



# Our Hen House Podcast: Transcript for Episode 677, Interview with Nabaasa Innocent

**Mariann Sullivan:** Welcome to Our Hen House, Nabaasa.

**Nabaasa Innocent:** Greetings from Uganda.

**Mariann:** It is a pleasure to be speaking to you. And let's just start off with talking a little bit about the vegan scene in Uganda, which I know nothing about. And how common is veganism there?

**Nabaasa:** Veganism is really not common here and most people are looking at it as an initiative from the west.

So actually people more easily understand vegetarianism than veganism. So when you talk about being vegan and veganism, you'll need to explain a little farther for anyone to understand what exactly you are talking about.

**Mariann:** So do people tend to think of meat as being a really healthy addition to the diet and really connected to prosperity, something that you aspire to, and does that make veganism a tough sell?

**Nabaasa:** Growing up, like most of us, the vegan meals, the vegetables and the legumes are for the poor because they are easily and readily affordable. So, for example, like personally where I grew up, it wasn't until I was around 20 years that I had moved to a city that I realized that we could actually buy food.

So all I'm trying to say is that most of the vegan meals here in Uganda can grow almost in every part of the country because we have fertile soils. So it's easy to find beans, find ground nuts, find peas, to find potatoes, cassava, yams, pumpkins like name it all. Almost everything we have it.

Now, the farmers are the poor, I'm sorry to say, but like the farmers mainly are the poor communities. Farming is actually still not industrialized as much, so it

means it's the food that is affordable. So when there's prosperity, when there is wealth, so many people tend to shift now to eating more meat because meat is quite expensive, chicken and all that.

So when you tell the poor, who are actually the majority, that you need to go vegan, they will not understand. It's more like, are you mocking us? We have eaten all this food our whole lives when we were poor, and now that we have money, you want us to go back to eat. So indeed, just like it is in other African countries, it's like they don't get it.

But then interestingly now the rich are now also trying to shift going vegan because now the rich have eaten poorly because they can afford the meats, the buggers, and all that. So now they're trying to avoid the non-communicable diseases. Also because they are exposed to knowledge. So they understand for them to live better, they may choose to go vegan.

And now it so happens that when you go to the urban centers, like the cities or the five star hotels, now these same legumes and vegetables and crops are quite a bit expensive. So there's that full imbalance between the rich and the poor, and who is vegan.

The poor, some of them are vegan not by choice. Because they cannot afford the meat and the other foods. But then the rich now have a choice to choose what to eat.

**Mariann:** This is such an interesting moment in time and phenomenon that you have all of these competing forces. That people have traditionally eaten probably what is an extremely healthy vegan diet, and yet they have aspired to eating what probably came in as a more Western diet originally, that's more meat centered. And yet on the other end, people who have been eating this meat centered diet and can afford to and have more money are now perhaps starting to shift back to a healthier. It's just fascinating. You're in the middle of not just a cultural shift, but almost a cultural shift in reverse.

So what are some of the health issues? You mentioned that a lot of Ugandans in particularly wealthier areas and in the cities are thinking of plant-based diet because of health issues. What are some of the health issues confronting Ugandans related to their diet?

**Nabaasa:** Yeah. Now some of the health issues that are happening right here in Uganda is like hypertension.

Annually, over 100,000 Ugandans suffer from this, die, from non-communicable diseases. And this is almost like 35% of the total annual death. So this is a big number, and not everyone has this data. And now this is more common in the urban centers because most of these diseases, that is like type two diabetes, hypertension, colon cancer, arthritis, among others, are related to consumption of animal products.

So it is on rare occasions that you'd find 50, 60 and above old Ugandan not dealing with hypertension or diabetes and all those other...and arthritis and all that. So because of continued sensitization, now the rich that can afford are trying to make that shift in their diet.

**Mariann:** Yeah, that's really interesting because you actually see the same thing here in the US, people of African descent have particularly high problems with hypertension and some of these diet related diseases. So it all seems to make total sense.

Another thing that you mentioned, that I thought was so interesting, is that now it can be expensive to get the foods when you're in the city, it could be expensive to get the healthy vegan foods that are actually grown by the poor in the countryside. I mean, for people who aren't actually wealthy, just living in the city. But is that a big obstacle to having a healthier diet, that the food is expensive?

**Nabaasa:** Yes, it is a really, really big obstacle because now in the city there are no farms. Farming in Uganda has really not been commercialized as much. So in the city there are no farms because of increased human settlements, increased population. Now the farming has gone in up country, I could say. For example, now I'm in the central, but most of the food that we consume in Central Uganda where the city is, comes from Western and Southern Uganda. You know, now there is a whole shift in transportation. There's a shift in value addition, transportation, access to markets and all that. So sometimes by the time the food moves from Southern Uganda or Southwestern Uganda to Kampala, some of the perishables, meaning they've already gone bad, but the few that have managed to get here, they're gonna be expensive.

And transport costs are really high here in Uganda because we don't have trains. So usually, basically they use trucks to move from different parts of the country. In fact, if you traveled on Ugandan highways at midnight, 3:00 AM you'd only along on the highways, you'd find trucks with food coming to the city and they offload at around, you know, in the markets, open markets around 4:00 AM, 5:00 AM, and 6:00 AM and that's when the purchases now to the supermarkets and the retail shops start.

And now it means the people now at around 7:00 AM and later in the day will have to walk into retail shops and supermarkets. So sometimes the price is four times, you know, it's like four times more what it costs in their countryside.

**Mariann:** Oh, this seems like that's a terrible problem and seems like something that really needs to be addressed.

Here you are growing all of this healthy food and people may want it and can't afford it, and animal foods can be so expensive to produce. One food I'm curious about in particular is dairy. I think I read that dairy is increasingly popular in the Ugandan diet, which seems like such a shame because it's so bad for you.

Are dairy replacements available and am I right that dairy is increasingly popular?

**Nabaasa:** Dairy is indeed very, very popular. I could say maybe it's getting increasingly popular, in like central Uganda, but in Southwestern Uganda and Western Uganda, dairy is part of the diet.

Every breakfast there is a cup of milk. Industrial animal agriculture is really not so common here. It is now the government is trying to introduce it due to increased population. So because of that, now government is trying to see how like in the central...because like I said, there's that whole cost of transportation and transporting dairy from upcountry up to Kampala, sometimes it goes bad because it's perishable. They don't have refrigerators and all that.

So now government's trying to promote industrial agriculture, which unfortunately is bad for the animals because now promotes cruelty, animals in small space. Now that's where the instance of growing animal feed comes in.

But like in the countryside, animals are grazing on acres and acres of land because there is enough land and of course there is less cruelty compared to the now, compared to the industrialized animal agriculture the government is trying to introduce, because they, the government, desires to start now importing milk even to the neighboring countries. Because in the region, basically, like in East Africa, it's Uganda and Rwanda that graze more cattle.

So the government wants to expand that trend, which is unfortunate. I also talked about alternatives. Alternatives aren't as much, like the dairy alternatives, like soy milk. Most of the soy milk you find on the supermarket shelves is imported. The same thing with almond, the same thing with coconut.

Like they're all imported into the country. For example, like soya bean, soya bean is widely grown in the countryside, not for the animals, but for human consumption. So meaning if there was deliberate effort, there would be an easy dairy replacement from soya bean. Coconut is also available in some parts of the country, but also in our neighboring country, Kenya.

So if there's also an deliberate effort to produce coconut milk, it would be affordable. But then there isn't much information on the dangers of dairy as much as we know, because I'll give an example of our president. He has been on record several times telling us about his diet. You know, he is like, he doesn't get sick, so his diet doesn't have milk.

He basically says he consumes cassava and beans on a daily basis and if he's gonna change his diet, he'll probably eat beef like once in a month, you know, like once in a while. And that's it. Nothing more, nothing less. So he is indeed, a promoter of healthy eating and he's talking about how he's managed to live healthy and all that.

But then on the other hand, he's done promoting industrial agriculture so that there is increased consumption of milk. So it's like a bit of conflicting, but I think now that calls on stakeholders, civil society activists, and advocates like me to ensure that there is increased sensitization on the disadvantages of dairy, both the human health, the environment, and to the animals because it promotes cruelty. And also, to promote and also invest in a production and accessibility of other dairy alternatives.

**Mariann:** It does seem like there are enormous opportunities available to you. Do you think Uganda and Africa in general have kind of a special role to play here in that, though factory farming has certainly started, it is not as entrenched as it is here in the US or in Europe. And perhaps it's a lot easier to change something before it happens than than after it's really entrenched.

Do you think this is a moment of big opportunity for you?

**Nabaasa:** It is an opportunity, but unfortunately there isn't much funding that is coming here. Like you said, as much as it is better to address the problem before it becomes bigger than it is, unfortunately, most of the funds now such lettered in the West where there's a a lot of intense and farming where the problem is already happening.

But now we've increased, animal welfare and animal advocacy organizations now, the west is starting to invest in Africa. For example, we've had like

different organization coming from different countries in the west wanting you to invest in dairy farms here in Africa so they can import the milk directly to the west.

You understand? So we lack a lot of sensitization. Now, I would compare this with climate change like. You know, the west is the biggest contributor, and Africa is contributing less, but not much funds have been invested in Africa, you know, to get and adapt to climate change. So it is more or less like a time bomb because if, like for example, here in Uganda, 95% of the population are cooking using either charcoal or firewood.

So that means more trees are being cut and more carbon emission. So that's the same thing that I could say is happening with this whole shift with animal welfare and animal advocacy organization. Even when they try to invest in Africa, the funds are little, it's \$1,000, it's 5,000, 10,000. Of course, there are a few organizations that can go up to 50,000 or a hundred, but the majority, it's 1,000 to like 10,000 and that cannot do much because now the west are like, "Oh, there's a green light in Africa. We can still do this in Africa." So they're coming here.

For example, like cages. Battery cages have not been a practice here in Africa or even here in Uganda. The hens have been into free range and then later they introduced the deep litter, but free range has been the common practice. But now because there's a lot of criticism on battery cages now they're being dumped into Africa.

There was a poultry summit, I think, a few months ago in Rwanda. And most of the exhibitions had battery cages and they're being exhibited by mainly companies from Germany. Ugandans, we don't make battery cages. Africans are not making battery cages and now government is investing in that.

Government is promoting that. You know that if you want to have produce more, to make more profit, you better adapt to battery cages. So there is need for increased investment here in Africa before it is too late. And then we are also like the Western. We are starting to address the problem when we can address the cause in time.

**Mariann:** That's very compelling and obviously really, really true. I mean, of course there's the problem that the industry has much, much more money than the advocacy organizations, but still it does seem like Africa needs to be a huge priority just because of what you said about you have to get ahead of the problem before it occurs.



So what is it like to be a farmed animal activist in Uganda? Is it a lonely business?

**Nabaasa:** Well, like I said, it's more or less like a lonely business. Many think it's an import from the West. They think it's not part of our culture. They think, "no animals have been here for eating, God has given us the animals for eating."

So it is hard to tell people about animal rights. Many think, "Animals don't have any rights. Who cares about animals anyway? At the end of the day, they're going to end up in a slaughter house," you know?

But also one thing with my time in the whole animal advocacy, one thing I have realized is that we actually have a special relationship with these domesticated animals. Told in the Western, referred (to) as farmed animals. For us, we call them domestic animals, but let me use farmed animals since it's the common term, so the cows and the goats. So for example, I talk a lot about the west and the southwest because that's where most farming takes place because that's where the fertile lands and soils are.

So talk about like in the west. So in the west you'll find like seven in 10 households they have cows or goats at home. Like it is part of us. Now because we have lived with these animals, like even me as a person, we have developed a special relationship. If you found us in our cows, conversing, the cows listen to us because now cows are being grazed on a few chunks of land.

You wake up in the morning, you take them to farm aid and then they eat freely, they graze freely, and then in the afternoon you take them to the pond to drink water. And then after that you take them to another farm. After that, then you have to again take them to the farm where they spend the night.

So you see like that whole relationship, basically grazing cattle is an activity that happens the whole day. You get it. So at the end of the day, you bond with these animals. So there is already an existing special relationship with these animals. So it won't be a hard paper to tell people about reducing consumption.

Telling them that you are promoting cruelty when you deny a calf an opportunity to breastfeed because you want the mother's milk. Someone can easily think through it because what happens, I have seen it myself, all morning he cows are mooing, like they're crying because they want to feed their little ones. But humans will not let them feed them because we want to first get the milk and then the balance goes to the calves.

So if you explain someone that and create empathetic thoughts and all that, means the transition could be easy. For example, still again in my culture, where I come from, like with grazing cows, so if you say, "I don't drink milk," they'll be like, "Are you fine?" Indeed, they'll go ahead to get your medication for being lactose intolerant.

So it's still unheard of, you know, to be vegan. But then there is a starting point because people already have that special bond. And unlike in the west where these cows are in industrial farms, here they live with us. In the morning you'll hear the cows mooing and you know, "oh, it's 5:00 AM it's 4:00 AM." You get it?

And when you hear the cow mooing at 3:00 AM, then you'd know there's a problem. Probably there's a thief in the farm because they usually do it at 5:00 AM, so there's that whole relationship and bond that already exists. Which I think we need to know to stamp and make people understand that you've been bonding with this cow for the last five, 10 years or one year, so why do you want to kill it?

And there are cultures, in fact, where they don't even sell their cows. There's a culture, part of the Banyankole culture, to be a cattle keeper is more like prestige. So to be considered one, you must have between 500 to 1000 heads of cattle. So meaning owned by basically one person. And people that love cattle to that extent, they don't even slaughter. They let the cow die and bury it. So you can see the relationship already exists, but unknowingly. Like it's still unknowingly, not intentional. So we need to make it intentional.

**Mariann:** Yeah, that is fascinating. I mean, there's so much food for thought there and one thing that really struck me is, which is obviously going to be the case, the people are going to say, "oh, veganism, that's something that comes from the west."

But when you look at the west, I mean, our treatment of animals is horrifying. It's not like the west are all these like hippies who are like being kind to all of these animals, that's not our culture. Yeah, there's a few people in the west, a few who are vegan.

But it so saddens me to think that people think that that's foreign to them. When obviously, as you're pointing out, so many people in Uganda have actually deeper relationships with animals than most of us in the West.



Tell us a little bit about yourself, your own story, because obviously you're not the common story in Uganda. You're telling us that most people don't have these feelings about animals, don't have these feelings about veganism. But here you are. You do, and you grew up in the countryside, you said. How did this all happen?

**Nabaasa:** I grew up in the countryside. So meaning I have grown up witnessing this animal cruelty.

And growing up, like in the morning you are going to the farm to check on the cows. They're interacting with you, they're letting you touch them. The same thing with the goats, the same thing with the sheep, the same thing with the with the hens. So I developed such a special relationship.

One of the things that one of my friend actually got surprised about, is if I told them that for us it's not whoever wants to slaughter a cow or a goat or a chicken must go to a slaughter house. No, you can do it at your home and take the meat to the market, so meaning it actually even happens at home. So yes, we have regulated slaughter houses, but not respected as much. Like now the festive season is coming, almost every village there will be slaughtering cows at home and people just come say, "Home B, they've slaughtered, let's go buy meat and it's gonna be at cheaper prices," and all that.

So many, many of the people have grown up from, they've been exposed to that. But me, a person haven't been exposed to the scenario where a cow is being cut, or a goat, because my conscience doesn't let me. But I've heard them scream for help when they're being slaughtered.

But what I've really witnessed is the hens. Now the hens is that, because as women we are the ones that are tasked to cook at home. So it means if you are gonna cook, you'll have to slaughter the hen live. It's rare to buy chicken in a supermarket. Yes, it is there because like I said, it's now that factory farms are coming up and all that. But initially like you just walk to your farm and just in your hen house and probably just pick out one.

So one of my tasks was to always do that. I felt bad because typically the hen is alive. You're just holding it by the neck and cutting it. And whenever I hesitate they'll tell me, "You know, you're a coward. You're gonna be married and how you gonna do this? How you gonna cook chicken for your husband?"

So to me that was really like a turning point. I was like, "No, I cannot do this anymore." And sometimes when it would be my turn to cook I would try to

avoid it. But of course, as African parents, you know, you had to be spanked later in the evening for not doing what you're supposed to do, for being a coward.

But when time reached and when I could make my personal decisions, I was like, “No, I have grown up, witnessed this whole animal suffering. I shouldn't be the one facilitating it or promoting it.” I first, of course, made the decision myself to change, and then also I decided to think, “Okay, it is not enough for me to make that adjustment in my diet. How about I get into activism and, you know, let people know about better treatment of animals and the kind of pain that these animals go through.”

**Mariann:** That's an extraordinary story. I mean, so, so many people go through what you went through and just become enculturated and just adopt the practices and put it aside and you didn't.

The other thing I wanna talk to you about is some of the activism you're doing, There are a number of different aspects to your activism, but I noticed that Africa Vegan Restaurant Week is coming up very soon, I think in January. Can you tell us about that? Because it sounds really cool.

**Nabaasa:** Yeah, it sounds really cool.

And importantly, I am the coordinator of the Africa Vegan Restaurant Week. So it's gonna be the first of its kind. It's gonna happen from 23rd to 29th of January, 2023. It's gonna happen remotely in different African countries. So different African countries will participate, but then we are going to have a joint online campaign using like the same hashtags and all that.

And we already have 20 organizations that have expressed participation. We've put up a website, [africaveganrestaurantweek.com](http://africaveganrestaurantweek.com). Restaurants are registering, organizations in Africa also registering and they're gonna be participating. Even people when they want to turn vegan, they find it expensive, which is sad because it is not. Now because the word vegan, like I said, has more or less like been imported.

So here people is like vegetarian, someone probably know vegetarian and all that. So now, imported, now it means that mainly it's the foreign nationals that actually do understand the term. So it means if I walk into a fast food restaurant and they say, “Where's your vegan menu?” You mostly find that foods that are not even indigenous to Uganda, indigenous to Africa.

I have tried eating in vegan restaurants. We don't have predominantly vegan restaurants, but they're vegetarian and they're those that have vegan options. I look at the vegan menu, they're not indigenous. So meaning someone as me, who is indigenous to Uganda, I'll not enjoy the meal. Because you're gonna find more like tofu.

You'll find the green beans. Find like most of the products you'll find are imported, or they're not indigenous to us. As much as they're good alternatives. Personally, I've tried introducing some of these alternatives to Ugandans and they're like, "But I don't like this." Because some people are like, "But if I don't want meat, why should I find an alternative to meat? Means I don't want meat. Like, that's it."

So I'm trying to show that you can still be an indigenous Ugandan and eat vegan because like I said, like beans. Like beans are the most affordable food here in Uganda, groundnuts are the most affordable. Potatoes are the most affordable, cassava, bananas, yams, pumpkin, peas, but then they're not ready available on these menus.

Now, the foods that are already available on some of these menus are really, really expensive. So making the middle income people and the young people and the rural people that want to go vegan are gonna find it expensive. And some people, like when you tell them like, "No, but even the beans you're eating are vegan." They are like, "Oh, so that's vegan?" Like, "Yes, there's no animal product in it."

So basically we want to have a showcase of the vegan foods that are available in the African market. If I am in Uganda, what are the vegan options? Indeed, you can find them everywhere. Don't need to walk into an uptown restaurant.

The same thing is gonna happen in Rwanda, in Kenya. So it's basically a showcase of the available vegan foods, vegan products, vegan ingredients, and also having like different chefs, you know, try to introduce different ways of cooking because sometimes the normal way of cooking can get boring. So introduce the unique and different ways and all that.

And also have like experts talk about why it's important to be vegan, for the health, for the animals, for the environment, and all that. So it's a whole collective action. As Africans actually try to show that vegan means indigenous to us. And if you are an indigenous African, you can still find options.

But then also, for Africans so that if they travel to different African countries, here is the restaurant to go to to find the different vegan options that you would want.

**Mariann:** I love this project, like as we've been talking about through the interview, this weird disconnect between the traditional diet in Uganda that so many people eat that's basically vegan and what people think vegan means and and the idea that people would think vegan means something from the West that's expensive and imported, is just such a shame. The fact that you're highlighting all of this, this is what has to happen. It has to happen. I mean, in Africa, like in so many countries. Not just where you are.

I see the same thing from activists in South America. You know, so many traditional foods are beans and corn. And the same situation implies that meat has been adopted into the diet and it's the meat that's the import. That's the colonial diet. That's the diet that has come from the west. It's not the vegan.

Well anyway, I'm going on and on because I just find this very, very exciting. Is this a project of Vegan Society, Uganda? And tell us a little bit about what else Vegan Society Uganda does. I know that's an organization that you head up.

**Nabaasa:** The Africa Vegan Restaurant Week is not a project of Uganda Vegan Society.

It is a project of Proveg International, if you've heard of Proveg.

**Mariann:** Of course, yes.

**Nabaasa:** It's a project of Proveg and it so happens I'm the Africa Regional coordinator for Proveg, so I am coordinating the program as well. So as Uganda Vegan Society, we also going to participate as Uganda Vegan Society.

So telling you more about the work we do as the Uganda Vegan Society, basically, one, we organize annual festivals, potlucks, and also teaching people how to make affordable vegan meals at home. Like if I want a milk alternative, how am I gonna get it? Oh, they'll just walk into a retail shop or a supermarket, buy your soya beans and you can do it at home and enjoy your soy milk. Because we've been drinking soya milk, but we've been drinking it as porridge, but this time actually drink it as milk. So our role is also saying if you go walk into a market and buy coconut, how can you make coconut milk at home? If you are a lover of tofu, you can still make it at home. So, and also sensitization, like, diet change information, why it's important. Because here people care more, in

reality, they care more about their health than they care about animals. That's the reality.

**Mariann:** That's the reality absolutely everywhere I've had an experience with. I mean, not everyone, but you have to go in with the health message. Fortunately, not eating animals happens to be good for your health.

I'm sorry I interrupted you.

**Nabaasa:** Yes, that's exactly what it is. And that's the message we are putting out there. So if you just come and say, "no, you gotta go vegan for the animals."

"For the animals!?" But I tell them for the health, they're like, "oh my health?" And now someone will give you an ear. So that's some of the message that we want to put out there, we put out there as a Uganda Vegan Society and also letting the people know where the vegan restaurants are.

**Mariann:** And I find that the health message, for many people, once they stop having the meat in their diet and they go vegan because of their health. Not everybody, but some of them do start to look around at what's happening to animals and seeing that it's horrible.

We're devastating all of our land. We're devastating all of these living creatures. What we are making of the world is a horror. I sometimes say it's like people need to get the meat out of their ears in order to hear that message. First they have to stop eating the meat for their own health and then they recognize it's not just about them.

So I think that's extremely powerful work. We had a little trouble putting together this interview, I'm so glad we finally managed to touch base.

**Nabaasa:** I'm glad

**Mariann:** It's really fascinating, what you're doing.

**Nabaasa:** Thank you. The pleasure is all mine.