

# QCLS Presents: Lessons In Leadership with Ismail El Gizouli

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*Ismail El Gizouli: Sudanese politician, former chair of the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), activist for climate change and mostly importantly, a leader in everything he does. Even today, climate change still hasn't been widely accepted. Mr. El Gizouli is a true trailblazer in the field, believing and working with Al Gore in the early 2000's to spread the word about climate change well before the general population believed in the issue. From working with people around the world, to winning the Nobel Peace Prize, he has had countless unique experiences few others could speak to.*

*When I first had the pleasure of meeting him and hearing his accomplishments, I immediately knew he was a perfect embodiment of QCLS 2018's theme Trailblazers of Tomorrow, because he is a trailblazer in every sense of the word.*

**You've had an immensely influential career, working for numerous organizations such as the African Development Bank and the World Bank. Growing up in Sudan, what challenges did you face to get to where you are today? How did you work to overcome them?**

I started to build relationships with those organizations as a civil servant at the Ministry of Energy in the Early Eighties as a government counterpart when these organization's missions would come to Sudan to provide technical assistance or conducting studies in certain energy and environment issues. This gave me good experience in understanding how these international organizations work. Unfortunately, a new military regime took power and formed a new government in 1989. I was the managing director of the Energy Administration at the time, and the government started to terminate the services of many senior staff they thought weren't loyal to them. It was 1991, and I didn't have a job. It's frustrating to have your job taken from you based on politics, and not skills or competence, especially after 20 years of hard work.

It was a challenge I had to face, so I started to try and change the situation. I wrote to the African Development Bank, which at the time had an Energy Project in Sudan, and told them that the government terminated my service. Since I was no longer the government counterpart to their project, I advised

them to contract the government to appoint someone new for my position. The bank replied and thanked me for the period I worked with them, and told me they would put me on their roster for future consultancy work.

In less than three months, I signed a short-term contract with the African Development Bank. After that, I had frequent short term contracts with organizations such as the African Development Bank, UNDP, FAO, World Bank, and others. Changing careers was not difficult, as I was experienced and at the time life in Sudan was not difficult like it is now. There was no war, only peace. It would have been much more difficult if I had to do that over the past few years.

### **Can you tell us about an experience or a person that greatly influenced you?**

Countless people have influenced my career in one way or another, whether that be at work or at school. An experience that greatly influenced me was when young African Scientists formed the African energy Policy Research Network (AFREPRN) in 1988. It was hosted by the University of Botswana in Southern Africa, and funded jointly by the Canadian International Development Research Centre (IDRC) and Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA). We began conducting research in energy policy issues under the supervision of university professors from many different parts of the world. This experience helped me in two ways. First, it strengthened my abilities and tools for research work. Secondly, working with many international professors from all over the world as well as my African colleagues developed strong relationships, which greatly helped shape my future career in research.

### **During your times as the Chair of the IPCC, how did you successfully coordinate such a diverse and international group of people?**

This was not as difficult as you might think, as the IPCC has the world's most professional and best scientists in the field of climate change. Many were senior professors who were experienced in group research work. I had experience as Vice Chair of the IPCC for six years, so I was comfortable leading this group of people.

I always designated power to the Co-Chairs of the different working groups and the bureau members. I gave them full support, and trusted that I would get the best out of them. The IPCC works are one team, rather than individuals. I chaired the Bureau and Panel meetings, but the Co-Chairs of each working group ran their own meetings and managed their own members. Although they have full responsibility they work in harmony with other groups, all under the supervision of myself as chair. Overall, what helped me coordinate the work of the IPCC was working as a team,

designating responsibility whenever possible, and giving both full trust and respect to your colleagues.

**Working in a field where there is skepticism surrounding global warming, heavy pushback against reform, and strong personalities, how do you communicate and work with others who don't share the same views as you? How do you remain steadfast in your own convictions and goals?**

Yes, it's true that there have been many skeptics of climate change in the past, but since the 4th assessment report, which proved scientifically that climate change is real, that number has diminished drastically. We try our best through meetings, conference and the use of meeting to communicate the truth of global warming, using scientific outcomes and observed impacts to the environment. There are many people in my field who I'm sure understand the reality of climate change, but still publish negative papers. Those are either advisors or employees of companies with large emissions such as oil companies, who believe mitigation efforts will reduce their overall profits.

These people are tough, as their personal interest comes before anything else. It's hard to convince people who refuse to see the truth. For me, since the first Earth Summit in Brazil during 1992, I started to learn about climate change, using the research ability I gained as a young scientist in AFREPRN. This coupled with joining the IPCC in 2002, I was in a better position to follow research and to continue my learning about climate change. Not only did this strengthen my position, it reaffirmed my goal of working with others to save the planet.

**You studied and started your career in Sudan, a country that is unfortunately facing issues that range from poverty to war. Yet, global warming is the cause that you have chosen to fight. How is your cause viewed in your country, and what made you decide to fight for the environment?**

I believe that a healthy environment means a better life, so I started to build my career around not only the environment, but climate change in particular. Climate change is not only an environmental problem. It affects all sectors and ways of life, including agriculture, food and water, settlement and displacement, migration, security and sustainable development. When framed this way, you can see that climate change becomes a social, economical, and political issue, not solely an environmental issue as many believe it to be.

I started my career when I graduated university in 1971. At the time, Sudan was very stable. Although we were an underdeveloped country, there was no war and life was considered to be easy. This began to deteriorate in 1983, when a large drought hit Sudan. During that year, thousands of people and their millions of farm animals moved South, to feed their animals and support their families. Conflicts began between them and the farmers that already lived in those areas. Many people lost their wealth and became very poor emigrants. Those emigrants began to cut down forests to sell the wood and charcoal for their survival. This caused land degradation, and this vicious cycle continued. The conflict, as well as the destruction of the land and farms made our country poorer and more vulnerable.

The government didn't consider that the environment and climate change to be developmental priorities. It took us a very long time to prove the linkages between climate change and development, and the way in which they affect each other. Policy makers now are changing gradually and trying to integrate climate change into their policies and development plans.

**Your work on the IPCC 4th Assessment Report helped win you a Nobel Peace Prize. Could you tell us a little bit more about that experience and journey?**

The IPCC as an institution, along with Al Gore (who famously ran for President of USA in the late nineties) won the Nobel Peace Prize.

The 4th Assessment Report, which received the Nobel Peace Prize was one of the most outstanding IPCC assessment reports. It presented an update to date account of our best knowledge on the science of climate change, its impacts and how we can deal with its' consequences.

Although the IPCC won the Prize as an institution, the entire bureau met and made the decision that all the bureau members and lead authors who contributed to the 4th Assessment Report should receive the Prize. A copy of the Prize certificate and a letter of recognition signed by the Chairperson of the IPCC was sent to each member who contributed to the Report. It is a collective prize for the IPCC family, which all contributors are immensely proud of. I contributed to the Prize as a bureau member of the IPCC and as a member of the group who conducted the Report, so I received both a copy of the Prize certificate and a letter from the IPCC recognizing me as a Prize winner.

It's worth mentioning that the money we received with the prize as put in a separate Scholarship Fund as seed money to finance young PhD students from developing countries. This fund gives students the opportunity to study

abroad in fields and subjects related to climate change, which are not available in the Universities of their home country.

### **What advice do you have for the next generation of leaders?**

This is an excellent question, and as a starting point I would like to say that I hope everyone understands we only have one planet to live on, and we have to take care of it with future generations in mind. Unfortunately, our planet has sustained a lot of negative impacts as a result of the actions of our generations. It is our responsibility to continue the efforts of environmental sustainability, and reverse the affect we've had on the planet.

I encourage every student to be committed about whichever field they choose, and take their work seriously. You must consider the impact of your actions not only on those directly around you, but on people around the world. Expose yourself to as many different experiences as you can, inside and outside of the country in which you live in. Finally, every student needs to believe in themselves, and know that no matter how much you fail, you will always do better the next time you try

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