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Exploring the Intersection of Human Rights, Climate Change, and Indigenous Displacement in Tanzania:
An Interview with Joseph Oleshangay

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Introduction: When Climate Solutions Create New Displacements: Why the Maasai Struggle Matters for Climate Justice Education

On September 24th, 2025, the Subcommittee on Human Rights met in the European Parliament in Brussels to discuss human rights and climate change, the role and the challenges of human rights and environmental activists, and the situation in Belarus in terms of fundamental rights. The entire session was incredibly interesting, but what captured our attention was the opening speech by Joseph Oleshangay, a Maasai lawyer, human rights advocate, and winner of the 2023 Weimar Human Rights Award. He is part of the Maasai Delegation to the European Union and his work in the Old Continent, both in European Institutions and at the national level, is to raise awareness about the forced displacement and human rights violations endured by the Maasai community in Tanzania. More specifically, he focuses on the areas of Loliondo and Ngorongoro, where conservation policies and carbon capture projects are being used as a cover for land dispossession. When not in Europe, he provides legal aid to his community in Tanzania, helping his people defend against government evictions. His speech offered a different view on climate mitigation initiatives, highlighting how they can be exploited to displace local communities and perpetuate colonial practices.

We are currently coordinating a project called IMPACT, whose goal is to provide school teachers with a toolkit to address the relationship between climate change and migration in a school setting. Our project focuses on climate change being a major driver of migration and Joseph's perspective fits our project as the perfect complement. By including into the discussion, the dispossession coming from the mismanagement of climate mitigation projects, his testimony adds depth to the themes at the core of IMPACT, reinforcing the project's commitment to linking climate awareness with social justice. These brief analyses the mechanisms through which carbon and conservation initiatives reproduce colonial dynamics of land control and to outline policy options for the EU, its partners, and civil society to align climate action with human rights.

Conservation as Modern Colonialism and Carbon as the New Frontier of Exploitation and Displacement

During an in-depth interview, Joseph argued that

> "If there is any legacy of colonialism that remained in Africa, particularly in Tanzania and with the Maasai, it's through conservation."

Indeed, the colonial logic of using conservation as a tool to control land and resources is actively used by the current president Samia Suluhu Hassan. The Land Act of 1999 is the colonial-rooted law enabling land expropriation by the Tanzanian government. It states that all land in Tanzania is designated as public land, held in trust by the President. In practice, it is exploited by the presidency to allocate land for various purposes to the highest bidders, excluding indigenous

communities from the decision-making process and forcing their displacement. Particularly, the president is using conservation projects as excuses to force the Maasai out of their traditional lands in Loliondo and Ngorongoro to create a "wild" environment devoid of inhabitants, catering to the misguided yet deeply rooted Western view of Africa as a land of wildlife only. Ultimately, mass displacement is seen by the government as a necessity to maximize revenue from tourism and trophy hunting.

Transitioning from traditional conservation to new forms of environmental exploitation, Joseph stated, *"Carbon is the new way to get the money"*.

Nowadays companies are in desperate need for carbon credits to maintain their polluting operations while claiming carbon neutrality and Tanzania is shifting towards this market. Foreign actors in need of such certifications partner either directly with the State or with organizations working in close relation with the government to protect land for "carbon storage." Each project is evaluated in terms of CO_2 saved and credits are sold to companies abroad. Profits are then shared among government and local actors. To guarantee the carbon remains "locked," grazing and burning are banned, which, for the Maasai, means losing access to pasture, water, and home. The three most problematic organizations, according to Joseph, are Blue Carbon, Soil for the Future, and The Nature Conservancy. Starting with the first, Blue Carbon is an Emirati company that concluded a preliminary deal to secure 8.1 million hectares (8% of Tanzanian landmass) of land in Tanzania for carbon sequestration. Details on the exact location are yet to be revealed but activists are already raising concerns on the lack of transparency, environmental effectiveness, and community rights. Soil for the Future is an American-linked organization, particularly criticized for its deal with Volkswagen. The Maasai International Solidarity Alliance (MISA) highlighted the lack of consultation of local communities and the loss of control over traditionally Maasai-inhabited lands. The Nature Conservancy, finally, is a US-based global environmental non-profit also running carbon projects in Tanzania adopting the colonial legacy of marginalizing local communities in the name of the environment. Foreign aid and investment lie at the core of the problem. Such instruments can become problematic due to poor accountability and questionable intermediaries, especially if destined to countries with no rule of law and widespread corruption like Tanzania. Joseph, while showing official letters from the Tanzanian Government, mentioned that the government was able to appropriate IMF Covid-19 funds destined to schools in Ngorongoro. He argued that, if they were able to take away money from schools with just a five-day notice, conservation money would not serve their purpose either. "No one will control that money [is not redirected to] buy a gun to shoot someone or to buy a car to chase a pastoralist", he commented. Joseph made clear that current environmental projects require the Maasai community to be displaced, underlining that foreign actors sending funds to Tanzania for conservation and carbon projects are financing human rights violations.

The consequences of these policies are tragically visible on the ground. Violent

displacements are being conducted in Loliondo. According to Joseph, the area is not yet touristic, implying that the government can afford the use of violence as brutalities are not witnessed by foreigners. On the other hand, in Ngorongoro, a more visited area**,** the Tanzanian government is taking away funding from public schools, dispensaries, and religious institutions. The catholic hospital and medical flying service have also been severely impacted. The former has been downgraded to a clinic (from 76 employees to 2, not permitted to operate in radiology, and in maternity) and the latter was prevented from flying planes in Tanzania (which were used to fly Maasai people to further facilities). As a result, as stated in a letter to the Presidential Commission of Inquiry by the flying service itself, during the 32 months they have been grounded, they were *"unable to treat over 16.700 patients, vaccinate more than 59.000 children, provide care to over 14.000 pregnant women, deliver medications to over 450 Tuberculosis patients and 200 HIV patients, and conduct more than 350 life-saving emergency and evacuation flights"*. As Joseph commented, in Ngorongoro

"If you are sick there is no place to go, if you want your kids to go to school there is no place to take your kid, if you are confused and you want to go and pray there is no place to go. If you make the place unbearable, then you'll force the Maasai out."

The repression extends beyond access to basic services. In Ngorongoro, the government attempted to take away the right to vote of the Maasai by abolishing lower levels of government, like villages. This move proved unsuccessful as the Maasai community won the right back, after taking the streets in protest in September 2025. However, this was not a significant loss for the government as "*they know that they can manipulate the vote easily [by patrolling] people on a daily basis.*" Voting is not free in Tanzania: along with constant surveilling, the government controls the media and the judicial system, oppresses the opposition (the two main opposition leaders - Tundu Lissu and Luhaga Mpina - were not allowed to take part in the 2025 election), and abducts people (Joseph reported that between October 1st, 2025 to October 9th, 2025, 13 people were abducted, including former Tanzanian ambassador to Cuba). Ultimately, the Tanzanian Government operates with limited checks and balances and, because of this, the displacement of the Maasai is reinforced by political control and the silencing of dissent.

European Union Involvement in the Maasai Case

Having now clear what the Maasai community is dealing with in their own lands, it is crucial to understand who is financing the conservation and carbon projects that enable these human rights violations. Joseph answered directly: *"the main funder of conservation in Tanzania is the German Government, either directly or through KFW or BMZ [Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development]"*. He then asserted that oftentimes *"money is given only if people are cleared"*, highlighting that, even

though the German government is not directly displacing indigenous communities, it is creating incentives for the Tanzanian government to displace Maasai. The list of contributors continued with "*the US government [and] the EU funding through NGOs*". Additionally, very important and famous organizations like the WWF and the Frankfurt Zoological Society are partners in such conservation programs. As far as the European Union is concerned, the EU granted €166 Million for Blue Economy Development in 2022 and the European Investment Bank (EIB) unveiled a €350 Million credit line to boost Tanzania's blue economy.

At the European level, Joseph is working with the European Parliament, DG INTPA, and the Special Representative for Human Rights, with the objective of raising awareness on the brutalities the Maasai community is facing. When asked whether the Parliament is receptive to the Maasai cause, he replied positively, yet acknowledging that there is still more work to do. The Maasai Delegation to the EU met the Parliament for the first time in May 2023 and the conversation was immediately productive. Some MEPs, led by Michèle Rivasi, started to plan an independent visit to Tanzania to witness the condition of Maasai and report back to the Parliament. Unfortunately, the Tanzanian Government prevented MEPs from traveling to Tanzania by denying them the visa the day before they were supposed to fly out. Despite this setback, the work of the European Parliament in favor of the Maasai community did not stop. As a proof of that, in December 2023, the European Parliament passed a resolution calling for Tanzania to stop forcibly displacing the Maasai in Ngorongoro and Loliondo. The Commission, on its hand, halted €18 Million for conservation projects between Tanzania and Kenya over human rights concerns, redirecting such funds to Kenya only. However, the Commission failed to ban trophy hunting imports, a decision deemed by Joseph as a *"big let down"*.

Joseph **Oleshangay: The Life of a Human Rights Activist**

According to the latest report by Global Witness, last year, 146 human rights and environmental rights activists were murdered or disappeared globally. The question to Joseph on his experiences as an activist in Tanzania came naturally. *"In 2022, one of the first people the government thought that should silence was me. Last year [2024], around March, they surrounded both my house in Arusha and in Ngorongoro. You had constant police for 8 days"* he said. He fortunately was never caught and was able to continue his work as lawyer and activist. He added that he was contacted and threatened both by the Tanzanian intelligence and the president's son. Despite multiple attempts of arrest and abduction, he shows no sign of stopping his activism. *"Do I stop? Of course not, there is no possibility. They can always abduct me and so it is better to do something. It is also a security strategy; you put them in a spotlight if they do anything. That's why I do not hide my face"*. In such a context of intimidation and authoritarianism, Joseph underlined the importance of raising awareness abroad and finding allies. Indeed, doing advocacy in Tanzania often means screaming in the void and providing legal aid proves not to be useful as rule of law is non-existent.

His activism is characterized by unfounded criticisms, with important stakeholders accusing him and his group

of not caring about climate change and nature. He was forced to open his speech on October 24th 2025 by acknowledging that global warming is real, showing how often this accusation has been moved to him. The Maasai International Solidarity Alliance Constant drafted their vision on conservation to beat such allegations. On their website, they specified that they call for a decolonial model of conservation rooted in indigenous rights, social justice, and coexistence with nature, adding that the environment should not come at the expense of Maasai culture and presence on the land. Maasai activists must counter various false narratives used by the Tanzanian Government to justify its violence and human rights violations. The Maasai, on one hand, are accused of harming the wildlife and, on the other, are told that they need protection from the very same animals. Both rhetorics are distant from reality as the Maasai community has been living on that land for centuries without being a problem to the local fauna. This shows how the government is not genuine in its intentions and, if it really wanted to protect wildlife and the Maasai community, indigenous stewardship of the land would be recognized and human rights would be at the center of Tanzanian conservation models.

Conclusion & Policy and Activism Advice

When asked if there is hope for his people, he replied that *"It is difficult to say that there is hope, but I am sure there is. It can take a long time, but there is always the [right] time. We have to create this process for [change] to happen. We have to speak out and expose"*. The European Union and its Member States should increase accountability in conservation and carbon projects they finance. Using Joseph's words, *"Conservation should not be a form of replacement"* and *"the relationship with the Tanzanian government must be tied to the respect for human rights"* should be the two pillars guiding the EU institutions and EU Member States when dealing with the violation of Maasai's human rights.

Concretely, EU institutions should:

- Ensure that all the funds to Tanzania are linked to the protection of human rights of indigenous populations.
- Demand transparency, accountability, and independent oversight of conservation or carbon capture projects.
- Support the indigenous vision of conservation.
- Promote direct funding access for Maasai organizations to avoid state-centric channels that enable misuse or corruption.

Institutions, however, are not the only ones that need to act. Indeed, individuals and civil society can also play an important role in supporting the Maasai cause by:

- Raising awareness on the matter to push national and European institutions to protect human rights in Tanzania.
- Avoiding tourism in Tanzania and boycotting travel companies sponsoring trips in the country.
- Supporting community-based conservation projects, like those in Kenya, and helping share their successful approaches across East Africa.

In a context in which climate change needs to be recognized as a major driver of migration, Joseph's testimony reminds that climate responses can themselves become drivers of displacement if implemented without any regards for human rights. Ultimately, this article stands as a contribution to the IMPACT project, as it enlarges the discussion around climate change and displacement, and a call to recognize the resilience of the Maasai community in Tanzania, who continue to defend their basic human rights and ancestral lands against growing threats.