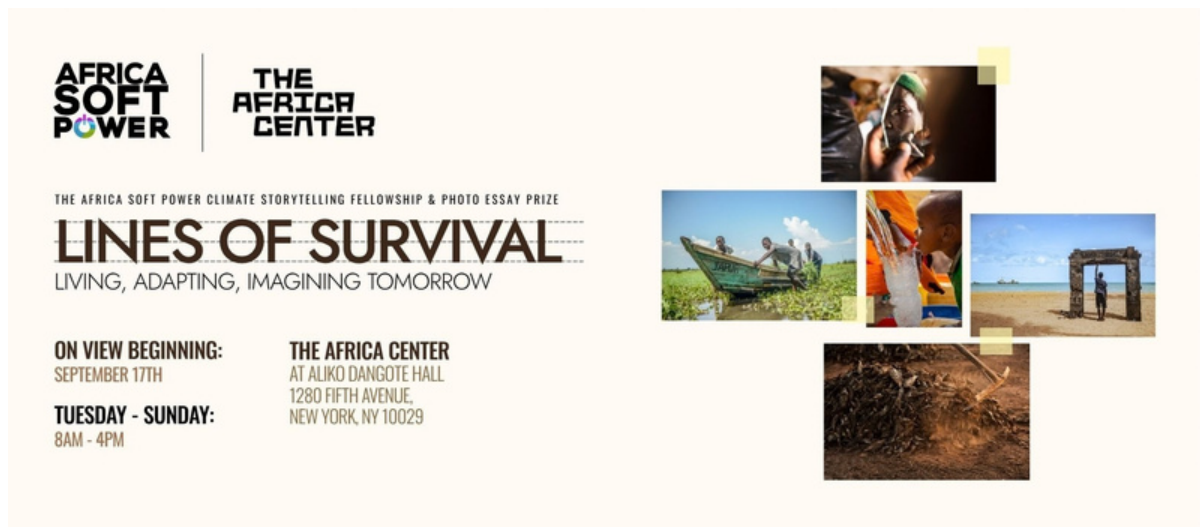




WHAT OUR JUDGES SAW IN AFRICA'S CLIMATE STORIES

2026 Africa Soft Power Climate Storytelling Fellowship & Photo Essay Prize

Beyond technical excellence, what makes a climate photograph stay with us?

The strongest photographs do more than document a moment.

They make us pause, question what we think we know, and see a familiar issue differently.

For the distinguished panel behind the 2026 Africa Soft Power Climate Storytelling Fellowship & Photo Essay Prize, selecting this year's winning works meant looking beyond beautiful individual images.

They were searching for clear points of view, strong narratives, and work that made the scale of climate change immediate and human - without reducing African communities to stories of crisis or vulnerability.



For **Polly Irungu**, Founder of Black Women Photographers, the power of the Prize lies in allowing communities to document their own realities:

“Climate change is often discussed through statistics, scientific reports and headlines, but photography allows us to see how these changes are actually affecting people, communities and landscapes.”

She was particularly drawn to work that made a complex global issue personal and tangible.

“The strongest essays had a clear narrative, strong sequencing, intentional image-making and a sense of place. They allowed us to understand not only what was happening, but why it mattered.”



Visual artist and documentary storyteller **Bernard Kalu** looked for photographers who moved beyond simply presenting the problem.

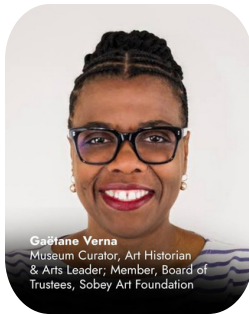
“To be able to create work that goes beyond stating the obvious, to showing possibilities - that’s where this work stood out for me.”

For Kalu, the strongest entries created a coherent journey through everyday life and showed communities responding to change rather than being presented only as victims of it. Reflecting on Kevin Ochieng Onyango’s *Climate Realities*, he offered perhaps the highest compliment one photographer can give another:

“It’s when I wish I’d shot them. This is one of those works I wish I shot.”



From the 2026 selection: **Kevin Ochieng Onyango**, *Climate Realities*



Curator and museum director **Gaëtane Verna** was drawn to work that resisted easy interpretation and continued to reveal itself.

“That’s always what I look for in an artwork: how does it keep me asking myself questions?”

Reflecting on Mpumelelo Buthelezi’s winning essay, *E’Plazini: A Place to Call Home for Waste Collectors*, she was struck by “the juxtaposition between the village, the mountain of debris, and the humans in all of this.”

Her observations speak to what makes the winning series so affecting: it looks beyond waste to ask deeper questions about consumption, inequality, work and human dignity.



From the 2026 selection: **Mpumelelo Buthelezi**, *E’Plazini: A Place to Call Home for Waste Collectors* (winner)



For South African visual artist and autoethnographer **Tsoku Maela**, the photo essay asks audiences to slow down and look more carefully.

“In an era when images are fleeting, photo essays are an invitation to stillness.”

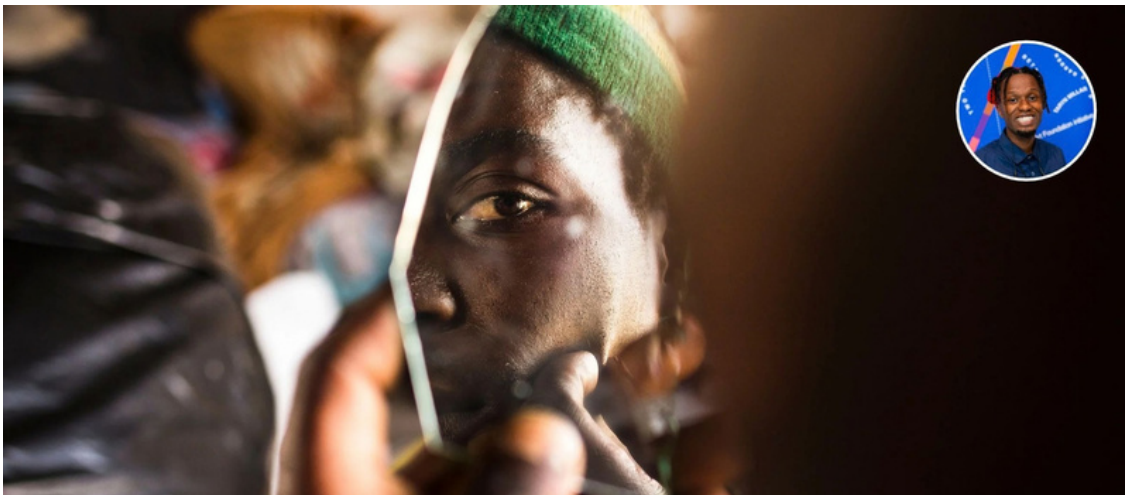
But their significance extends beyond the present:

“These works by our incredible African photographers serve as a reminder of our current climate challenges, but they also create a vital archive for tomorrow. In a way, they remind us of the future and that we, as Africans, belong in it, too.”

EXPLORE PARTNERSHIP OPPORTUNITIES

The 2026 Selection

The panel selected **Mpumelelo Buthelezi of South Africa** as the 2026 winner for *E’Plazini: A Place to Call Home for Waste Collectors*.



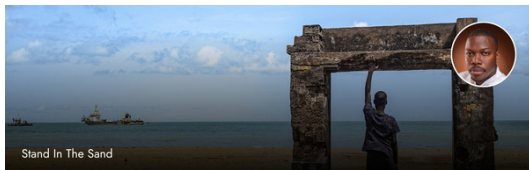
He is joined by four finalists:



Brian Ongoro, Kenya — *When the Water Stays*



Vanessa Mulondo, Uganda — *The Fishermen's Tale*



Vanessa Mulondo, Uganda — *The Fishermen's Tale*



Kevin Ochieng Onyango, Kenya — *Climate Realities*

Together, their photographs show that climate change is not only an environmental or economic question. It is a human story shaped by culture, livelihoods, identity, adaptation, and hope.



From UNGA to COP31

The selected works are now on view at The Africa Center in New York through 1 November 2026. The exhibition opened during the United Nations General Assembly as part of Africa Soft Power's special partnership with The Africa Center.

From New York, the exhibition will travel to Antalya during COP31, followed by Lagos and Nairobi - taking these stories into influential global conversations before bringing them home to engage audiences across the continent.

The judges have helped us select the stories. The next task is ensuring they are seen by the audiences and institutions helping to shape our climate future.

EXPLORE PARTNERSHIP OPPORTUNITIES

About The Africa Soft Power Group

The Africa Soft Power Group brings together Africa SoftPower, African Women on Board, and ASP Global around a shared mission: to bring vital, and too often unseen, African perspectives into the mainstream of global conversations shaping business, culture, leadership, and society.

Copyright © 2026 | Africa Soft Power Group | All rights reserved.

Want to change how you receive these emails?

You can [update your preferences](#) or [unsubscribe from this list](#).