



Prize Winners Today: Environmental Justice with Bobby Peek

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By Ellen Lomonic

“A march is not a movement.”

“It’s just a point in time when people come together. Movements are everyday lived realities and processes. They are about change over time and not change through one moment.”

Equating the development of a social movement to a tree's strengthening roots (slow, sustained, and motivated) and its marches and rallies to the tree's flowers (vibrant, colorful, and expressive), Bobby Peek's interpretation of today's social upheaval reveals his foundational understanding of a long history of environmental injustice in South Africa. Needless to say, our team was eager to speak with Bobby as part of the [Prize Winners Today](#) series.

Since winning the Goldman Environmental Prize at the young age of 30, social activist and environmental champion [Sven "Bobby" Peek](#) (South Africa, 1998) has maintained an energetic drumbeat of community organizing. Over two decades later, he finds himself and his NGO, [Groundwork](#), uniquely positioned to meet today's global moment of social and environmental awareness.



1998 Goldman Prize winner Sven "Bobby" Peek

Participatory Democracy

For the past two decades, Bobby has remained unwavering in his belief that environmental movements are part of social movements. And to see any progress, one needs to participate. Although South Africa is now a democracy, Bobby maintains that, "even in a democracy, we still need to challenge. We recognize that we still need to be part of our democracy."

With this in mind, Bobby launched Groundwork's [Environmental Justice School](#)—the brainchild of a late-night discussion with fellow Goldman Prize recipient [Ka Hsaw Wa](#) (Myanmar, 1999). Over the years, the idea has gradually grown into a four-week program on effective grassroots organizing. Centered on the core belief that activism requires a strong understanding of global and local contexts, the program's curriculum first explores the causes of environmental injustice. Then, students learn organizing tactics and turn their newly developed skills into action by developing a campaign for an issue in their own community.

Although acutely aware of the challenges and the slow global response to climate change, Bobby is optimistic about the changes he has seen within grassroots environmental leadership: "We have strong women like [Makoma](#) [Lekalakala—Goldman Prize winner from South Africa, 2018] ensuring that women are taking leadership." Bobby firmly believes in

the democratic process as a means to ensure equal representation in the face of climate crisis.

A Just Transition

As evidenced by its name, Groundwork is committed to addressing local environmental injustices, placing “particular emphasis on assisting vulnerable and previously disadvantaged people.” The NGO works to address systemic injustices on multiple fronts, campaigning for climate, energy and waste justice. Its diverse programs are united by a common thread: people.

Groundwork’s commitment to local communities is illustrated in its [work with waste-pickers](#), individuals who salvage and resell recyclable materials as their primary source of income. “You have to remember,” Bobby noted, “60% of people in South Africa are poor and living below the poverty line.” When the COVID-19 pandemic arrived in South Africa, members of the informal economy lost their income overnight. Groundwork seeks to reverse the negative view of waste-pickers and instead recognize their role as an integral component of municipal waste management systems. Putting waste-pickers and their livelihood front and center, Groundwork advocates for a just and transparent waste sector.

A Lifelong Career of Organizing

Bobby reflected that the Goldman Environmental Prize provided a solid foundation for his lifelong career as an organizer: “It literally set up my future direction of work and life.” In addition to providing international notoriety, the Prize also equipped Bobby with a robust network of environmentalists—other Goldman Prize winners. From his groundbreaking work with [Von Hernandez](#) (The Philippines, 2003) to ban waste incineration, to ongoing social activism with fellow South African [Desmond D’Sa](#) (South Africa, 2014), Bobby listed countless Goldman Prize “family members” who have inspired and collaborated with him over the years.

What would Bobby say when asked about his success as an organizer? It’s all about your team. Echoing sentiments expressed by many Goldman Prize winners, Bobby noted that, while the Prize recognizes the individual, the true movement lies in the community.

“In South Africa there is a saying,” he concluded. “[Ubuntu](#): I am because we are.”

This blog post is part of the [Prize Winner Today](#) series, a monthly installment that reports on the latest news and projects from past recipients of the Goldman Environmental Prize. From reflections on the Prize to updates from the field, we’ll answer the question—what are these extraordinary individuals doing today?

<https://www.goldmanprize.org/blog/prize-winners-today-environmental-justice-with-bobby-peek/>