought that was a bit weird. It's like he's not seeing the whole, the big picture. We really need to change our patterns of consume. As Jared said, especially the rich part of the world, they consume in a scale that is unsustainable as we know.

**CLAUDE  
GRUNITZKY:**

Absolutely. I wanted to move to Alex Asen who, as I said earlier, having worked for the UN and now working at Civic, which is a London based agency working on all these citizen projects around the world-- you, as I said, know more about the Great Green Wall than almost anyone I've ever met. Why did you decide to spend so much of your working life and energy on making sure that you helped, and we helped, and the media helped to raise awareness of this Great Green Wall project?

**ALEX ASEN:**

Yeah. Thanks, Claude. And first of all, huge congratulations on the launch of True Africa University. It's such a fantastic initiative, and I know you've been talking about it for some time. So we are delighted to be part of the launch today.

So Claude I think, like many people, I think when I first heard about the Great Green Wall-- which for me must have been about five years ago-- I was I think pretty flabbergasted by the scale of the ambition. And I think initially maybe also a little underwhelmed by the way in which people were talking about this project.

So when I first came on the project, I seem to remember that it was kind of being

described at the time as a kind of a sustainable mosaic of interventions across Africa, which might actually be true. But in reality, it is something very difficult, I think, for people to get their head around. And in fact, I think we really started to conceive that beyond this, it was really in many ways-- and I don't think this is just simple hyperbole, but I do believe that if completed, the Great Green Wall would really be a new wonder of the world. Both in its kind of epic size, but also in the fact that it touches some of the biggest kind of challenges facing humanity ranging from climate change to migration to food security to some of the issues that Jared and Fernando have just been talking about around Lake Chad and the intersection between climate breakdown and conflict and terrorism.

And so it really felt that-- I think I was initially just really captivated by the epic nature of this project. But I think also more than anything else it really struck me that, while rooted in Africa, this is really a global story. And the fact is that in many ways the Sahel is the crucible of some of the biggest challenges we will face this century, and in many ways a kind of a canary in the coal mine of what could be all of our destinies if we don't take action.

And so I think that, on the one hand, I was really captivated by this idea, but I think beyond it as well really kind of astounded also by just being involved in the Great Green Wall over a number of years, the kind of the stories of resilience of communities on the ground that are really living in many cases in kind of uninhabitable kind of circumstances. And it felt like, particularly with this film, that there was an epic, really powerful story that needed to be heard.

And I think as Fernando kind of alluded to first, the first I guess attempt to also try and capture some of kind of the stories from communities on the ground was through this kind of virtual reality film that was shown in Paris at the climate COP. And obviously had the kind of incredible privilege then to work with Fernando and others to really bring this story to life. And I think as Inna says in the film, I think maybe going into the Great Green Wall you think that perhaps the kind of the size of the ambition is really the thing that's striking.

But I think ultimately it is these kind of human stories of resilience, which we try to bring to life in this film, that really have the most kind of enduring and lasting kind

of impression on people. And obviously ranging from the stories of Lake Chads and kind of the jihadist movement around there, to some of the kind of incredible stories of hope that you see at the end of the film as evidenced through Ethiopia. And just the staggering kind of transformation that that environment has seen over the last 10 to 15 years. I think it's just really, really inspiring.

**CLAUDE**

**GRUNITZKY:**

Alex, we speak every week. We have an ongoing dialogue. And one of the things that I was struck with-- I was struck by the fact that you went from this big world of United Nations, which is tackling a lot of really important issues, and you went from working for the UN to working for Civic, which is again pushing more kind of grassroots movements and citizen empowerment.

And I'm wondering, tell us about the shift in approach when you're working within a huge organization like the UN and how that could kind of segue into working more with communities on the ground to actually spread the word about the Great Green Wall and to take matters into their own hands, to the point earlier about not just living off of handouts and expecting solutions to be flown in?

**ALEX ASEN:**

Yeah, I think it's a really interesting question, Claude. And I think for me, I think one of the incredible things that's kind of emerged also from this film is also just kind of the impact it's had in terms of capturing the imagination of world leaders around the world. And this film showed last year at the UN General Assembly. It's been shown at various different kind of forums, including the World Bank and the European Commission. And I think it's been really striking just how that also played a small part in helping to kind of ramp up the Great Green Wall across the political agenda.

And I think that for me, maybe just explaining some of my thoughts around that, I think that it feels to me that right now, as opposed to maybe five years ago when I first joined the project, the political momentum has really kind of shot up around the Great Green Wall in the past few years. And I think we see that actually also in kind of the recent developments around a major new funding round, multibillion funding round for the Great Green Wall of the One Planet Summit, which is obviously going to make a big impression in terms of evolving the Great Green Wall over the coming years.

**CLAUDE** And the One Planet Summit is President Macron, was hosted by President Macron of  
**GRUNITZKY:** France.

**ALEX ASEN:** Absolutely. And I think that that's been fantastic to see, just the level of political attention towards the initiative but also increasingly in the media. The latest Attenborough series also featured the Great Green Wall. So kind of the high level political level is-- this thing is really taking off. But I think that at the same time I was conscious--

**CLAUDE** Well what about the African Union though?

**GRUNITZKY:**

**ALEX ASEN:** Sorry, Claude?

**CLAUDE** The African Union. Because you mentioned European Commission. Before you went  
**GRUNITZKY:** on, I wanted to talk about the African Union. Sorry to interrupt.

**ALEX ASEN:** Yeah, absolutely. It's been shown at the African Union. It's been shown in various different forums around the world and on the continent as well. So it's made a big impression in that sense. But I think that, for me traveling across the Sahel, one of the things that was striking to me and maybe explains also kind of my move career-wise was also that speaking to communities on the ground. And I think Inna will speak to this as well. But that many people on the ground, the front line communities that are supposed to be championing this vision, in many cases did not know that it was even happening.

And I think that there is a real need, really, to kind of ground the initiative and to in a sense kind of shift power from the corridors of the African Union and government ministries into the African drylands, and to involve communities to really buy into the vision. And so I think in short it felt very much like-- and we've spoken a lot about this, Claude. And obviously we've recently launched a kind of a program under the Great Green Wall, which we're calling Great Green Wall X, which really attempts in many ways to kind of shift the power and put tools into the hands of the communities on the ground.

And so yeah, I think that while there's a big momentum pushing towards moving this Great Green Wall forward, at the same time, there is this kind of incredible

disconnect also at the grassroots. And I think that until communities themselves feel that they can own and empower this vision themselves that kind of disconnect will remain.

**CLAUDE**

**GRUNITZKY:**

Thanks Alex. And Kemo, you work with Alex at Civic, but you also run your own organization called Green-Up Gambia. And I was also really interested in you telling the story about how you also went for a complete career change. And you decided to focus on climate change issues and to become a conservationist with Green-Up Gambia.

So tell us about that personal career choice of yours focusing on the Gambia. And then, also one thing I've noticed, is that a lot of Africans and young Africans are not so aware of these mega climate change issues. You know, it's almost considered a foreign concept in some ways. And so tell us about how you're able to mobilize people in the Gambia around these issues.

**KEMO FATTY:**

Thank you so much, Claude, for having me on this panel. I think just like Alex has put it-- when I was really young back in high school, there is always this drive that you always want to be successful. Part of the reasons why in fact you have this mass exodus is because we are used to seeing a particular system that has been sold to us. That most of the people who are comfortable and living sound lives have people out there in Europe sending them money. So the dream always has to become the wolf of Wall Street.

This continued throughout high school, trying to become this wish that people have always imagined you to become, rather than you choosing yourself. So at some point, I went through this reformation understanding the fact that the two most important days are-- our old proverb saying in Africa is, that the day that you were born and the day that you understand why.

This exodus that we are talking about-- my brother went to high school. Some of the university graduates that are here are also jumping on the same boat, and that they are leaving. So this was not really making sense for me. Why are they leaving? It seems as if humanity everywhere is more concerned with having than actually being. So this is when I started to rethink myself as a part of the ecosystem of the Earth.

When we look at it even here in [INAUDIBLE] it has become a sobering reflection that, even in the books that I'm reading, they are telling me that 100 years ago we used to have elephants here. So all the natural forest has disappeared. We have species that are being extinct. So I begin to wonder, OK, what would be left here after I finish? Will I build my mansion in a place that is all desert? How am I going to be able to produce my own food? Sometimes we have a saying that says, true independence is having everything in your backyard. So the only way that that could be done is if we enhance the productivity of the soils.

So this was where my attention was tied to. That this is actually the way that we can change. And of course I have been inspired by Thomas Sankara, because we must really dare to invent the future. When I look at what Sankara has put in place, it wasn't just about the African continent. I think Sankara had a vision for humanity as a whole, because the African continent is carrying most of the world's arable land.

Why are we not able to meet the productive demands of the world? We are supposed to be the food basket of the world, but instead, we are the continent that are being fed. Looking at our geographical position, lying major parts of the continent are within the tropics. And we still cannot grow food. Sometimes I walk down the supermarket shelves, and I buy apples from Spain. I buy food from Germany where crops only grow sometimes six months, and we can grow from January to January.

So this was something that was-- I'm being a prisoner in my own land. So at some point, there has to be a shift in thinking. Like, instead of me to continue that vision of getting to Europe and having to come and establish a comfortable home is a way of just meeting my incremental desires. So while having the vision, vision can transform the entire situation.

So at some point as a youngster coming from high school and being an activist, I just dug myself a revolution. I am Thomas Sankara reincarnated. And if he's killed, I will take his walk to the finish line, because I feel that this is the only way that we can be able to revive our land. And we do not have to waste any time in this.

So this is why it didn't even take me a switch, at a month, or how do they call it again-- it didn't take me any hesitation to leave what I was doing and get down to

the real action. Because in reality, if we don't act now, we are long gone. The Sahel, ground zero, is-- this is ground zero of climate change. Like Inna has said, we are in survival mode. The people are now buying rice from China. Our flood plains are all disappearing. So because of this sobering reflection that I had, this was what had made me shift into bringing back the productivity of the land and of course ensuring that our people have their dignity once more.

When I look at it even logically, hundreds of years ago slavery was a different case, where they came with boats, and then they packed people by force and then migrated them to Europe. Today is a similar circumstance, but this time only that it is voluntary. So this was something that we have to do something as the African continent. Because this was the education that was given to us to be able to change these systems. So this was the motivation behind my total career shift, because otherwise we are long gone.

**CLAUDE  
GRUNITZKY:**

Thank you for speaking so honestly. It's really straight talk. And I wish more young Africans had this mindset of yours. Consider the fact that 70% of the jobs in Africa, seven zero, 70%, are actually linked to agriculture. And yet these farmers, many of them, are just barely just surviving.

And it's really a sad state of affairs, but I think that we have to switch to a modus operandi where it's really about solutions. And it's really about taking action, as you said, and looking to model oneself after the greats. We have a lot of great leaders in Africa. Unfortunately, many of them were killed. Thomas Sankara was one of those who really focused on agriculture and empowering farmers. And Kemo, we're really inspired by the fact that you've chosen to make this your life's mission.

We're coming to the close of the talk. We have time for two questions, because we only have eight minutes left. And I want to start with the first question, which is from Linda Jenkins. And Linda is asking, what, if anything, has changed in the progress of building the Great Green Wall since the film was made? I think that would be a really good question for Alex Asen.

**ALEX ASEN:**

Yeah. Thanks, Claude. And maybe just to say, first of all, that the film was kind of made between I think 2017 and '18. And given how long it takes land restoration to take roots and also trees to grow, it's difficult to claim that a lot has changed in

those two years.

But having said that, I would say that what has changed in terms of the broader kind of ecosystem around it is that people are starting to hear about the Great Green Wall. And people are also around the world getting excited about this movement. I think that's being evidenced in what we referenced earlier, Claude, in terms of the new funding commitments, which actually is to the tune of 14, more than \$14 billion.

We have world leaders around the world championing the Great Green Wall including the likes of President Macron and President Higgins of Ireland. But I think that that's been a major shift change I would say in the last couple of years. But having said that, I think that there was at the end of last year, which was, it wasn't clear exactly how much of the Great Green Wall had been completed. I think in this film you would have seen that there were estimates of 15%. But it was actually a major landmark report that was released last year by the United Nations that actually shows that, in fact, more than was claimed in the film-- actually 18% of the wall-- has actually been completed.

And there are some kind of extraordinary examples I would say in particular in Ethiopia, which you see in the film, where 15 million hectares of degraded lands have been restored through kind of an extraordinary mass mobilization of communities and people across the country in places like Senegal, which you see at the beginning of the film. 17, more than 17 million drought resistant trees, like the Acacia senegal, have been grown and sustained in less than a decade. Other places like Niger have also done extraordinary work in bringing life back to the land through a process called natural regeneration where they've restored five million hectares of land.

So there's been an extraordinary amount of progress that has been achieved. And I think that the reality of the situation is that, as you said at the beginning of your presentation, Claude, that to actually complete the Great Green Wall we're looking at restoring between now and 2020 almost 10 million hectares of land a year, which is obviously--

**CLAUDE**

2030.

**GRUNITZKY:**

**ALEX ASEN:** --an extraordinary undertaking.

**CLAUDE** 2030. Between now and 2030, right.

**GRUNITZKY:**

**ALEX ASEN:** Yeah, that's right, Claude, yeah.

**CLAUDE** Thank you. [? Alyssa ?] [? Berry ?] was asking a question, where can we watch the

**GRUNITZKY:** film, because she obviously missed it. And we can-- maybe Jared, you could talk a little bit about obviously the film. Cinemas have been closed, and we were supposed to release the film in many parts of the world. And, unfortunately, we were not able to release the film as widely as we would have wanted. But Jared, did you want to maybe just give a one minute answer to [? Alyssa ?] [? Berry ?] about where we could watch the film?

**JARED P. SCOTT:** I'm sure Fernando and Inna could speak to this, too, with their films as well. I mean, of course the coronavirus has affected the rollout across the board in the industry. But we still have managed. We were going to have this pretty big coming out across-- I think it was going to be in over 20 countries and hundreds of cinemas last Earth Day.

Then, of course, the pandemic hit prior to that. And it's been a bit of a, it's been releasing at different times to different countries. But if you are in Canada right now, it's in theaters both virtual and physical. It had been released prior to the initial lockdowns in Europe across Austria and Germany over 100 cinemas, and those are coming back.

It's across Africa with Rushlake. It's in China, it's in Spain. It's coming to the US very shortly. I think it's in over 50 territories right now. So it just depends where you live. But if you're here in the US watching it just stand by. It'll find one of your streaming services here very shortly.

**CLAUDE** And we'll put the information on [GreatGreenWall.com](http://GreatGreenWall.com) and also on  
**GRUNITZKY:** [TRUEAfricaUniversity.com](http://TRUEAfricaUniversity.com). The last question really is for you, Inna. And it's more of a personal question, because you have a very young daughter. You have a toddler, and I'm sure when she grows up-- and maybe she's already watched the film, but

when she actually is aware more about the issues of the film-- she's going to be very proud of what you were able to do before she was born. So how will you explain to her her responsibility, for the lack of a better word, to the continent of Africa where her mother was born and raised?

**INNA MODJA:** I think that for my generation it's our duty to do our best, so that our children won't have to face what we are facing right now, and to kind of save the planet. Because we have not even 10 years to do our best before the planet goes into a situation that we could never reverse. And for me getting on this project-- actually, you, Claude, brought me into this project-- I remember I was touring in India, and you sent me an email. And we had a meeting with Fernando, Alex, and the old team.

And when you told me about the story of the Great Green Wall, I actually heard about it but very vaguely. And getting on board I realize how this project could change the face of the continent. By changing the face of this continent, it could change the whole world. Because the Great Green Wall is an African-led project. But it will, in the end, when it will be achieved, it will be beneficial for the whole world.

So to my daughter, hopefully she will be someone who will be aware of where the continent was when I did the film, and that she will do her best to also help raising awareness on our journey, because it's a journey. It's something that started with Thomas Sankara, and something that we are all doing our best and working really hard to change the narrative.

And as Africans, as you said, we are not willing to take handouts. We want to thrive. We want to be successful. We want the continent to be a place where people can dream and realize their dreams, and know that they have a seat at the table, the table of the world. And for a long time, Africa has been the poor cousin. And I want my daughter to believe that her life matters, her voice matters.

And so that is one of the reasons why I'm working so hard right now to let everybody know about the Great Green Wall. It is one of this kind of project that you don't come across this kind of project often in your lifetime. So for me it was really an opportunity to do my part as an African woman. And also, as a woman traveling, being on this journey, and sharing the stories of the people that we met, it was so important. Because as a feminist, for me showing that we can do it, it was

something that is really important.

So sharing the journey with all of you, really I learned so much. I learned so much. And hopefully I will be able to pass that to my daughter. And not just my daughter, like the generation that is coming. We saw them in the streets all over the world fighting for their rights and fighting for the planet. They want a safe planet to live. And hopefully we will be conscious enough to do what is right.

**CLAUDE  
GRUNITZKY:**

Thank you so much, Inna, for doing this. And thank you also for agreeing to let True Africa University and MIT use the song "Africa Yeah", which is the theme song of the film for our entire series. Those who came in early were able to hear the beautiful song "Africa Yeah" that Inna created with some other collaborators. And each Thursday for the next 11 weeks we will start each webinar with that theme song, because it's a song of optimism. It's positive, and it's about possibility.

So I want to now switch my microphone, my megaphone, to Michelle English from MIT in thanking her for hosting us for this inaugural screening and webinar for the launch of True Africa University in partnership with MIT Center for International Studies. I want to thank Inna Modja, I want to thank Kemo Fatty, I want to thank Jared P. Scott, I want to thank Fernando Meirelles, and I also want to thank Ari Jacobovitz for all of what he's been doing. I want to thank Alex Asen, but Ari, from the MIT Africa project, has been helping to give us legs. So thank you.

Next week, next Thursday, 12:00 PM Eastern time, we have Taiye Selasi, award winning author, talking about African stories and the kind of value that we place on them. So hopefully you can tune in. And today's webinar will be uploaded and available tomorrow for download on [TRUEAfricaUniversity.com](http://TRUEAfricaUniversity.com). Thank you all for attending. Thank you Michelle, and have a wonderful afternoon, or evening, or morning depending on where you are. Goodbye, everyone.

[MUSIC PLAYING]