



Keynote Speech by Dayana Blanco
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Aski Urukipan nayaja Dayana Blanco. I am Dayana Blanco, an Aymara indigenous woman from Bolivia.

My community lives in the mountains, on the shores of Uru Uru Lake. When I was a child, I would listen to the sounds of thousands of flamingos who lived in this rich aquatic ecosystem.

My grandmother would say that she did not need a clock because the animals around the water were the precious morning alarm gifted to us by nature.

Today, things are different.

Today - the flamingos we knew from childhood are disappearing. Pollution from mining, mountains of plastic waste, and constant drought, have devastated our lake. The water has turned an oily black. The fish are gone, and the shores of the lake are poisoned - a wasteland.

This destruction has occurred despite Bolivia being one of the few countries in the world to recognize nature as a legal entity.

Since 2019, illegal mining companies have invaded our community. Thousands of tons of heavy metals and toxins have leached into the water. Tens of thousands of tons of plastic waste have been dumped into the lake.

We used to drink and fish from the lake. Now, my community must buy potable water from private companies. And what about the plants and animals? What about the flamingos we find dead in the mud? Well, they can not buy clean water.

Our local economy has been devastated, and my people have suffered - especially the girls and the women. So many of the girls I knew from childhood have married early, fallen into poverty and suffered gender based violence and exploitation because of the economic pressures caused by food and water insecurity. I have seen *so much* lost potential - as time and again, girls are unable to pursue their dreams. Instead they are consigned to an endless pursuit of adequate food and water for their families.

And yet, it is also the role of indigenous women to fight for mother earth. We women are keepers and stewards of water. And I want to tell you about how we have fought back!

I brought the women of my community together. We became Uru Uru Team!

First we looked to the law for help. We protested. We organized nonviolent campaigns calling on authorities to stop the illegal mining. But the mining companies bribed and bullied local officials.

With no help from the government, we decided that we had no choice - we needed to restore the lake ourselves. So we turned to our elders and looked for answers in our indigenous knowledge.

I asked my grandmother.

She taught me about Totoras. They are native aquatic plants. They are natural filters - purifiers of water. Tiny but powerful.

We designed and built floating rafts from the plastic waste in the lake. We planted thousands of totoras on the rafts. We floated them out onto the water.

We tried, we tested, we failed. We tried again. Try and fail. Try and fail. After many months, finally, we began to see results. The waters began to clear. It's a process called phytoremediation - which means the use of green plants to purify water. A laboratory tested the water where we had placed the totora rafts. The contamination was reduced by 30%.

Like the Totoras themselves, Uru Uru Team is small but powerful. Slowly we have expanded our activities. We built more floating rafts. We planted more Totoras. We created a community garden where we grow and sell vegetables and fruits. We use the money we make to plant more totoras. The women in my community have become a force for change and they are so proud of what we have accomplished.

We have built a coalition of organizations and supporters who partner with us to grow our activities. UNDP, Girl Rising, Global Landscape Forum, the Irish Prize and others - have provided financial support, technical support, **and importantly**, they have helped us to tell our story.

Our story is important NOT because it is unique. No! It is important because we are one of thousands of indigenous communities around the world who are using nature based solutions to regenerate wetlands and ecosystems - our friends in Ecuador defending the Yasuni, our Indigenous sisters and brothers from Brazil, and Peru defending the Amazon, the Maasai tribes in East Africa who conserve the land and restore grassland biodiversity - the list goes on and on.

Did you know that there are nearly 400 million indigenous people in the world, living in 90 countries? Imagine what progress we could make if the world embraced our knowledge instead of leaving us out of the global conversation. Imagine the possibilities for system change if we harnessed the kind of energy that drives the Uru Uru Team?

This is a moment when we could become despondent and discouraged. This is a moment when we might be tempted to give in to the fear that the world is being dragged backwards by the greed and brutality of some of the world's leaders.

But I want to say that even when our needs and hopes are met with indifference, we must find ways to take action - we must come together and remember that even small steps - like the tiny totora on my lake - have all the potential to be powerful.

I ask every person in this room to imagine themselves to be a Totora. Each of us is different. Each of us is small. But when we come together to take small steps, we can make a big difference. I ask that despite the uncertainty of this moment, we must believe that we can meet the goals in Agenda 2030. We can create a better world where every life is respected and has the right to live in a healthy planet. We can live our lives guided by the principle of "Suma Qamaña". Thank you.

